

Thailand's green goals threaten indigenous forest dwellers

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BAN SABWAI, Thailand (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - For three generations, the family of Suwit Rattanachaisi has farmed a plot of land in a forest in northeastern Thailand's Chaiyaphum province, growing cassava and maize while living in a modest home a few miles away.

The forest was declared a national park in 1992, and under a forest reclamation law passed in 2014, Suwit and dozens of other farmers from Ban Sabwai village were evicted.

With no other means to make a living, many returned to the Sai Thong National Park.

In 2016, authorities charged 14 villagers, including Suwit and nine women, with trespassing. Out on bail, they are awaiting a Supreme Court hearing while they try to reach an agreement with local authorities for a community title to the land.

"We have farmed the land for more than 40 years - long before the forest became a national park," said Suwit, 63, who was sentenced to 17 months in prison and a fine of more than 100,000 baht (\$3,335) for trespassing.

"The government says we destroy the forest, but why would we destroy the land that feeds us?" asked the farmer, who, like the nearly 200 other villagers who farm or live in the forest, has no formal title to his 16-acre (6.5-hectare) plot.

Forests in Thailand have long been contested sites between the government, corporations, indigenous people and farmers.

The forest reclamation order, enforced by a military leadership, aimed at ending encroachments and conserving natural resources. It led to a redrawing of forest boundaries and hundreds of evictions, according to land rights groups.

Following protests, a new national parks law was enacted in 2019, allowing people who had lived in or near the more than 100 parks in Thailand to access them and use some resources.

But authorities decide who had these rights, and there are stricter penalties for trespassing, including imprisonment and hefty fines.

The National Parks Act also curbs land use rights to 20 years and limits each family to about 8 acres (3.2 hectares), which land rights groups say is inadequate.

"The new law does not resolve conflicts, as it continues to treat people who depend on the forests as criminals," said Oranuch Phonpinyo, a coordinator of the Isan Land Reform Network.

"Denying forest dwellers land rights deprives them of their livelihood, their tradition and dignity, while these parks are opened up for city dwellers and tourists to enjoy," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

FOREST COVER

Globally, indigenous and local communities own more than half of all land under customary rights, but only have secure legal rights to about 10%, according to the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), a Washington D.C.-based advocacy group.

About 2 billion indigenous and rural people live in conservation areas worldwide.

As governments prioritised conservation to cut carbon emissions, more than 250,000 people were evicted from protected areas in 15 countries from 1990 to 2014, RRI estimated.

Yet the financial cost of resettling evicted indigenous people far exceeds the cost of recognising their tenure rights, a move that comes with substantial green benefits, RRI said in a report last year.

“Legally recognised community lands store more carbon, have lower emissions and have significantly lower deforestation rates,” according to the group.

“A great incentive for communities to contribute to the sustainable management of forests is community forestry or land titles, which provide a degree of tenure security,” said Daniel Hayward, a coordinator of the Mekong Land Research Forum at Chiang Mai University.

“There is no need for conservation needs and human rights to be kept separate.”

Thailand aims to increase its forest cover to 40% of total land area from about a third.

The goal threatens millions of people living in or near forests, with thousands jailed every year for trespassing, according to rights group Land Watch.

A Community Forestry Bill introduced in 2019 aimed to give villagers more say in managing resources, but it limited these rights to those in reserved forests and not in national parks.

Thailand’s more than 12,000 community forests benefit about 3 million people, according to government data. Authorities have pledged to issue more community land and forestry titles.

“It is a slow process, but quite a few communities have already got titles, and we are studying others,” said Varawut Silpa-archa, minister of natural resources and environment.

Varawut has vowed to resolve all conflicting forest land claims, and the environment ministry in 2018 updated the Kor Tor Chor programme, that was originally set up to handle disputes over land in forests.

People who had been living in forests before they were declared parks can now stay and collectively manage the land, as long as they conserve the ecosystem and do not sell the land.

“Land is in limited supply, so people should be able to co-exist with forests and help protect them,” Varawut said.

COMMUNITY TITLE

This week, authorities rejected a plea by ethnic Karen people to return to the Kaeng Krachan National Park from which they were evicted as the government pushes for World Heritage Site status.

But in Bo Kaew village, also in Chaiphum province, more than 100 people who were forced from a reserve forest area have reached an agreement for a Kor Tor Chor community title.

The villagers plan to practise organic farming, and have already planted banana, papaya, maize, eggplant and chilli.

“Without the land, I struggled to feed my family,” said Buala Inim, 69, one of about 30 villagers who was charged with trespass in 2009 and ordered to leave in 2014.

“This gives me hope.”

Community forestry and titles are feasible solutions for indigenous people who lack legal recognition in Thailand, said Thomas Worsdell, a researcher at RRI.

“Their displacement generates socio-economic and cultural burdens that alienate them, hindering their traditional ways and generating the very pressures on biodiversity that these ‘fortress’ models of conservation are attempting to mitigate,” he said.

In Ban Sabwai too, villagers have been promised a community title after officials map and verify their plots in Sai Thong National Park.

They are drawing up a plan to expand forest cover by planting more trees, said Pirot Wongnaan, a community leader.

“We can increase forest cover and still farm in the forest,” he said.

“But there is no assurance we won’t be evicted again. We need a title so that we are secure, and our children can be secure.”

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