

HUMAN–WILDLIFE CONFLICTS AND THE IMPACT ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES' SUPPORT FOR KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Human-wildlife conflict is one of the biggest challenges facing conservation in Thailand and throughout the world. This study investigates human-wildlife conflicts in Khao Yai National Park, Thailand, and their impact on local support for park conservation. Semi-structured interviews were employed, and data was analysed using narrative analysis. Economic losses due to wildlife crop depredation were identified as the main cause of human-wildlife conflict, leading to less support from local people for conservation activities. However, it was also found that human activities are the root cause for wildlife disturbance. The respondents underlined that humans first trespassed on the lands of wildlife, negatively affecting their needs. Therefore, the potential for severe human-wildlife conflict greatly depends on human activities. This study suggests that planting vegetation at the park boundary to provide more sustenance to wild animals and to prevent them from coming out of the forest is critical for long-term success regarding wildlife conservation and human livelihoods.

Key words: human-wildlife conflict, National Park, conservation, Khao Yai, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

While wildlife and other natural resources are important for human society's ongoing economic and social development, biodiversity is also under increasing pressure worldwide from factors such as increasing human populations, global economic activities, social changes and climate change (Carter et al., 2014). Environmental degradation, species loss and threats to species have resulted in the promotion of national parks as an international conservation strategy. Early conservation efforts that excluded humans from nature emphasise the values of natural resources where people are seen as an adverse impact on these valuable resources and as a destructive element to the natural integrity of ecosystems (Jeanrenaud, 2002; Adams, 2005).

The establishment of national parks could be regarded as a Europe-centric conceptual division between nature and human society (Adams & Hutton, 2007). According to Neumann (1998), national parks are "quintessential landscapes of consumption", in which human beings and any evidence of their activities do not belong. Neumann also argues that these early approaches to conservation were initially a desire to "escape" to "pristine" nature. They were founded on a fundamental conception of nature as something pristine that could be distinguished and physically separated from humantransformed lands (Champbell, 2005; Adams & Hutton, 2007).

Despite the growing establishment of national parks under this approach of displacing local people from natural resources, there has been a global reduction in biodiversity. It has also resulted in conflicts between park management and surrounding communities. This is largely because local communities who traditionally depend on the park resources for their livelihoods, have been either denied or restricted access. Bhusal (2012) argues that park authorities have always failed to adopt appropriate management policies to protect parks from traditional exploitation of natural resources.

In Thailand, for example, the government often severely restricts livelihood activities in conservation areas or resettles residents elsewhere, with consequent conflict over the land. One example of such a conflict concerns land rights in a national forest reserve in the Buriram province of Thailand, Dong Yai. Here the government decided to allocate land and release the deteriorating forest to the private sector for tree planting. About 300 out of 1,297 families had to move out of the forest area without any compensation. Two thousand villagers protested against the authority and burnt down 20 rai (3.2 ha) of the forest and one tree nursery. A Buddhist monk and three village leaders were arrested and imprisoned under the National Forest Reserve Act 1964 (Yamauchi, 2005) for encroaching and destroying the forest reserve. Unclear rights to forest resources and lands have also been reported in Kanchanaburi province, in the west of Thailand. Interviews were conducted here with 50 participants regarding conflicts between national park authorities and local communities. The results showed that the underlying cause of the conflict is the unclear and contested tenure (Phromlah, 2014).

Thapa (2014) also identified national parks in these jurisdictions as breeding grounds for conflict. Even established national parks are not free from conflict with local people who inhabit the area either inside the parks or in the buffer zones. In many countries, parkpeople conflicts are centred around restricted access to traditionally used forest resources (Nana & Tchamadeu, 2014; Thondhlana & Cundill, 2017), loss of crops and livestock due to wildlife damage (Karanth & Nepal, 2012; Lamsal, 2012; Timsina, 2014; Thapa, 2016), landuse conflicts (Kideghesho et al., 2013; Isdori, 2016), lack of benefits from national parks and limits to community participation in reserve management issues (Thondhlana & Cundill, 2017). Among these threats, human-wildlife conflicts such as crop raiding, livestock depredation, predation on managed wildlife, or human mortality from wildlife are critical and significant pressures facing park management. Specifically, crop damage and livestock depredation are the most prevalent forms of human-wildlife conflict and these contribute to the problems of food insecurity and poverty in the majority world (Dickman, 2010; Gemeda & Meles, 2018).

Human-wildlife conflict refers to the negative interactions between human and wild animals, with undesirable consequences for both people and their resources and wildlife and their habitats. It occurs when animals pose a direct and recurring threat to the livelihood or safety of people, leading to the persecution of that species (IUCN, 2020). This conflict has been in existence as long as wild animals and people have inhabited the same landscape and shared the same resources. The expansion of human populations into or near areas inhabited by wildlife and the modification of natural environments for agricultural activities escalate human-wildlife conflict (Gemeda & Meles, 2018; Lamichhane et al., 2019). Wildlife species, which meet a number of human needs, decline or disappear as human populations clear wildlife habitats for anthropogenic activities (Masanja, 2014).



Elephant, Khao Yai National Park © Rangsiwut Keawsang

This study examines the human–wildlife conflicts in communities around the Khao Yai National Park in Thailand. The study findings are discussed in terms of wildlife conservation activities' impacts, both intentional and unintentional, on local livelihoods and incomes. This paper seeks to improve understanding of these conflicts that can affect local communities' support for park management.

METHODOLOGY Study site

As Thailand's first national park established in 1962, Khao Yai National Park is a national symbol of nature conservation. It is a major international, regional and local tourist attraction in Thailand because of its beautiful scenery, rich forest, waterfalls, abundant wildlife and location close to Bangkok (Suwanwaree & Aroon, 2014). It is located in north-eastern Thailand and covers parts of four provinces: Nakhon Nayok, Prachin Buri, Nakhon Ratchasima and Saraburi. In 2005, together with three other parks in the same Dong Phayayen mountain range, Khao Yai National Park was proclaimed as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site under the name 'Dong Phayayen – Khao Yai Forest Complex' (UNESCO, 2013).

The park encompasses a mountainous area of 2,168 square kilometres and is the third largest national park in the country. The area comprises dry deciduous and evergreen forest, tropical moist evergreen forest, hill evergreen forests and grassland. The forest provides a wide range of ecosystems and habitats for at least 2,000 species of plants, over 300 bird species, 70 species of mammals, and 74 reptiles and amphibians (Myers, 2016).



Figure 1. Map of Khao Yai National Park showing villages included in the study

Due to its rich biodiversity, Khao Yai National Park is a magnet for illegal collecting, logging and poaching, such as the illegal harvesting of high-value timber species such as the vulnerable Siamese Rosewood (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis*). Khao Yai has villages within the national park and heavy settlement pressure from 104 villages along its borders (Figure 1). The majority of local villagers are involved in agricultural activities such as the production of maize, orchard fruits, flowers, mushrooms and poultry.

Data collection

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach to enable the study of subtle nuances in attitudes and behaviours, and investigation of social processes over time (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect qualitative data in this study, with the aim of obtaining insights into the human–wildlife conflicts in communities surrounding the national park, and the impacts of such conflicts on local support for national park management.

Before data collection, a selection procedure identified the target villages to be studied around the Khao Yai National Park. A total of nine Moo (village in the Thai language) were selected as the research population for this study: Moo 3, Moo 4, Moo 5, Moo 6, Moo 10, Moo 11, Moo 13, Moo 17 and Moo 18. With the help of the village chiefs, purposive sampling was then applied to sample 15 interview respondents across the nine selected villages. The respondents were selected from different occupational backgrounds. The sample includes employment or identity categories such as elder, village chief, teacher, farmer, National Park officer and park ranger. Interviewees from different backgrounds and responsibilities were chosen to provide valuable and rich data to reveal different perspectives and understanding towards conservation attempts, as well as the challenges faced in handling human–wildlife conflicts.

Data analysis

The interviews were made up of semi-structured questions adapted from Labov's (1982) evaluation model of narrative. The importance of the narrative model is to lead respondents to share their views and experiences through a story-line. The interview transcripts were then analysed using narrative analysis. This analysis method has demonstrated its effectiveness in examining participants' points-of-view in order to understand their culture and experience in real life through their story-telling (Richmond, 2002).

Qualitative data collected from the interviews were analysed to generate themes based on Labov's (1982) structural analysis of narratives to investigate the interviewees' experiences of human–wildlife conflicts. The researchers explored and arranged the stories into a basic narrative structure including: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, results and coda. First, the story was summarised in an abstract to provide an overview. In the orientation step, the action of the participants was introduced and identified according to place, time, characters and situation to answer the questions, "Who? When? Where? What were they doing?". Under complicating actions, the sequence, crisis or turning point of the events were recorded to tell "What happened next?". The overall meaning of the story was evaluated and the ending or outcome of the story was described in a result. Finally, the researchers ended the story by recording a coda to tell "What does it all mean?".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interviews with the participants who were elders, village chiefs, farm or plantation owners, and a primary school teacher narratively revealed their local livelihoods and incomes, now and in the past. The local people's original ways of living were linked to the forest before the existence of the national park. After park establishment, they engaged in agricultural farming before tourism became a significant activity. The respondents shared their viewpoints on wildlife damage to crops which impacted local incomes, and their support for park management. In addition, interviews with the park officers discussed the park efforts for conflict resolution in addressing agricultural crops depredation and park boundary demarcation problems. Overall, emerging themes extracted from the findings through the narrative analysis included 'human encroachment and degradation of resources', 'the impact of human-wildlife conflicts on local livelihoods

and incomes' and 'park management of conflict situations'.

Human encroachment and degradation of resources

Human encroachment into forests has induced many severe changes to the natural environment even during ancient times. Many forest areas and wildlife species have been affected through hunting, logging and agricultural expansion. People pursued lands and resources in order to meet their legitimate material aspirations (Wahab, 2016). Before Khao Yai National Park was established in 1962, the local people were considered a forest-dependent community. They lived within nature and depended on forest resources for their livelihoods. According to the interview respondents, the ways of living of their ancestors involved hunting and harvesting forest resources.

An elderly respondent mentioned that he was one of the first groups of people who came to live in Khao Yai during the early 1950s. In the past, the woodland was regarded as very fertile and lush. He described it as 'awesome forest', as nobody was around when he first stepped onto the land.

"I have lived here since the 1950s, before it was declared a national park in 1962. I moved here together with my family members and few of my relatives...there wasn't anybody around this place, only wildlife such as tigers and elephants...which I would call it the coolest forest areas."



An elderly respondent explaining that he was among one of the first groups of people who came to settle in Khao Yai in the 1950s © Teh Kate Yng

The old man identified himself as the invader in this forest in the beginning. Fishing, hunting and collecting forest resources were among his main activities during the time he settled on this land. Apart from the contribution of the forest for food and nutrition, the respondent further explained how he made an income by selling products from hunted animals including furs, skins, claws, horns, heads, meats and other items. The quotation above demonstrates the economic contribution of the forest to local villagers, when they started trading animal products over 60 years ago.

After initially depending on forest resources for daily survival, the local communities in Khao Yai started to engage in agriculture. Crops included rice, potatoes, corns, bananas and other vegetables. They were able to easily access and clear lands for growing their crops. Every family was actively farming for their own consumption and as an income source. One of the respondents interviewed said that large areas of forest were cleared by heavy machinery such as tractors for commercial cultivation. Once the land had been cultivated for several years, the soil would become infertile, and the farmers would move and clear new lands. This led to soil degradation and erosion and the loss of fertile land. A primary school teacher commented:

"Forests were slowly decaying because a lot of people opened the lands for growing corn and rice. They also used tractors to clear the lands... The biggest problem was when the soil had lost all its quality after the crops had been grown for several years."

In order to make a profit, the conversion of forest to agricultural fields involved chopping down the trees and disturbing the natural habitats of animal species (Chakravarty et al., 2012). Consistent with Kideghesho et al. (2013), our findings suggest that poverty at a household level forced the local people in Khao Yai to adopt coping strategies that were unsustainable and ecologically destructive.

Impact of human–wildlife conflicts on local livelihoods and incomes

The contentious relationship between park management and the neighbouring communities can be seen as a conflict between two opposing objectives: natural resources protection on the one hand; and safeguarding local livelihoods on the other. Previous studies have identified that policies related to national parks in Thailand are having an impact on people's livelihoods and incomes at the local level (Suwanmanee, 2009; Thaworn et al., 2010). This is because human– wildlife conflict is closely associated with the social and economic well-being of the local people (Upadhyay, 2014).

This study found that a serious threat impacting local communities' perspectives on wildlife conservation is conflict with wild animals from the park. Local villagers close to the national park regarded wildlife crossing the park boundary, rampaging through villages and eating farm crops as a common situation in Khao Yai. This problematic issue confirms Timsina's study (2014) that wildlife damage is a great concern among farmers as the losses can result in serious reductions in their annual income. The interview respondents stated that many wildlife species damaged their crops. Amongst them, the owner of a corn farm highlighted his loss of income saying:

"A lot of animals have been coming down and eating the vegetation and fruits. My corn plantation has disappeared by 50 per cent. For one-acre plantation, I need to spend four to five thousand Baht. When the animals destroyed the crops, I need more money and time to re-harvest. Can you imagine how much I have lost?"

As compared to previous years, the number of animals leaving the forest and the potential for crop damage caused by the wildlife species was not as high. However, the overall wildlife damage to crops has increased considerably over the past decade and it has caused great economic losses for farmers. One interviewee reported that wildlife has learned to distinguish between forest vegetation and crops, particularly corn. They are clever enough to detect the difference in taste and know what is in season.

In those days, the wild animals used to only rely on forest vegetation. But once they discovered the fine foods and novelties here, they decided to come more often since it's all so yummy! They are too smart now.

Another respondent who is also a farmer reported that crop damage was mainly from elephants. Elephants were often mentioned by the villagers as the most damaging species affecting coconuts and corn, and the most difficult to defend against (Timsina, 2014; Eustace et al., 2018). In the words of the respondent, the elephants are clever. This is because they choose only the tastier crops like corn, sugarcane and coconuts, but they never touch potatoes.

Actually, we also plant potatoes as well, but the elephants wouldn't go for it, they only go for the corn. This is because the corn is very sweet. You see, in fact, they are clever enough, they know what to choose and what is tastier.

However, in the words of a senior respondent mentioned earlier, the farmers could not assign all the blame to the wild animals because humans are the ones destroying the animals' homes in the first place. He was angry, noting that the natural habitats of many wild species have been destroyed due to agricultural activities by humans causing a corresponding loss of biodiversity. Therefore, when wild animals graze on cultivated crops, the farmers should accept the behaviour.

Park management of conflict situations

Local villagers who suffered from loss of income complained and expressed their dissatisfaction with the park management in failing to resolve wildlife crop depredation. In many conflict scenarios, the situation is compounded by the challenges of obtaining compensation and a lack of concrete solutions by the park administration to address wildlife damage. As a result, the threats to local livelihoods are consistently associated with low local support for park management in Khao Yai.

The interview respondents highlighted that the compensation problem has still not been resolved and that farmers' complaints were ignored. The farmer whose corn plantation had been eaten by elephants blamed the ineffectiveness of the national park management for taking too long to propose a solution.

The park management said that they are going to pay us for the losses, but they haven't paid us so far. They have taken too long and delayed the issue. We have been dealing with it for more than a year already!

Nevertheless, interviews with national park officers depicted different perspectives in solving the humanwildlife conflicts. The Deputy Superintendent of the park defended their quick response in resolving wildlife disturbance problems in order to prevent local people's negative attitudes and attacks towards wild animals. He argued that in most cases, the delay in the claim was usually caused by incomplete paperwork or when the applicants were not the legal landowners. The officer replied:

We would provide cooperation to solve the complaints as soon as possible because we worry the people would harm the wildlife by putting up the baits and traps...but before we pay the compensation, we have to do the correct assessment and follow procedures religiously... The procedures would take longer time and become very complicated if the lands do not belong to the farmers. They only rent the places for doing the farming while the owners are probably someone from Bangkok. Due to this situation, they could not provide sufficient documents to apply for the compensation.

On the one hand, the local people blamed the inefficiency of park management in providing solutions.



National Park Deputy Superintendent discussing the effectiveness of the park management in addressing wildlife damage © Teh Kate Yng



On the other hand, another government officer who is a park ranger argued that the wildlife damage happened mainly because of the increase in human population and the expansion of human activities. This is supported by the findings of Lambin and Meyfroidt (2011) that show that the expansion of human land use at the expense of natural ecosystems has caused wildlife habitats to become increasingly fragmented and degraded. A member of the park staff was cited as saying:

It is true that wildlife has caused substantial damage to the farmers' crops, because we [human] are the ones who first invaded their habitats... Nowadays, forests are rapidly being cut down especially for the construction of buildings such as hotels and resorts. Many people moved to stay in Khao Yai and the park is becoming an island where the communities gathered. As a result, the wild animals have started to come out of the forest after the loss of their real habitats.

In the very beginning, the fertility of the forest provided habitat and enough food for the wildlife. Later the forest was destroyed due to land clearance for agriculture, development, accommodation and infrastructure construction. As a result, the wild animals have lost their original habitats. They started to roam outside park boundaries and onto land owned by the local communities. The national park was regarded by respondents as an 'island' surrounded and crowded by an increase in the human population over the years. The decrease of forest lands has forced wild species to come out from their natural habitats.

In order to find a compromise for the benefit of both wild animals and local livelihoods, a cooperative project which involved the national park and local villagers was then implemented to plant vegetation and fruits inside the park boundary such as corn, coconuts and bananas. Hence, the animals could enjoy the crops inside the protected areas and they would not come out to cause problems. A village headman noted that he was confident that the outcomes of their attempts would be positive and lead to success. Concerning the problems of wildlife, especially the elephants coming to graze on our cultivation fields, we support and actively participated in the project of growing crops inside the national park... We just started planting these crops, and we do not know the results yet. But we predict more than 70 per cent of them will survive.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of this study confirm humanwildlife conflicts as problematic for local communities living close to Khao Yai National Park. The farmers expressed their concern about wildlife damage, which has increased significantly in recent years causing a serious reduction in agricultural crops. As a result, the interviewees blamed park conservation strategies for threatening their livelihoods. Moreover, those that suffered from a loss of annual income were discouraged from claiming compensation because of the time involved in the process. These individuals developed a poor park-people relationship and had low local support for wildlife conservation.

However, interviews with two respondents identified different perceptions about wildlife disruption to peaceful existence amongst the local communities. They agreed that humans are actually the biggest threat to wildlife. Consistent with Masanja (2014), ongoing human activities are a major cause of wildlife loss worldwide. The growing human populations overlap with wildlife needs and move further into previously uninhabited areas (Dickman, 2010).

In other words, when wildlife and humans are sharing the same landscape in close proximity, it is almost impossible to entirely avoid wildlife damage (Lamichhane et al., 2019). Therefore, managing the human–wildlife relationship requires a number of interventions which respect the lives of both the local people and wildlife in the park (Timsina, 2014). This study suggests that the park authorities and local villagers should work together to cultivate native vegetation inside the park boundary for wildlife consumption in order to benefit both wild animals and local livelihoods. These findings support the notion of a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment, resulting in a lasting and fundamental relationship that is both close and complex (Liu, 2008).

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RESUMEN

Los conflictos entre los seres humanos y la fauna silvestre son uno de los mayores retos a los que se enfrenta la conservación en Tailandia y en todo el mundo. En este estudio, investigamos los conflictos entre los seres humanos y la fauna silvestre en el Parque Nacional de Khao Yai (Tailandia) y como impactan sobre el apoyo local a la acciones de conservación del parque. Para ello empleamos entrevistas semiestructuradas y realizamos un análisis narrativo de los datos. Pudimos determinar que el principal conflicto era el ataque de la fauna silvestre a los cultivos, provocando el bajo apoyo de la población a las actividades de conservación. Sin embargo, también descubrimos que son las actividades humanas que originan el ataque de los animales a los cultivos. Los encuestados subrayaron que, en principio, los humanos invadieron el territorio de la fauna silvestre y afectaron negativamente las necesidades de estos. Por lo tanto, el potencial para que se generen conflictos graves entre el ser humano y la fauna depende en gran medida de la acción del ser humano. Sugerimos que sembrar vegetación que pueda proporcionar sustento a los animales silvestres en los límites del parque puede evitar que estos salgan del bosque, lo que sería crítico para conservar a largo plazo la vida silvestre y los medios de subsistencia humana

RÉSUMÉ

Les conflits entre les humains et la faune sont l'un des plus grands défis auxquels est confrontée la conservation en Thaïlande et dans le monde. Cette étude examine les conflits humains-faune dans le parc national de Khao Yai, en Thaïlande, et leur impact sur le soutien local à la conservation du parc. Des entretiens semi-structurés ont été utilisés, et les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse narrative. Les pertes économiques dues à la déprédation des cultures par les animaux sauvages ont été identifiées comme la principale cause des conflits entre les humains et la faune, entraînant une diminution du soutien de la population locale aux activités de conservation. Cependant, il a également été constaté que les activités humaines sont la cause première des perturbations de la faune. Les personnes interrogées ont souligné que les humains ont d'abord empiété sur les terres des animaux sauvages, affectant négativement leurs besoins. Par conséquent, le risque de conflit grave entre les humains et la faune dépend largement des activités humaines. Cette étude suggère que la plantation de végétation à la limite du parc pour fournir plus de nourriture aux animaux sauvages et les empêcher de sortir de la forêt est essentielle pour le succès à long terme de la conservation de la faune et des moyens de subsistance des humains.