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Environmental Awareness in Thailand: “Institutionalization” of Environmental Problems and the State of the Save-Nature Boom

Tsuruyo Funatsu

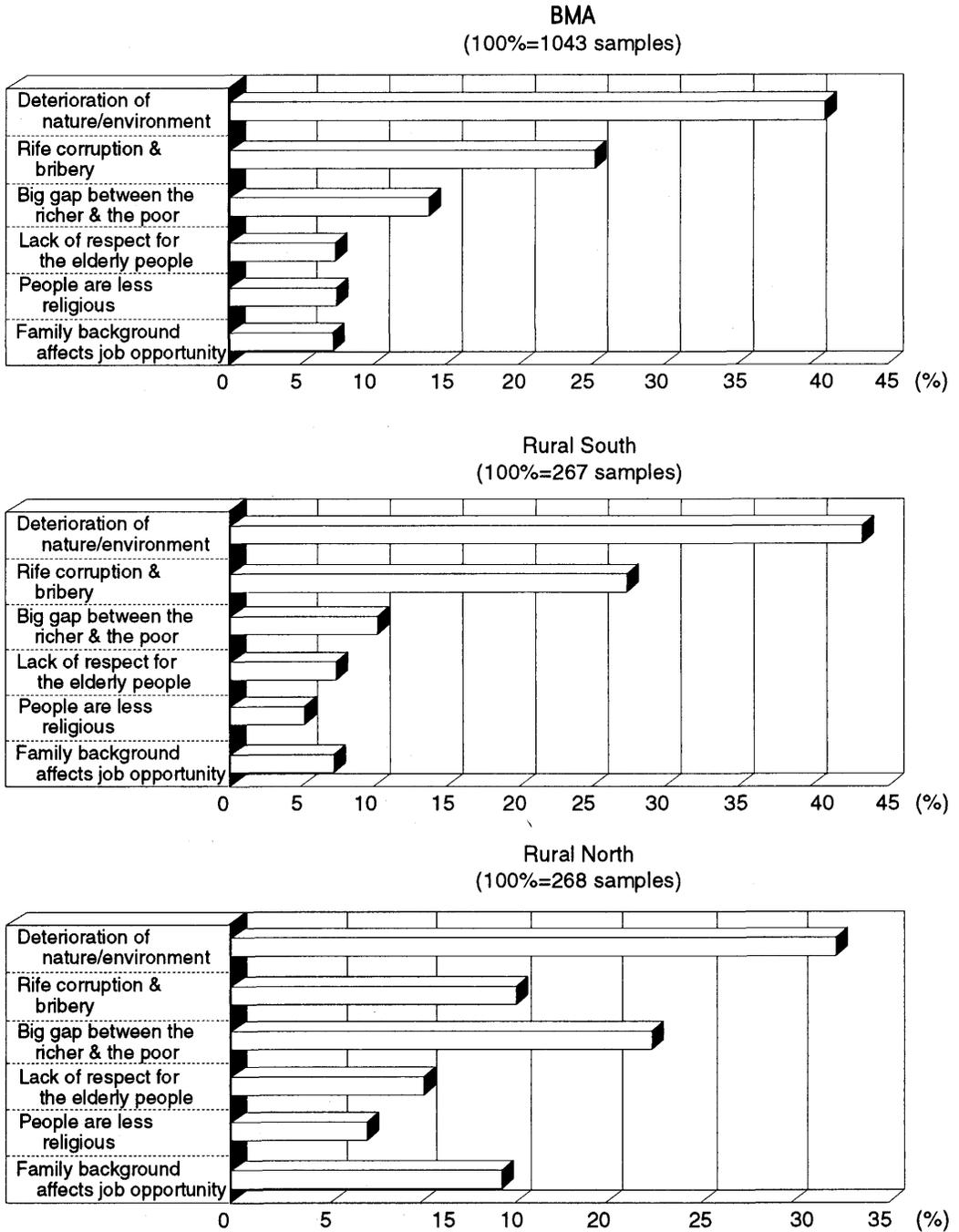
INTRODUCTION

The results of the latest environmental awareness survey (fall 1994) demonstrate that people in Thailand, both in urban and rural areas, take a strong interest in environmental problems and are profoundly aware of the importance of protecting the environment. Among a host of problems confronting Thai society, “nature/environment deterioration” was listed as the most serious problem (Figure 1). In the Bangkok metropolitan area, about 60% of the respondents gave precedence to “environmental protection” over “economic development” (Figure 2). How then should these results be interpreted? As Figure 3 indicates, the majority of the pollees feel their lives and health are constantly affected by environmental deterioration. There is no doubt that the environmental concerns they confront on a daily basis led them to give top priority to protection of the environment. However, given that the government’s protect-the-environment campaign and related information via the mass media flooded the whole nation since around 1990, it seems that these campaigns played a more than negligible part in engineering the noticeable rise in environmental awareness in Thailand. The following sections briefly discuss the process through which the environmental boom in the 1990s was engineered, as well as the contents of the environmental campaigns as background information necessary for interpreting the survey results. They also look at the wide gap between the rise in the awareness of environmental problems and the effectiveness of governmental measures to solve such problems.

1. RISE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION BOOM IN THE 1990s

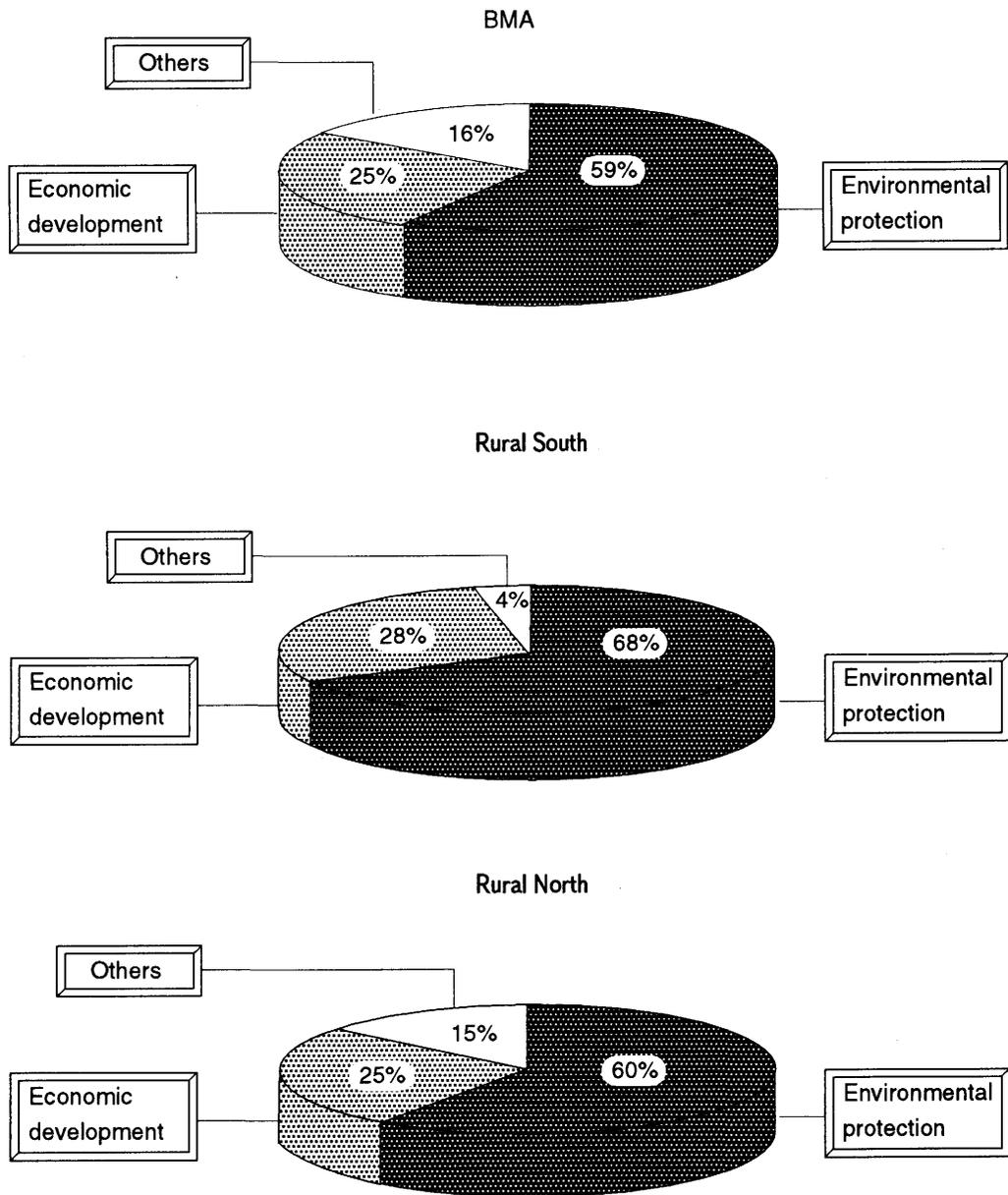
The environmental movements in Thailand first came to the fore in the first half of the 1970s. These movements have, roughly speaking, two different origins. One is the farmers-

Figure 1 The Most Serious Social Problem in Thai Society

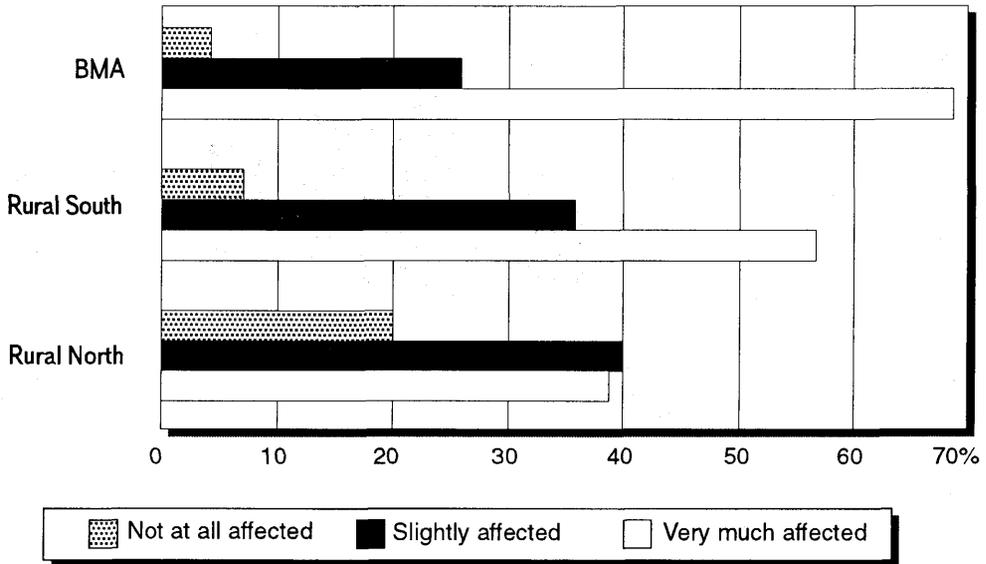


Note: See Questionnaire on Environmental Awareness Survey in Thailand (included as Appendix B of this book), Q2-15A.

Figure 2 Selection between Environmental Protection and Economic Development



Note: See Appendix B (Thailand), Q3-2.

Figure 3 Influence of Environmental Deterioration on Health and Life

Note: See Appendix B (Thailand), Q3-1.

led protest movements over the rights to utilize and manage natural resources, such as the campaigns to oppose the planting of eucalyptuses or deforestation that have been taking place in various parts of the country since 1985. The other originates from movements by non-governmental organizations, students, researchers and the mass media against public work projects. A typical example of the latter is the campaign against construction of Nam Choan Dam that lasted from 1982 to 1988. In both categories of the movement, opponents and the government locked horns in the negotiation processes, and in cases of extremely high tension, there were not a few instances when key leaders of the movements were punished by being arrested, deprived of their priestly ranks or even killed.¹ Seub Nakkhasathien, under the Royal Forestry Department, who led the movement for forest and wildlife conservation, was so desperate about the future of the wildlife that he killed himself in protest. Monk Phracak, who fought against the planting of eucalyptuses, had to face numerous threats. He was later deprived of his priestly rank and arrested. These incidents aroused strong public concern and were symbolic of how environmental protection movements in those days were brought to an end. Partly because of these harsh circumstances, people who became directly involved in movements to protect the environment in the 1980s were largely limited to those directly affected and a handful of students and NGOs.²

But the government's stand started to change gradually in the 1990s, and environmental problems began to take on a completely different significance. The international calls for a turnaround in the attitude toward environmental problems, from a United Nations resolution in 1989 up to the 1992 Earth Summit, cannot be neglected as key external factors that touched off this change.³ In fact, Thailand had seen rapid improvements in legislative and

other institutional changes related to environmental protection at the government's initiative in the first half of the 1990s. In particular, the first and second cabinets of Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun in 1991-92 took a series of steps, such as revision of the Enhancement and Conservation of National Environment Quality Act B.E.2535(1992), transformation of the Office of National Environmental Board into the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, the establishment of three environment-related departments and expansion of their administrative powers. These developments represent the government's domestic responses to environmental problems that were becoming increasingly serious in tandem with rapid economic growth. At the same time, it is easy to imagine that the government's actions were motivated by its desire to do credit to Thailand ahead of the Earth Summit.⁴

Along with this overall trend, one of factors that were most helpful in turning the nation around in environmental awareness, in my view, was the speech delivered by King Bhumibol Adulyadej on December 4, 1989.⁵ In November 1988, massive floods and landslides hit nine southern prefectures in Thailand, leaving more than 700 people dead or missing. Speaking to the nation before his birthday, when the previous year's disaster was still fresh in people's memories, King Bhumibol declared the need for the whole nation to embark on campaign to afforestation and protection of nature in order to prevent natural disasters. Beginning the following year, the government designated December 4 as "National Environment Day," and it became an established custom to plant large numbers of trees on national holidays or commemorative ceremonies across the nation for the purpose of preserving forests.⁶ In the field of education, education on the environment gained greater weight in school curriculums. From 1991, the environmental contests sponsored by the Ministry of Education encouraged students to undertake trees-planting projects to beautify their schools.⁷ School textbooks liken preserving the environment to abiding by Buddhist precepts, giving the message that "destruction of the environment is a result of evil deeds." (This analysis of school textbooks is based on Nithi Aeosriwongs, *Chaad Thai, Muang Thai, Baep rian lae Anusawarii*, Bangkok, Matichon, 1995)

Audio-visual media also played a large and effective role in the spreading of the new environmental campaigns. "Green Wave," a radio station set up in 1991, regularly provided listeners with information on environmental issues, while television programs like "Thung Saeng Tawan" and "Wethii Chaobaan" earned high audience ratings by on-the-spot coverage of the difficulties of people suffering from environmental deterioration. On early Sunday morning religious service programs, "symbiosis between nature and humankind in Buddhism" became a common topic. In TV commercials, images of a beautiful environment with birds and trees were repeatedly shown.

With the Royal Family and the government, the two highest national authorities in Thailand, playing a part in the campaigns for environmental protection, in collaboration with mass media,⁸ environmental problems in the 1990s transcended the confrontational concept of "government versus people" and turned into part of the "national objectives in which people are expected to help each other in achieving" or "national morals." At the same time, the support base for environmental movements became broader, creating room for the participation of major corporations and a wide spectrum of urban residents. For example, Magic Eyes, an environmental organization sponsored by the Sophonpanit conglomerate, posted recycle boxes in public places as a way of encouraging public awareness of garbage problems, while oil company Bangchak earned itself the corporate image of an environment-friendly company by investing in a variety of environmental activities under the banner of "clean energy." Also, health-conscious urban consumers go shopping at prestigious department stores for vegetables free of agricultural chemicals or other goods labeled as environ-

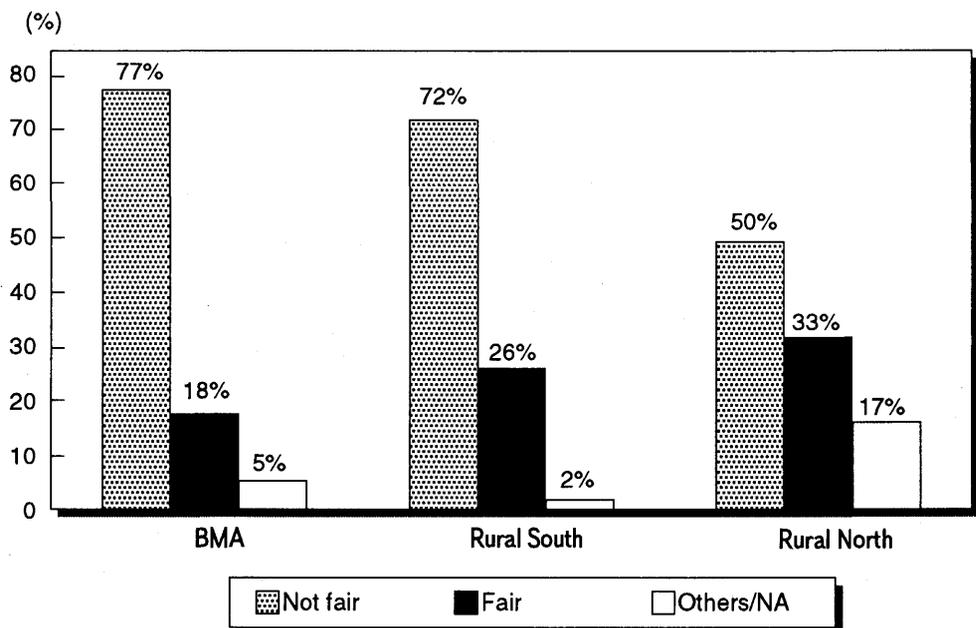
ment-friendly. The Ministry of Industry officially introduced the green label system in 1994, counting on the "wise" selection of merchandise by middle-class consumers in the big cities. As evidence of the private sector's active participation in environmental activities, NGOs registered on the directory of the Thailand Environment Institute as of the end of 1995 reached 100, and the number of cooperative companies reached 125.

2. COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE DISPUTE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM AND FUTURE PROBLEMS

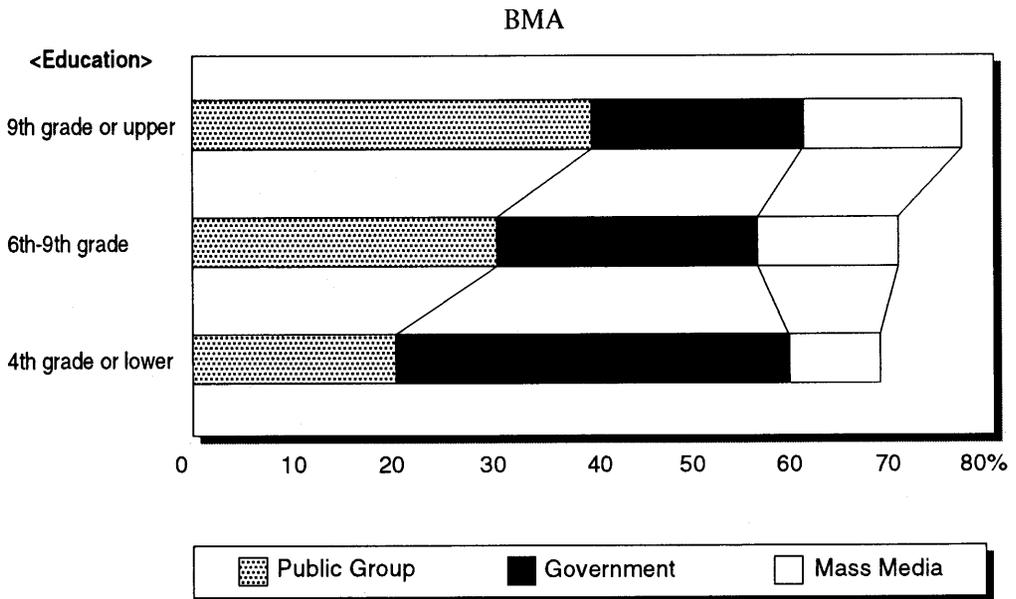
But the high awareness of environmental issues that came out of the environmental boom was much removed from the realities of environmental problems. Environmental destruction became even more serious after this boom and pollution dispute settlements have not been seen much progress. In rural areas, illegal logging still continues under the guidance of some public officials, despite the government's forest-conservation program. As things stand now in Thailand, the powers of ministries and agencies in charge of environmental preservation are not entirely free of the politics of local influential men. There are few instances where local governments or courts, which in Japan played a pivotal role in turning the tide in favor of anti-pollution movements, can fully perform their functions in protecting the interests of local residents. The results of the 1994 survey provide clear indications that disillusioned people are looking at the current situation with cool eyes.

In reply to the question "Do you think the law is applied fairly to people who are responsible for damaging the environment?" (Q3-6) the answer "not very fairly" was chosen

Figure 4 Fairness of the Law for People Who Damage the Environment



Note: See Appendix B (Thailand), Q3-6.

Figure 5 The Most Helpful Person in Solving Environmental Problems

Note: See Appendix B (Thailand), Q3-5.

by 77% of Bangkok residents, 72% of people in southern rural areas, and 50% of those in northern rural areas (Figure 4). Asked "If you suffer harm through environmental damage, who besides you would be most helpful in solving the problem?" (Q3-5), Bangkok residents with higher education, who are relatively environment-conscious, tended to put "public group" before "government" (Figure 5). The outcome of the 1994 preliminary survey that asked some 50 people in Bangkok who they think they can count on in solving their problems was rather surprising. As many as over 90% said they have only themselves to rely on. Though a response like this sounds like a Buddhist discourse emphasizing self-salvation, it seems to have reflected to a greater extent the prevailing distrust to the formal procedures dealing with environmental disputes. As criticized by Professor Nithi of the Chiangmai University (who offered the aforementioned analysis of school textbooks), if the government continues its simplistic practice of blaming environmental problems on the lack of morals and repeating statements that problems could be solved by precepts and merciful heart alone, this may lead to a conflict between values and the realities of a serious environmental situation especially among young people. Almost every day in Bangkok, under the democratically elected government, people who suffer from environmental destruction march on to government offices in protest.

Under these circumstances, the environmental awareness awakened by the government's official campaigns will not be satisfied unless the road is paved for better supervision of pollution problems and systematic solutions to environmental disputes.

Notes

1. According to Ms. Wanida Tantiwithayaphithak, an environmental activist since the campaign against Pakmun Dam construction, the frequency of the disappearance or killing of leading figures in environmental disputes has declined, particularly under democratically elected governments since 1992; but this does not mean these disquieting incidents have ceased to occur (based on an interview on June 16, 1996). In fact, since 1995, at least three leaders have already been murdered in the movements against construction of quarries, industrial waste dump sites or hydraulic dams.
2. According to an annual report of the Green World Foundation, NGOs working on development problems had been the occasional target of anti-communist smear campaigns until 1984 and the government had also looked on NGOs with a suspicious eye. See *Sathanakaan Singwedlom Thai 2537*, (State of the Environment in Thailand 1994), (Bangkok, Green World Foundation, 1995) [in Thai], p. 250.
3. See Chapter 5, Yonemoto Shohei, *Chikyu kankyo mondai towha nanika* (What are global environmental problems?), (Tokyo, Iwanami-shoten, 1994 [in Japanese]). It provides a good survey of changing global attitudes and politics on environmental issues before the 1992 Earth Summit.
4. According to Mr. Banphot, Division of Information Dissemination, the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion, Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, behind the 1992 revision of the National Environmental Quality Law and other moves by the government were Prime Minister Anand's initiative and public outcry at home over deterioration of the environment, and the Earth Summit provided a form of international pressure. He also recalled that statements by the King since 1989 and those by the Queen in 1993 played a tremendous role in turning the nation's attention to environmental problems (based on an interview on August 2, 1996).
5. The Royal Family, known for its primary concern about raising living standards of Thai people, has long been involved in problems related to the environment, such as soil-improving projects. Royal projects for water resource development and afforestation have been undertaken since 1975 (*Chulalongkorn Review*, Vol. 31, 1996, April-June [in Thai]). But the appeals for protection of the environment by the King and the Queen became more ardent and frequent in their public speeches in the 1990s. Walking in the King's footsteps, the Queen expressed her stand in favor of environmental protection before her birthday on August 11, 1993. In view of the King's policy of promoting water resources development, King's projects presumably lay stress on environmental protection geared to the enhancement of people's livelihood (based on a telephone interview on May 2, 1996, with Mr. Watsan Dechawongtham, an editor with the Bangkok Post who wrote on the history of changes in King's projects).
6. The planting of trees by Royal Family members or prime ministers at ceremonies has not been uncommon. But it is believed to be only in the recent years that the significance of the tree planting has switched from "commemoration" to "protection of forests." In 1983, in anticipation of ceremonies for the 200th anniversary of Rattanakosin, as many as 500 trees were planted. But the trees were planted also as part of a bigger project for improving the scenic beauty of cities.
7. In the area of environmental education, schools have been using educational materials on forest reservation since the 1960s. School curriculums incorporated environmental education in the 1970s. In the 1990 revision of curriculums, environment was made an important compulsory 'life-experience' subject (an integrated social studies and science subject in elementary education) (based on an interview on April 17, 1996, with Ms. Suphanii, responsible for environmental education at the Office of the National Primary Education Commission, Ministry of Education).

8. The Buddhist leadership, another component of Thailand's public authority, has also taken on an important role in awakening the public to environmental problems. But this writer excluded it from the principal players in arousing the new strain of the environmental awareness in the 1990s, because a segment of the Buddhist leadership supported the earlier of environmental movements, including the campaign by Monk Phracak against the planting of eucalyptuses and the movement to oppose construction of Nam Choan Dam (including famous Bhuddadasa) in the latter half of the 1980s.

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