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Protection for the Forest and Farm: A Comparative Study of Buddhist Environmentalism for Sustainable Development in Thailand

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Protection for the Forest and Farm:

A Comparative Study of Buddhist Environmentalism for Sustainable Development in Thailand



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Introduction: Religious Environmentalism in Thailand

For millions of people in Southeast Asia, Buddhism is more than a ‘religion’ in the Western sense; it is a lifestyle, an all-encompassing instrument of spiritual, cultural, and political identity.¹ Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is intimately connected to Thai governance, society, and culture. The three pillars of nation-state ideology in Thailand are nation, religion, and monarchy (*chat satsana mahakasat*).² Nearly 95% of Thailand's population is affiliated with the Theravada school, though Buddhism in this country has become integrated with folk beliefs such as ancestor worship.³ Buddhism is an integrated aspect of Thai society and since the 1980s has created links with environmentalist movements.

The diversity of environmentalism in Thailand has been a result of changing socio-political structures, contested views towards national economic development, expanding environmental awareness among the middle class, and increasing resource competition between the state and rural people.⁴ As governments enacted environmental policies via legalisation, local religious communities have continued their teaching and practices that are engaged with environment protection. Buddhism serves as the foundation for environmental actions and are prominent in local resource management in Thailand.⁵ The Buddhist Environmental movement in Thailand has two terms related to monks: firstly, Development Monks or *phra nak phatthana*, and secondly, Forest Monks or *phra nak anuraksaa*. By 1991, there were some 250-300 Development Monks, comprising an important network in village grassroots communities, especially rural communities, and premised the desire to introduce a ‘Buddhist way of development’ by promoting ‘right living’.⁶ These numbers have increased as the environmental movement grows larger

¹ Robert Carlton Lester, *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (University of Michigan Press, 1973), 3.

² Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Singapore University Press, 2006), 257.

³ Arvind Kumar Singh, *Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (M.D. Publications Pvt Ltd, 2009), 89.

⁴ Pinkaew Laungaramsri, “Thailand: Whither Gender in the Environmental Movement?,” in *Routledge Handbook of The Environment in Southeast Asia*, ed. Philip Hirsch (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, 2017), 471.

⁵ Laungaramsri, “Thailand: Whither Gender in the Environmental Movement?,” 472.

⁶ Pierre Walter, “Activist Forest Monks, Adult Learning and the Buddhist Environment Movement in Thailand,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 3 (2007): 334.

and more action is taken by both monks and non-monks. Development Monks believe that the Buddha's teaching indicates that monks should play an active role in changing society and thus they participate in many community development and social welfare programs. Development Monks is another name given to the Forest Monks and can be used separately or interchangeably. The main difference between the two terms is that Forest Monks work directly with issues regarding forestry while Development Monks work on all kinds of sustainable development projects. However, at times, these projects overlap hence their interchangeable use. Receiving and giving merit are an essential part of Thai culture. Merit is sought by lay people because it is presumed that merit, the consequence of moral acts, will effect a reduction in suffering.⁷ The notion of *kamma* (Karma) works in tangent with the notion of merit. By addressing environmental issues Monks and laypersons can gain merit and improve their *kamma*. Development projects particularly in villages use the Buddhist idea of 'right living' to promote merit gaining and meditation alongside communal rice and buffalo banks, irrigation projects and basic medical welfare projects.

Therefore, the research question is as follows: In what ways and to what extent has Thai Buddhist Environmentalism contributed to Sustainable Development efforts in Thailand? By Thai Buddhist Environmentalism, I especially refer to practices and rituals created to raise specific environmental awareness or protection.

The literature review in this chapter situates Thai Buddhist Environmentalism in the context of the contribution of Southeast Asian religions to the promotion of environmental sustainability. It offers the framework to assess the actions taken by national governments as well as local communities in Thailand.⁸ Chapter One examines Thailand's sustainable development efforts from the 1950s to 2010s including the Buddhist Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in addition to an in depth analysis of Nan Province's sustainable development. Chapter Two investigates the case study of Forest Monks and their

⁷ Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007), 140.

⁸ Anthony Le Duc, "Religious Environmentalism and Environmental Sustainability in Asia," in *Sustainable Development Goals in the Asian Context*, ed. Jan Servaes (Springer Science and Business Media, 2016), 47.

efforts in Nan Province. Chapter Three is a comparison of the national and Buddhist movements' commitments to sustainable development.

Methodology

Thailand is a part of the Buddhist-majority nations within Southeast Asia, constituting the ideal geographical location to conduct a comparative study on Buddhist environmental practices. Thailand has been chosen for three reasons, firstly the country by percentage is dominantly Buddhist, secondly, Thailand relies heavily on its agriculture sector for the nation's economic capacities allowing for an in-depth analysis of agricultural sustainable development programs from Buddhist organisations and government institutions, thirdly, Thailand's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy was introduced by King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927-2016) nationally steering the country towards a sustainable economy,⁹ placing a national interest in sustainable development. These three factors are the reasoning behind selecting Thailand as the country of research for this thesis. A timeframe from the 1980s to 2020s has been enacted in order to show how sustainable development measures have also grown and changed over time.

This thesis will focus on two scenarios. The first focuses on agriculture and uses the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy project to examine community development via sustainable farming and other agricultural practices while the second focuses on reforestation using the Buddhist Ecology Organisation of Forest Monks (*phra nak anuraksaa*) Tree Ordinations. The Buddhist case study shall be analysed based on how Buddhism has been connected with environmentalism, how the religious organisation itself practises/contributes to environmental protection in that country, and if it contributes to the country's environmentally sustainable development as a whole or if it is independent. These two case studies have been chosen as they are both conducted or have originated in Nan Province in Thailand, both are centred around deforestation/reforestation and sustainable agriculture efforts in a rural environment and they are both directly tied to environmental issues/awareness in Thailand.

This thesis aims to use lived Buddhist environmental practices in Thailand as a case study to understand how religions can operate at a communal and local level to address the threat of escalating climate change and foster environment-focused sustainable development. This can also help to advance

⁹ Gayle C. Avery and Harald Bergsteiner, *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand's Gift to an Unsustainable World* (Allen&Unwin NSW, Australia, 2016), 33.

national governmental policies in preventing climate change for developing nations such as Thailand, which are often more likely to suffer first from such environmental effects. The focus of the thesis shall remain on agricultural and forestry protection as to investigate all forms of sustainable development or environmental programs in Thailand is above a single thesis's capabilities. The agricultural/forestry industry has been selected as not only do agricultural products make up 11.7% of exports and a trade surplus of 4.5 billion US dollars for Thailand, it is also a contributor to high labour in rural workforces¹⁰ where spiritual and Buddhist practices are the strongest. Therefore, the agricultural industry shall be highlighted by selecting two case studies, one national agricultural sustainable development program, and one Buddhist agricultural sustainable development project for comparison and contrast.

The comparisons and contrasts made in the thesis shall not dictate how one Buddhist organisation or movement is better than others nor how the country's sustainable development policies are the best in the region but instead hope to show how Buddhism, and as a whole, religion, can contribute to countries' sustainable development policies and if these religious organisations' environmental protection can be implemented and expanded upon nationally across Thailand and regionally across Southeast Asia.

Sustainable development efforts within Southeast Asia itself encompass' a mix of developed and developing countries with different levels of social-economic and political development¹¹. Thailand is at a higher level of development than nations such as Vietnam or Laos, but not as developed as Singapore. By evaluating sustainable development projects that Thailand implements at a national level alongside the engagement of Buddhist organisations to environmental protection, the expansion of Buddhist environmental sustainable development can be extended to other Buddhist majority nations in Southeast Asia.

¹⁰ Judul Rucianawati, *The Development of Agricultural Sector in Southeast Asia: Sustainable Agriculture in Thailand* (Jakarta: Literata Lintas Media, 2013), 2.

¹¹ Jing Huang, "Environmentally Sustainable Development in Asia: Challenges and Choices," in *Environmental Policies in Asia: Perspectives from Seven Asian Countries*, ed. Jing Huang and Shreekanth Gupta (Singapore: World Publishing Company, 2014), 5.

Literature Review: Thai Buddhist Environmentalism

This thesis shall contribute to the field of Buddhist religious environmentalism and shall build upon the research done in the academic fields of Buddhist Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, Thai Studies, Environmental Studies, and Sustainability Studies. These five academic fields are combined in this thesis for an interdisciplinary approach as well as a de-eurocentric/western perspective on each of these fields. The literature review discusses previous research on Thai Buddhist Environmentalism.

Thailand's Buddhist Environmentalism

The Buddhist tradition counsels us to treasure and conserve nature.¹² Buddhism has been used as a tool for teaching about environmentalism in Thailand by those who actively engage with environmental work, whether they come from a scientific, development, or eco-activist background. The intersection between environmental protection and Buddhism has not only an environmental cause but also a social-cultural influence. In Thailand, the climate crisis serves as the driving force behind the interest of the majority of young people in environmental issues. Religion is illustrious for drawing large masses, in this case, the linkage between Buddhist teachings and environmentalism can redraw youth to the religion that has been at the forefront of a globalised market-economy society.

Thai Buddhist Environmentalism has shaped itself around the needs of the local people, particularly, those whose income relies upon nature. As the climate crisis continues to grow worse, more environmentalist practices have entered Buddhist realms of knowledge and social order. Since the 1980s, Thai Buddhist monks have both openly and quietly negotiated with and challenged the dominance of the urban elite, business, and the state in environmental affairs through public protests, rituals, seminars, and networking, all contributing to the construction of a new knowledge of Buddhism in Thai society'.¹³ In urban settings, youth movements lead the fight against climate change and environmental protection while the government focuses on sustainable development and how to implement that into Thai society. In

¹² David E Cooper and Simon P James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 107.

¹³ Susan M Darlington, "Sacred Protests and Buddhist Environmental Knowledge," in *Buddhism, Modernity and the State in Asia*, ed. Kiti'āsā Phatthanā and John Whalen-Bridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 247.

rural settings Thai Monks such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Phrakhrū Pitak are some of the most noticeable Development Monks working on environmental issues for such communities.

Socially-engaged Buddhism was first coined by Vietnamese Monk Thich Nhat Hanh to refer to his order's commitment to a Buddhist basis for social action.¹⁴ Socially-engaged Buddhism is grounded in ethics and morality, and uses engagement as a practice in itself of spiritual development either independently or communally. Multiple studies have been conducted to showcase the local engagement of Buddhist communities in Thailand such one completed in Khiriwong, Southern Thailand. Forest orchards in Khiriwong created a space for people to gather to learn about the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, and given its abundant and sustainable natural resources the ritual and community festivals are a common sight held in the Buddhist temple where people from different walks of life converge and interact in the spirit of togetherness.¹⁵ The study concluded that the village of Khiriwong relied on community resilience and passion for forest ecological sustainability. In this case, the whole village of Khiriwong participated in their own form of Socially-engaged Buddhism of self-sufficiency. The inclusion of environmental activism or protection within Buddhist religious practices can come from both past/historical events or as a response to climate change. Either way, it is another aspect of Socially-engaged Buddhism that has absorbed environmentalist actions from religious communities and rural communities battling changing agricultural seasons.

The Buddhist Model for Sustainability was introduced by Sulak Sivaraksa, a renowned scholar and activist who advises Thais to cultivate loving, kindness, and compassion as their inner strength with community capacity-building through Buddhist education.¹⁶ Sivaraksa is the most prominent Thai figure for Socially-engaged Buddhism where his work is connected with international development, inequity of

¹⁴ Kathryn Poethig, 'Moveable Peace: Engaging the Transnational in Cambodia's Dhammayietra,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no.1 (2002): 19.

¹⁵ Dicky Sofjan, "The Heartware of Ecological Sustainability in the Asian Context," in *Civic Engagement in Asia: Transformative Learning for a Sustainable Future*, ed. Mochamad Indrawan, Jeffery Luzar, Helen Hanna and Theodore Mayer (Singapore: Springer, 2003), 31.

¹⁶ Patchanee Malikhao, "Ecology and Sufficiency for Sustainable Development: Perspectives from Thailand," in *Communication, Culture, and Ecology: Rethinking Sustainable Development in Asia*, ed. Kiran Prasad (Singapore: Springer, 1968), 26.

resource distributions, environmentalism, inter-religious dialogue, and human rights.¹⁷ While Sivaraska did not hold the title of an Forest monk, he is closely related to the environmental movement intersecting with Thai Monks and Buddhist teachings. As understood from Sivaraska's writing, Buddhist education challenged the Western assumption that objectivity is equated with neutrality, as it integrated constructivism with what Buddha taught the *tisikkha*: wisdom (*panna*), ethics (*sila*), and concentration (*samadhi*).¹⁸

Socially-engaged Buddhism continues to have a significant influence in particular on environmental movements within Thailand. A number of Thai Buddhists have sought to explain the causes of environmental degradation and how they have responded to it by proposing a variety of different strategies, which are informed by religious beliefs, practices, and teachings.¹⁹ This is most noticeable in rural Northern Thailand, where the Forest Monks movement originated. More shall be discussed on the Forest Monks in Chapter Two.

Rituals such as *Buat Pa* (tree ordination) and *Seub Cha Ta Rum Num* (longer life ritual for stream and river) are not traditional practices but were instead taught by Phrakhru Pitak Nantakun²⁰ via the Huk Muaeng Nan Network.²¹ It can be noted that these environmental practices in Thai Buddhism mostly take place in the countryside and in less-wealthy populations. As climate related issues drastically affect less well-off communities first, these communities are thus the first to put sustainable living into practice to ensure their livelihoods. The ceremonial performances of *Buat Pa* and *Seub Cha Ta Rum Num* are aimed firstly, to show respect and gratefulness to the forest and water; secondly, to stimulate the awareness of conservation based on the spiritual belief in sacred power and lastly, to build participation in the recovery

¹⁷ Anne Ruth Hansen, "Modern Buddhism in Southeast Asia," in *The Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian History*, ed. Norman G Owen (Talyor & Francis, 2014), 230.

¹⁸ Malikhao, "Ecology and Sufficiency for Sustainable Development," 26.

¹⁹ Martin Seeger, "Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism: Continuity and Change," in *Environmental and Climate Change in South and Southeast Asia: How are Local Cultures Coping?* ed. Barbara Schuler (Boston: Brill, 2014), 48.

²⁰ Phrakhru Pitak Nantakun is a Thai Buddhist Monk whose work has revolved around environmental forest practices. More shall be discussed about his work in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

²¹ Katesuda Sitthisuntikul and Pierre Horwitz, "Collective Rituals as meaningful expressions of the relationships between People, Water and Forest: A Case Study from Northern Thailand," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36, no.1 (2015): 92.

and conservation of forests and water.²² These ceremonial rituals which are performed by Monks exhibit how these communities participate in environmental protection through a Buddhist worldview.

The venerated Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-93) preached what he called ‘AgriDharma,’ a form of agriculture based on Buddhist scriptures.²³ Bhikkhu acted independently from the organised sangha of Thailand, thus was much more popular with the rural populations and local villagers in Northern Thailand than in urban areas such as Bangkok. In his AgriDharma teachings, he spoke about the reduced social status of farmers in Thailand’s newly industrialising economy, he argued that through moral farming, the farmer has the potential to reach nirvana.²⁴ Moral farming would remove the practices such as deforestation for new agricultural land, forced flooding of fields, anti-pesticide on soil etc.. This combined agricultural environmentalism and Buddhism was applicable and later popular with farmers as it acknowledged their livelihood and religion while at the same time teaching them new farming techniques and practices that would allow them to gain merit in an environmentally friendly way. This is another instance of how environmentalism has been combined with Buddhist practices.

There are numerous discussions about Thai religious environmentalism, but most of them highlight Buddhism’s adaptability as a religion and the impact of engaged practices of local Buddhist communities on treatment of nature. Buddhist engagement with the Environment has been present both in the past, present, and most likely future. As climate change is prevalent around the world it is unsurprising that the Buddhist community has also joined the environmental discourse and turned to their religion as a resource. According to Poranee Natadecha and Lesile Sponsel, ‘the monastic community of monk and nuns (sangha) are highly respected and even revered members of society, they have extraordinary sociocultural status, prestige, and power to take the lead in transforming Buddhist societies into far more ecological attuned policies, drawing on the ecological wisdom of the Buddha’s life and the

²² Sitthisuntikul and Horwitz, “Collective Rituals,” 92.

²³ Alexander Harrow Kaufman and Jeremiah Mock, “Cultivating Greater Well-being: The Benefits of Thai Organic Farmer’s Experience from adopting Buddhist Eco-spirituality,” *Journal of Agricultural & Environmental Ethics* 27, no.6 (2014), 876.

²⁴ Kaufman and Mock, “Cultivating Greater Well-being,” 876.

Dharma'.²⁵ Susan Darlington's research is concerned with the Buddhists who, faced with deteriorating environmental conditions and suffering, not only turn to the teachings but also deliberately initiate innovative practices to deal with environmental problems.²⁶ How Buddhist teachings have been understood by the followers has led to multiple outcomes on environmental protection or environmental practices. At times the practices to deal with environmental protection do not come from a space of scientific or climate change woes but of sacred beliefs and spiritual practices. Darlington concludes with, 'the distinction between a superficial practice that is labelled as 'ecological' and one that has a positive impact on the environment and the beings within it can be seen in both the intention behind the act and its consequences'.²⁷ The inclusion of environmental practices seems less to do with the climate crises and more to do with beliefs regarding nature, folk beliefs, superstitions, and Buddhist teachings.

In summary, Environmental Buddhism in Thailand is deeply rooted in common environmental practices that have emerged as a form of engagement in reaction to the local beliefs and the environmental crisis the world faces, as well as the environmental engagement local communities make to keep their way of life.

²⁵ Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel and Lesile E Sponsel, "Buddhist Environmentalism," in *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting Traditions*, ed. Todd Lewis and Gary de Angelis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 321.

²⁶ Susan M Darlington, "Contemporary Buddhism and Ecology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (Oxford University Press, 2017), 489.

²⁷ Darlington, "Contemporary Buddhism and Ecology, 491.

Chapter 1: Land of Learning: Thailand and Sustainable Development

This chapter shall be split into four sections. The first shall discuss Thailand's national development plans, the second will introduce the country's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy which is used as a guiding factor in sustainable development, the third, will outline community sustainable development and the fourth, is a summary of sustainable development in Nan Province focusing on forest and agricultural practices with an analysis of national development plans and community sustainable development.

From the 1950s onwards, through the 1980-90s and into the present 2010s, Thailand has seen a radical social and economic transformation. Cold War geopolitics, rapid economic growth, and the shift from agricultural to industrial production had massive social and spatial implications for the country that led to the emergence of distinct perspectives in Thai environmental politics.²⁸ This rise of environmental-based politics in Thailand originates from community environmental movements calling for environmental justice. By the 1990s, the nature of environmental activism began to change when environmental issues became overtly linked with development and politics.²⁹ Environmental issues caught public attention as a series of disasters and struggles such as the outbreak of invasive species in rural farming creating soil damage put environmental concerns on the national political agenda.³⁰ Since the 1980s, both a state and communal interest in sustainable development has emerged. At a grassroots level, environmentalism has emerged due to the impact of Thailand's development path on rural livelihoods, in particular it has affected the marginalised ethnic, low-income and religious groups who live in certain areas such as forest reserves where resource competition between state, capital, and local people's interest

²⁸ Eli Elinoff and Venessa Lamb, "Environmental Politics in Thailand," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Abingdon, Oxon: New York, 2020), 381.

²⁹ Chantana Banpasirichote, "Civil Society Discourse and the Future of Radical Environmental Movements in Thailand," in *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Hock Guan Lee (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2004), 235.

³⁰ Prudhisana Jumbala and Maneerat Mitprasat, "Non-Governmental Development Organisations: Empowerment and Environment," in *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison (London: Routledge, 1997), 202.

has intensified greatly.³¹ Thailand's rapid development and the rise of capitalist culture is the main cause of agricultural environmental destruction that the country faces.

1.1 Thailand's National Development Plans

Since the UN introduced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015,³² Thailand has worked towards addressing and implementing them. Thailand has embarked on a path of globalisation adopting the modernisation paradigm with large-scale socioeconomic and infrastructure development.³³ The SDGs have been utilised both from a national governmental level to a local grassroots level as early as the 1960s until contemporary times. Throughout the described timeline in which the SDGs were implemented, Thailand's development policies have changed to address diverging socio-economic needs.

These national development plans were conducted during Thailand's changing political environment from military coups to the country's democratisation. The incorporative nature of Thailand's development plans means that peripheral areas and their inhabitants are drawn into mainstream political and economic currents.³⁴ This inclusion is mostly of different social classes which leads to a range of perspectives and opinions on the national development plans. While the first several plans focused on economic development, the latter plans have focused on slowly integrating a 'Sufficiency Economy'.

The way Thailand has gone about nationally implementing the SDGs has two main themes; ecology and sufficiency. The country has so far directed eleven national development plans,³⁵ the first (1961-1966) emphasised industrialization, the building of railroads, roads, and dams. Moreover, it led to the establishment of two universities; while the most recent eleventh plan (2012-2016) has focused on a sufficient economy, social security, environment, security of energy and food as well as social justice.³⁶

The national development plans are continuously being revised to fit Thailand's rapid globalisation.

³¹ Philip Hirsch, "The Politics of Environment: Opposition and Legitimacy," in *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison (London: Routledge, 1997), 180.

³² "The 17 Goals," United Nations, accessed 23 February 2023, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

³³ Malikhao, "Ecology and Sufficiency for Sustainable Development," 25.

³⁴ Hirsch, "The Politics of Environment," 180.

³⁵ These national development plans have an implementation year for when they started and while most also have a completion year, these plans are still being improved upon and expanded after their official finish year. The national plans are continuously being worked upon and thus don't really have an end date. The end date year is more so that the legislation of the national plan has been completed but often the development projects are ongoing.

³⁶ Malikhao, "Ecology and Sufficiency for Sustainable Development," 25-26.

1.2 Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP)

A guiding plan of sustainable development in Thailand is the ‘Sufficiency Economy Philosophy’ or SEP which was introduced by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927-2016) as a guide for recovery after the 1997 economic crisis. It acts as a framework highlighting psychological well-being or the happiness aspect of quality of life which in 1999 became a guideline towards sustainable development.³⁷ The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy not only works as a developmental framework but also ties in Buddhist philosophy as a core element in the success of the SEP and Thai society. By incorporating Buddhist concepts into the theory by the use of the ‘Middle Path’, SEP aims to achieve sustainable development and provide an alternative approach to corporate sustainability. The ‘Middle Path’ in SEP means to take a path between two extremes of a continuum, namely, maximising growth and minimising utility or indulgence in terms of people’s daily activity and community development.³⁸ As Buddhism is an important aspect in Thai society it can address the needed changes from capitalism’s exploitative nature including providing solutions as SEP views sustainability based on Buddhist values.³⁹

The SEP is based on three core principles, moderation (avoiding extremes), reasonableness (the causal connection between actions and consequences), and self-immunity (the ability to deal with unpredictable and uncontrollable shocks).⁴⁰ These three core principles allow for outcomes and solutions to be addressed in a sufficient economic way while acknowledging religious, social, political, ethnic differences when regarding sustainable development initiatives.

The essence of SEP is that those people who strive to be virtuous and knowledgeable are more likely to make moderate, reasonable, and prudent decisions that benefit themselves and their communities

³⁷ Chantinee Boonchai and Robert J.S Beeton, “Sustainable Development in the Asian Century: An Inquiry of its Understanding in Phuket, Thailand,” *Sustainable Development* 24, no.2 (2016): 112.

³⁸ Hee-Chan Song, “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy: Buddhism-based Sustainability Framework in Thailand,” *Business Strategy and the Environment* 29, no.8 (2020): 2997.

³⁹ Song, “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy: Buddhism-based Sustainability Framework in Thailand,” 3002.

⁴⁰ Suwongrat Papangkorn, Pattanapoorn Chatjuthamard and Sirimon Treepongkaruna, “Sustainable Development and Firm Performance: Evidence from Thailand’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy,” *Sustainable Development* 30, no.5 (2022): 1031.

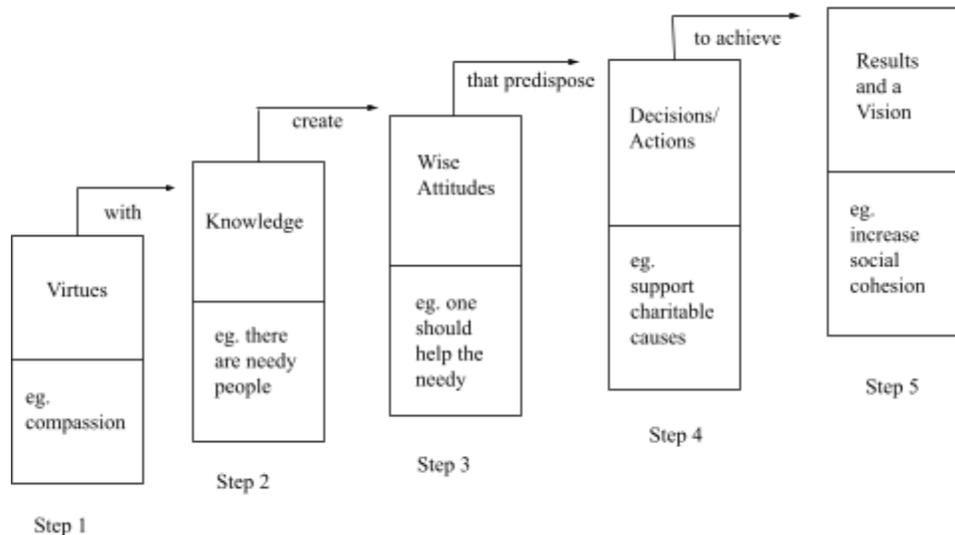
in a way that maximises and balances economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes.⁴¹ The SEP is therefore applicable to not only national development plans but also to local and communal development plans as it takes into consideration the different issues and environmental factors it could encounter. The SEP acts as a guided model on how to implement and conduct effective sustainable development programs for the benefit of all of Thai society.

A basic model (Figure 1) showcases how the SEP is supposed to work while a more detailed model created by Priyanut Dharmapiya, the director of the Sufficiency School Centre, demonstrates the additional details that come with SEP plans.

Dharmapiya’s model (Figure 2) administers a virtuous five-step cycle, a combination of

people’s enduring virtues and attributes with true knowledge promotes, wise attitudes in a sufficiency mindset (moderation, reasonable, precedence) that predispose people to engage in, wise actions and behaviours (the middle path) thereby facilitating, balanced economic, societal, environmental, and cultural outputs (sufficiency) so ultimately delivering, a range of sustainable outcomes (chiefly self-reliance, resilience, immunity), at the individual, family, group, and national levels.⁴² The five-step cycle of SEP can be engineered to address a number of environmental issues from reforestation efforts, clean water initiatives, sustainable farming practices, and eco-friendly city spaces. SEP’s management depends on the program it is assisting.

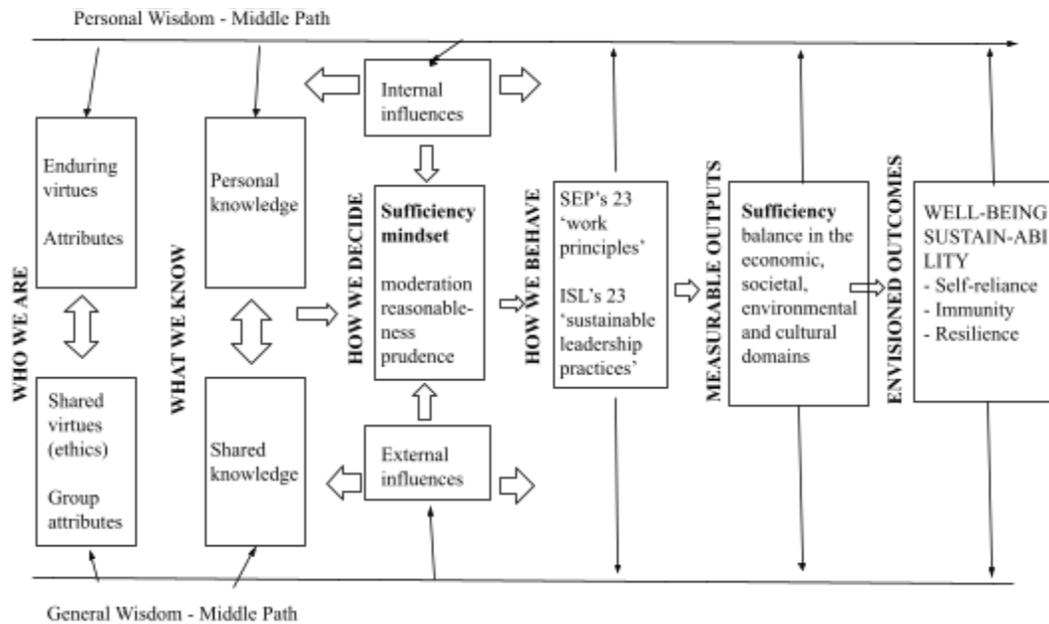
Figure 1: Simplified Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Process Model



⁴¹ Priyanut Dharmapiya and Harald Bergsteiner, “The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Process,” in *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand’s Gift to an Unsustainable World*, ed. Gayle Avery and Harald Bergsteiner (Allen & Unwin, 2016), 32.

⁴² Dharmapiya and Bergsteiner, “The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Process,” 52.

Figure 2: The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Model



The national development plans also embrace King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s philosophy, with the eighth national development plan shifting its focus from economic growth to the holistic development of human potential and the ninth (issued in 2002) comprehensively embracing the ‘Sufficiency Economy Philosophy’.⁴³ This implementation brings together politics, economics, environment, and society under one single framework rather than separate factors, and only by addressing all can a real solution be presented. Not only has SEP been embraced by national governmental organisations but it has also been incorporated with corporate actors and non-governmental organisations. In corporate spheres, SEP pursues sustainable development via ethical approaches such as good corporate governance, corporate social responsibility, and being mindful of all stakeholders, in other words, corporate SEP is concerned with the long-term sustainability of a company's operations in the ecological, social, and economic environment.⁴⁴ Corporate SEP aims to make business more sustainable and less economically exploitative.

⁴³ Aree Wiboonpongse and Songsak Sriboonchitta, “The Impact of Sufficiency Thinking on Community Development,” in *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand’s Gift to an Unsustainable World*, ed. Gayle Avery and Harald Bergsteiner (Allen & Unwin, 2016), 94.

⁴⁴ Papangkorn, Chatjuthamard and Treepongkaruna, “Sustainable Development and Firm Performance: Evidence from Thailand’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy,” 1031.

From a Thai perspective - the development of a sufficient economy is based on the multiplicity paradigm, which affirms the management of natural resources, self-reliance, and the use of appropriate technology.⁴⁵ The Sufficiency Economy continues to go hand-in-hand with how Thais and to a larger extent Thailand, interpret developmental projects from communal to legislative institutions. As of 2018, Thailand is in the process of planning and conducting its twelfth national development plan which shall accentuate the philosophy of a sufficient economy, ecology, and green economy.⁴⁶ Among the second concept, ecology is a major element in Thailand's understanding of sustainable development due to agriculture being one of the nation's largest GDP-producing industries. The eleventh and twelfth development plans are where Buddhist communities have the most significance to aid sustainable development in Thailand. For instance, the belief in reincarnation and fear of consequences of bad karma have been used to deter local villagers from illegal logging in Thailand's community forest management.⁴⁷ However, it is not just the national development plans where Buddhism can play a role.

Buddhism can play an important role in shaping the values of the community. Buddhist values are also considered community values. In order for SEP to be considered a successful philosophy, community development must be integrated. SEP alongside the incorporation of Buddhist values includes community-based sustainable development approaches.

1.3 Community Sustainable Development

The majority of the time, community sustainable development is not government-sponsored, rather it is a combination of efforts made by local communities, academic experts or professionals, and non-governmental organisations. Community sustainable development surfaces when areas of negative environmental impact are severe and residents have inadequate information to resolve the problem. Environmental monitoring by communities, often called citizen science, is a practical way to collect and

⁴⁵ Malikhao, "Ecology and Sufficiency for Sustainable Development," 30.

⁴⁶ Malikhao, "Ecology and Sufficiency for Sustainable Development," 26.

⁴⁷ Boonchai and Beeton, "Sustainable Development in the Asian Century," 112.

record data about actual pollution and its impacts.⁴⁸ This so-called citizen science acts as a form of local knowledge that can then be used to provide solutions and outcomes for a sustainable development plan that will take the needs of the community to the forefront. One form of citizen science that has been used in combination with indigenous knowledge in Thailand are community forestry programs.

Community forestry or social forestry emerged in the late 1970s when concerns over increasing deforestation rates in Thailand led to a questioning of state control over forest resources and the state's capacity to effectively protect and manage forest sustainability.⁴⁹ This development led to one such community taking matters into its own hands. The Ban Huay Poo Kang community forest was created in Chiang Rai Province and it consists of agriculturalists who mostly plant rice and vegetables and raise livestock as well as having access to upstream water resources that provide the needed water for agriculture and the community.⁵⁰ The community of Ban Huay Poo Kang is not the only community forest in Thailand, several have emerged since the late 1980s in order to protect forest environments. The emergence of most forest communities arose to address the rhetoric in 1980s Thailand surrounding hasty mass deforestation while some were simply villages located near forests or in forests that wished to protect their lands.

The Chang Tok Tay Community Forest is located in Nakhon Ratchasima Province (Figure 3) and is managed by seventy households from ten villages surrounding the forest. The majority of these households maintain traditional livelihoods where traditional kinship, leadership, and spiritual practices remain strong amongst the community that they form.⁵¹ The spiritual beliefs in Chang Tok Tay are a combination of Theravada Buddhism



Figure 3: Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand

⁴⁸ Penchom Saetang, "The Role of Citizen Science in Policy Advocacy and Building Just and Ecologically Sustainable Communities in Thailand," in *Civic Engagement in Asia: Transformative Learning for a Sustainable Future*, ed. Mochamad Indrawan (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 53.

⁴⁹ Nathitakarn Pinthukas, "Community Forest Management for Sustainable Local Agriculture Development in Ban Huay Pu Kang, Thailand," *Earth and Environmental Science* 270, no.1 (2019): 1.

⁵⁰ Pinthukas, "Community Forest Management for Sustainable Local Agriculture Development in Ban Huay Pu Kang, Thailand," 3.

⁵¹ Rachanee Pothitan, Toshikuni Noguchi and Abdus Salam, "Community Forest Management in Thailand: Current Situation and Dynamics in the Context of Sustainable Development," *New Forests* 31, no.2 (2006): 274.

and folk traditions. As these communities rely on the forest as a major source of food/income, preserving the forest works in accordance with their economic and social values.

Community sustainable development is at the forefront of environmentally-friendly forest practices that have been naturalised for village heads or farmers of these communities. The concept of establishing community forests to recognise and engender villagers' cooperation in preserving and managing local forests is part of a broader environmental discourse popular in Thailand today.⁵² Communal forest management often does not have any formal written rules or regulations,⁵³ as it is based on local and communal knowledge that has been passed down for generations. However, Thailand's boom of economic development led to non-environmentally friendly practices increasingly being used to keep up with the economic demand, which is illustrated by the usage of chemical pesticides instead of natural fertilisers to speed up growth. Community sustainable development aims to address these issues and bring back an environmentalist approach based on local knowledge.⁵⁴

At the community level, the SDGs have also been impactful in Thailand. An initiative called Local Agenda 21 (LA21) was proposed at the United Nations in 1992. LA21 is an agenda that sets tasks and a vision in order to promote sustainable development at the local level and it shows the menu of action.⁵⁵ LA21 was all about community engagement and how the SDGs could be administered locally. LA21 was conducted in four municipalities in Thailand namely: Bangkok, Korat, Trang, and Lamphun. The latter three experienced industrialisation and urbanisation as regional hub cities, and their environment, particularly the quality of river water had deteriorated during the process of change.⁵⁶ The project brought the local community into the municipality's meetings about how to renew the quality of the river water. Participants within LA21 had ample opportunity to reflect upon possible options/points of discussion that were presented, while at the same time, all those affected by a decision, that is the local

⁵² Susan M. Darlington, "Practical Spirituality and Community Forests: Monks, Ritual, and Radical Conservation in Thailand," in *Nature in the Global South*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Paul Greenough (Duke University Press, 2020), 347.

⁵³ Pothitan, Noguchi and Salam, "Community Forest Management in Thailand," 276.

⁵⁴ Pothitan, Noguchi and Salam, "Community Forest Management in Thailand," 278.

⁵⁵ Aki Tonami and Akihisa Mori, "Sustainable Development in Thailand: Lessons from Implementing Local Agenda 21 in Three Cities," *Journal of Environment and Development* 16, no.3 (2007): 270.

⁵⁶ Tonami and Mori, "Sustainable Development in Thailand," 276.

residents and community representatives, are involved in the process.⁵⁷ LA21 in the four municipalities used public engagement as a way to contribute to better environmental management at a communal level. LA21 is one such case of community development SDGs being administered in Thailand.

From the national level of SDGs, the eleventh and twelfth development plans are where Buddhist communities have the most significance to aid sustainable development in Thailand. However, at the local grassroots level, communities have been practising particular ecological and sustainable living through Buddhist practices which are closely linked with Thai culture and traditions before the UN SDGs or Thailand's national development plans were even introduced. Buddhism contributes to Thailand's sustainability efforts through problem-solving by limiting materialistic desires and focusing on intellectual and moral development.⁵⁸ Ultimately, Thailand has multiple sustainable development initiatives all to create a better economy and lifestyle for the country presently and for future generations, and actively engages with sustainable development programs. One such sustainable development program is conducted in Nan Province and is focused on community and agricultural sustainable development.

1.4 Nan Province as a Sustainable Development Hub

Sufficiency Economy Philosophy is currently being tested in rural communities that are agriculturally focused such as Nan Province in North-eastern Thailand. Nan Province is situated along the border with Laos with mountainous landscapes with elevations ranging from 700 to 2300 metres while the central part consists of a large valley, referred to as lowlands, surrounded by mountains, which are referred to as highlands.⁵⁹ Nan Province is small compared to neighbouring provinces and consists of a predominately rural population. This population is concentrated in the lowland areas along the river valleys alongside being scattered throughout the highlands.⁶⁰ As the population makes a living mostly

⁵⁷ Delina L Laurence, "Energy Democracy in a Continuum: Remaking Public Engagement on Energy Transitions in Thailand," *Energy Research & Social Science* 42, no.1 (2018): 56.

⁵⁸ Boonchai and Beeton, "Sustainable Development in the Asian Century," 112.

⁵⁹ Phimonpahn Sakitram, Shivani Agarwal, Banjit Sairorkham, and Eric Lambin, "Effectiveness of Community Forests for Forest Conservation in Nan Province, Thailand," *Journal of Land Use Science* 17, no.1 (2022): 309.

⁶⁰ Henry D Delcore, "*Localising Development: Environment, Agriculture, and Memory in Northern Thailand*," (Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 2000), 78.

from the agricultural sector in a time of climate change and previous rapid economic development, environmental protection and sustainable agriculture are priorities for Nan local governance.

As sustainable development plans encircle the region, Nan's environment is undergoing changes. Agriculture in Nan consists largely of rice and field crop cultivation through fruit trees and commercial timber crops which have become popular recently.⁶¹ Nan's many forests are divided, seven have been named national parks while others are managed as national forests by the Royal Forest Department or by the communities living in and around forest patches.⁶² When researching many forms of sustainable development initiatives, agricultural sustainable development, and SEP sustainable development programs, Nan Province often emerges as a case study for previous research due to its location, rural population, and intensive forestry.

The Royal Initiative Discovery Foundation (RIDF) or the Pid Tong Lang Pra Foundation began its area-based community development projects in Nan Province in 2014. The RIDF's approach is people-and environment-centric, with a focus on irrigation, multi-crop farming, reduced reliance on chemicals, community collaboration, self-help, and reforestation.⁶³ The project was a five-year government sponsored introductory trial of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy framework in practice using sustainable agricultural methods. The main objective was to apply the SEP concepts to area-based development to reduce poverty and improve living standards.⁶⁴ The outcome of the project showcased numerous successful outcomes such as a shift towards more extensive farming practices with a focus on production for home consumption and a more limited adoption of agricultural innovations.⁶⁵ Overall, four successful factors were identified throughout the duration of the project, first; a focus on local people, second; local participation alongside local mentors for guidance, third; willingness to resolve conflicts,

⁶¹ Delcore, "Localising Development: Environment, Agriculture, and Memory in Northern Thailand," 78.

⁶² Sakitram, Agarwal, Sairorkham, and Lambin, "Effectiveness of Community Forests for Forest Conservation in Nan Province, Thailand," 309.

⁶³ Phallapa Petison, Werapong Prapha and Veerathai Santiprabhob, "Community Sufficiency in Nan Province," in *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand's Gift to an Unsustainable World*, ed. Gayle Avery and Harald Bergsteiner (Allen & Unwin, 2016), 75.

⁶⁴ Petison, Prapha and Santiprabhob, "Community Sufficiency in Nan Province," 79.

⁶⁵ Kassirin Phiboon, Man Purotaganon and Nicolas Faysse, "Which Pathway to address interrelated challenges to farm sustainability in Thailand? Views from Local Actors," *Regional Environmental Change* 22, no.1 (2022): 2.

and fourth; developing strategies for managing common resources.⁶⁶ The slow long-term success of the 2014 RIDF project allowed farmers to remove themselves from debt, remove themselves and their families from poverty, increase crop yields, increase self-reliance for farmers, produce multi-crops rather than just one type, and it increased familiarity between locals resulting in communal trust growth and the adoption of sustainable farming techniques.⁶⁷ However, the project illustrates that to achieve these goals, there is a requirement consisting of the participation of local farming communities to be willing to change their farming practices to implement SEP-focused techniques.

Thailand's sustainable development projects and programs not only seem to centre on environmental issues that affect rural communities the most but include the collaboration of national and local development programs in order to engage with the wide range of issues the nation has to address. While national and communal sustainable development programs have increased in frequency they seem to leave out a large factor that is greatly significant in many Thai social lives, which is religion. Religion, particularly Buddhism has an influence on environmental issues in Thailand both at a national and communal level. However, SEP programs, while addressing religious aspects of the subjects' lives, leave out the inclusion and impact of monks within these rural communities in Nan Province.

⁶⁶ Petison, Prapha and Santiprabhob, "Community Sufficiency in Nan Province," 88.

⁶⁷ Petison, Prapha and Santiprabhob, "Community Sufficiency in Nan Province," 89.

Chapter 2: Ecology Organisation of Forest Monks (*phra nak anurakasa*)

The Forest Monk movement started in North-eastern Thailand during the 1990s. In 1991, the Thai Buddhist monk Phrakhrui Pitak Nanthakhun sponsored a Tree Ordination in Nan province.⁶⁸ This action of the Tree Ordination sparked what is now associated with Forest Monks. Environmentalist Monks form a small percentage of the total number of monks in Thailand. Nonetheless, their actions are visible in contemporary Thai society, particularly the media, as they tackle urgent and controversial issues such as deforestation, dam construction, and many more environmental issues using modified Buddhist rituals and ecological interpretations of Buddhist teachings.⁶⁹ Forest Monks are the focus lens in this chapter. The reasoning is that Environmental Monks is a general term that refers to Buddhist monks involved with any environmental issues whereas Forest Monks refers to monks who specifically engage with forestry and sustainable agriculture. Over time, the movement has gone from being controversial in both monastic domains and contemporary society to acceptance by the Thai sangha (with exceptions) and by the general public. For instance, it is not unusual in Thai Buddhist culture to see a Tree Ordination, or monks holding seminars on communal efforts for reforestation.

Thai Buddhism is perceived to have enormous potential to address environmental problems effectively and sustainably.⁷⁰ By combining Buddhist practices and teachings, Forest Monks have established themselves within both the hierarchical Thai sangha and the social justice movements of the common people. Monks bridge the gap between rural and urban by involving religion in social issues rather than keeping religion and activism separate.

Northern Thailand has a mixture of ethnicities with Khmer, and Lao living alongside Thai and indigenous peoples such as the Noi, Tham, and Humong. In all regional North-east Buddhist traditions,

⁶⁸ Susan M. Darlington, "Buddhism and Development: Ecology Monks of Thailand," in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Christopher Queen, Damien Keown and Charles S Prebish (Florence: Routledge, 2003), 96.

⁶⁹ Darlington, "Buddhism and Development," 96.

⁷⁰ Seeger, "Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism," 48.

the monastery had always been a centre of learning, for secular as well as religious knowledge,⁷¹ and it is treated as a place of gathering and community. Spirit worship is a significant part of local religion in combination with Buddhist practices. Trees and forests are spaces where North-eastern spirits dwell and before locals work in these natural habitats they pray or offer gifts to the spirits to appease them. In Nan Province, the life and work of Phra Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun represents one manifestation of grassroots environmentalism,⁷² from a Thai perspective. Phrakhru Pitak made sure that his environmental work took into consideration the livelihood and rural villagers' standpoint in order to provide actual working solutions to sustainable agriculture in these areas without requiring major reformation efforts. Phrakhru Pitak constructed a strategy based on cooperative local organising and the reinterpretation of Buddhist and local beliefs. Pitak used environmentalism to strengthen rural livelihoods through local control and wise use of resources.⁷³ His work centred on environmental goals with Buddhist rituals and practices for the benefit of rural communities.

The Tree Ordination ritual is the quintessential symbol of the Thai Buddhist environmental movement.⁷⁴ Monks in Thai society hold the highest status next to that of the monarchy. By ordaining a tree, monks are symbolically raising the status of trees to the same level as that of monks. Phrakhru Pitak was the first to ordain a tree in Thailand and he conducted the ritual in five steps which have now been replicated across many other Tree Ordinations. First, the largest and oldest tree in the area would be selected to be ordained, and second, a sermon would



Figure 4: Monk Ordaining a Tree in Northeastern Thailand alongside Village deforestation activists.

⁷¹ Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 50.

⁷² Delcore, "Localising Development: Environment, Agriculture, and Memory in Northern Thailand," 153.

⁷³ Delcore, "Localising Development: Environment, Agriculture, and Memory in Northern Thailand," 154.

⁷⁴ Susan M. Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 3.

be given by the monk in charge of the ordination. Phrakhru Pitak's sermons at the first Tree Ordination highlighted the importance of nature, nature's intersection with Buddhism and how the community can work towards sustainable forest management.

The third step once the sermon is finished is where an orange robe would be wrapped around the body of the tree representing the orange robes that monks wear. The fourth step is the sanctification of water in the monk's alms bowl which the monks chanted over to bless the tree and the participants of the ritual. Lastly, the blessed water would be sprinkled over the ritual participants concluding the ritual of the Tree's Ordination. The Tree Ordination ritual is also participated in by village heads who pledge to protect the forest.

It is important to note that the monks who administer tree ordinations do not claim to be fully ordaining the tree. Instead, the ceremony is used symbolically to remind people that nature should be treated as equal with humans, deserving of respect and vital for humans as well as all life.⁷⁵ However, for local villagers who observe these rituals, the status of the tree is now on par with that of the monks due to the orange robes which gave the tree a monk status, making the tree holy and thus untouchable in the minds of the villagers. Buddhism remains a primary source of Thai identity for rural people, and Buddhist monks continue to be a powerful force in the promotion of local alternatives to state-sponsored programs.⁷⁶ The interpretation of ordained trees are different between monks and rural villagers most likely due to different levels of understanding the ritual. Either way, the aim has been reached, which is that the tree and thus the forest is now protected and cannot be used for 'evil' or greed-led purposes such as commercial logging.

Tree Ordinations work in tandem with presenting sermons, educating about sustainable agricultural practices, and placing a Buddha image as the 'chief' of the forest to forbid cutting down trees to ensure the removal of harmful deforestation and non-sustainable agriculture.⁷⁷ Tree Ordination led to protected forests for community use. Phrakhru Pitak's Tree Ordinations combined the importance of

⁷⁵ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 74.

⁷⁶ Walter, "Activist Forest Monks," 332.

⁷⁷ Darlington, "Practical Spirituality and Community Forests," 349.

protecting the forest, Buddhist teachings and rituals, and education for villagers on the benefits of forest conservation and sustainable agriculture. The establishment of community forests while being a part of Thailand's environmental discourse also ties into the importance of forest conservation and protection. Not only do Tree Ordinations help local villagers and farmers but they also protect against commercial logging and timber corporations. In such a traditionally Buddhist country, even destitute, desperate loggers, observed by both villagers and monks, are reluctant to sink their saws into these 'sanctified' trees,⁷⁸ in fear of bad merit and angry spirits befalling them. That is not to say Tree Ordinations stop all illegal logging or commercial logging from happening but that they provide an additional layer to the forest's protection.

Rituals are an important aspect of Forest Monk practices that negotiate the political and economic aspects of the environment's connectivity. The ritual acts as the monks 'political statement' in a way as they are still bound to the rules and image of the sangha. While rituals are only one tool used by forest monks, they are a tool available only to monks, thereby setting them apart from other social change agents such as environmentalists and government officials.⁷⁹ Buddhist rituals that involve Tree Ordinations for forest protection localise environmentalism by integrating it with popular religion.⁸⁰ Tree Ordinations in particular require a balance between the spiritual meanings invoked through the ritual (especially the emphasis on suffering) and the political negotiations needed to enact successful changes in how forests are categorised and used.⁸¹ These practices localise religious beliefs at a level that benefits the rural villagers while protecting the forests and at the same time assisting national reforestation efforts that are introduced by state institutions.

Phrakhru Pitak is not the only prominent Forest Monk. Phra Khru Suphajarawt Subjacaro is a locally highly respected abbot of a small temple in Yasothon Province (Figure 5) in North-eastern Thailand. Over the last three decades, Phra Khru Suphajarawat has been involved in and central to many

⁷⁸ Jess River, "We Must Learn to Be Leaves," *Earth Island Journal* 8, no.4 (1993): 12.

⁷⁹ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 90-91.

⁸⁰ Delcore, "Localising Development: Environment, Agriculture, and Memory in Northern Thailand," 154.

⁸¹ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 56.

local development projects, including organic farming, self-sufficient agriculture, and forest rehabilitation.⁸² Phra Khru Suphajarawat's Buddhist practice and work demonstrate the intersection between Development and Environmental Monks and also the broadness of the movement. According to Phra Khru Suphajarawat, due to their charisma and central role in communities, monks play a very important part in forest conservation and reforestation projects.⁸³ Most Forest Monks and Development Monks work independently and directly with local communities. They are not bureaucratically organised.

Given the centrality of the forest to the lives of rural people across Thailand, it is not surprising that Environmental or Development Monks decided to focus on forest issues.⁸⁴ Forest Monks as a focus group of Development Monks arose due to this rapid deforestation that for the majority impacted Northern Thailand. In 1961 Thailand's tropical forests occupied 53% of the total national land area before declining by 50% in the 1990s.⁸⁵ The expansion of cultivated land in the 1960s meant increasing agricultural output with minimum intervention from the state although it was to the detriment of the nation's forests.⁸⁶ A large part of Thailand's economy relies on agricultural exports, therefore mass deforestation in the name of economic development through access to more agricultural land affected many forest areas across the nation. Thailand had the highest annual rate of deforestation in Southeast Asia and ranked third in 1990 for total loss of forested area in the region.⁸⁷ Forest Monks' efforts revolve around community development and action. For Forest Monks, the forest is the centre of gaining merit for the villagers to take care of their livelihood and the nature that provides them life. The Community Forest Management (CFM) approach takes into account the local people's dependence on forest resources and the sheer impossibility of keeping them away from forests. As a result



Figure 5: Yasothorn Province, North-eastern Thailand.

⁸² Seeger, "Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism," 54-55.

⁸³ Seeger, "Ideas and Images of Nature in Thai Buddhism," 55.

⁸⁴ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 142.

⁸⁵ Gadsaraporn Wannitikul, "Deforestation in Northeast Thailand, 1975-91: Results of a General Statistical Model," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 26, no.1 (2005): 102.

⁸⁶ J.L. Talyor, *Forest Monks and the Nation State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 247.

⁸⁷ Wannitikul, "Deforestation in Northeast Thailand, 1975-91: Results of a General Statistical Model," 102.

it ‘intimately involves’ them in forestry activities.⁸⁸ Forest Monks take this approach of local involvement alongside Buddhist teachings.

Reforestation efforts by Forest Monks have also led to NGO collaborations such as the Northern Farmers Network, which set out to ordain 50 million trees in 1996 to commemorate the 5th anniversary of the King’s accession to the throne.⁸⁹ Once again, Tree Ordinations are at the centre of environmental and developmental work. This large and intensely organised event was the first time that multiple Tree Ordinations happened at once for the



Figure 6 : Ordained Trees

sole reason of the King's anniversary gift. The event combined community forests as symbolic gifts to the King from the rural peoples and at the same time, reinforced the sanctity of forests.⁹⁰ This mass ordination also led these trees to be protected property under the King.

The two monks mentioned previously, Phra Phrakhru Pitak and Phra Khru Suphajarawt moved into environmental activism individually as many Forest Monks do. Forest Monks focus on the concept of environmentalism that is grounded in their own interpretations of Buddhist teachings from their formal Buddhist education and the lived suffering seen in communities facing environmental issues. Thusly, Forest Monks emphasise relieving the suffering that is centred on humans and their interdependence with the natural world.⁹¹

The individual actions of the Forest Monks and their projects at times combine with community development programs and non-governmental organisations. The Community Development Monk’s Network in Northern Thailand (*Khrueakhai phra nak phatthana chumchon phak nuea*)⁹² has worked with

⁸⁸ Pothitan, Noguchi, and Salam. “Community Forest Management in Thailand,” 274.

⁸⁹ Walter, “Activist Forest Monks,” 335.

⁹⁰ Walter, “Activist Forest Monks,” 335.

⁹¹ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 82.

⁹² Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 84.

Phra Phrakhru Pitak before in the organisation of Tree Ordinations for village communities. However, Forest Monks were not always so widely accepted by both the sangha and local villagers especially when their own independent form of Buddhist practices are combined with folk beliefs/spirit worship.

The bureaucratisation of the sangha (which resulted in the Sangha Act of 1902) sanctioned the peripheralisation and marginalisation of Forest Monks to the point where they lost their formal recognition and institutional relevance.⁹³ Monks such as Phrakhru Pitak and Phra Khru Suphajarawt had to make sure to centre their environmental work in line with the Buddhist doctrine accepted by the sangha or risk being ostracised by the sangha and lose all credibility as monks. However, it must be considered that conflict with the institutional sangha is not the only opposition that Forest Monks face. On occasion their environmental activism places them against large corporations.⁹⁴

Thai Monk Phra Supoj Suvacano was murdered on June 17th 2005, when trying to protect the land around a meditation centre on which he lived from being converted into a tangerine plantation.⁹⁵ While the case was being investigated as an instance of land conflict, due to his death being on-site, it highlighted the complex tensions that surround Environmental Monks, the sangha, and state institutions. Particularly, cases around economic development for national advancement. Phra Supoj's assassination raised questions about the relationship between monks as well, especially between activist monks and the sangha authorities, as sangha authorities often do not approve of the political aspects of environmental monks' work.⁹⁶ In the national news, Phra Phrakhru Pitak was called 'crazy' for ordaining a tree and faced many calls for de-robing from local sanghas and the public before the ritual of ordaining a tree became more widespread and the people started to understand his teachings. Resistance from powerful establishments to not only Forest Monks but Environmental Monks' work showcases that even though rural villagers' attitudes have changed towards these monks' efforts, national interest and the image of the sangha still provide a face of tension for the movement.

⁹³ Talyor, *Forest Monks and the Nation State*, 134.

⁹⁴ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 197.

⁹⁵ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 197.

⁹⁶ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 197.

Environmental justice, which the Forest Monks are associated with, provides a reminder to consider the inequalities in place, as well as how the various players involved understand and relate to their environments.⁹⁷ In this case, the Thai sangha, the state, the regional/provincial government, and the rural community. However, paradoxically, the Forest Monks have simultaneously been revered not only in Thailand but throughout the Theravada world due to their mastery over external powers and self-control (personal attributes highly valued among the Thai).⁹⁸ The Forest Monks and the communities that support or interact with them actively engage in environmental justice on their own terms. In environmental justice, the environment is defined as where people work, live, and play, and it's not an 'othered' nature that remains separate from human life. Instead, the definition used in environmental justice is intimately entwined with human life,⁹⁹ which is also a major Buddhist teaching used by Forest Monks. For rural villagers in North-eastern Thailand, the Forest Monks' work resonates with them as they help to protect their livelihoods, way of life, and the nature around the village.

⁹⁷ Susan M. Darlington, "Environmental Justice in Thailand in the Age of Climate Change," in *Environmental and Climate Change in South and Southeast Asia: How are Local Cultures Coping?*, ed. Barbara Schular (Boston: Brill, 2014), 211.

⁹⁸ Talyor, *Forest Monks and the Nation State*, 155.

⁹⁹ Darlington, "Environmental Justice in Thailand in the Age of Climate Change," 213.

Chapter 3: Thai Buddhist Environmentalism: Success or Failure?

This chapter shall be divided into three parts; firstly, a discussion of the similarities between the Thai Ecology Monks and the RIDF's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy program in Nan Province; secondly, the differences between these two case studies; and lastly, a critique of the case studies to showcase what improvements can be made in the future.

During the 1980s, officials encouraged agricultural expansion in Thailand. Around the same time, rural communities also noticed the destructive effects of the expanding agricultural industry. The consequences were obvious: Thailand's economy turned to monoculture (rice) and smaller-scaled rural industries alongside the displacement of traditional handicrafts by market-oriented export agriculture; poor migrants flooded the forest in search of farmland; the population increased dramatically on the forest land; and a rapid decline followed in the country's forest cover.¹⁰⁰ Thailand's forest-based environmentalism is majority-based on resource-based sustainability. This translates to making sure the forest resources that one generation enjoys are present for the next. In Thailand, natural resource governance and the associated institutions were developed in order to combat the problems of deforestation and the depletion of natural resources.¹⁰¹ However, like many national-focused development and sustainability policies, often local and communal knowledge and perspectives are discarded, leading to rural-urban conflicts and tensions. Because environmental problems are closely linked with income and poverty disparities, the issues of environmentalism raised by radical movements do not situate themselves favourably within the consensus-dominated civil society discourse.¹⁰² Thailand faced an identical development until the mid-1980s when the government introduced a decentralisation process in the

¹⁰⁰ Amare Tegbaru, *Forests, Farmers and the State: Environment and Resistance in Northeastern Thailand* (Stockholm University Press, 1997), 54-55.

¹⁰¹ Wirongrong Duangjai, Rajendra P. Shrestha and Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt, "Institutional Development of Natural Resource Governance in Thailand: The Cases of Forests and Land," in *Thailand: Environmental Resources, Social Issues and Related Policies*, ed. Rajendra Prasad Shrestha, Traisurat Yongyut and Palle Havmoller (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2018), 241.

¹⁰² Banpasirichote, "Civil Society Discourse," 234.

Seventh National Development Plan (1992-1996).¹⁰³ The decentralisation process allowed local opinions to be included and area-based solutions introduced in order to address challenges that emerged. In addition, the decentralisation process allowed for religion to be included in discussions, particularly in rural areas where religion plays an important role in socio-cultural life. Thai perceptions of the forest are varied and differentiated, influenced by elements of spirit worship, Buddhism, and Western-influenced ideas of ‘development’ and ‘conservation’.¹⁰⁴ These perspectives have directed how Buddhist and national environmental programs approach forest protection and sustainable agriculture.

3.1 Sustainable Agriculture vs Forestry

Firstly, the two case studies; Buddhist Ecology Organisation of Forest Monks (*phra nak anuraksaa*) and RIDF Nan Province SEP program share a location as the Tree Ordination and Royal Initiative Discovery Foundation (RIDF) programs were both conducted within the Nan province. Agriculture plays a key role in the economy of the province, supplying means of livelihood to most of the population, particularly the ethnic groups living in mountainous areas. However, the areas suitable for cultivation are limited.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the province provided the perfect location for SEP-focused programmes and the Tree Ordinations as a way to showcase the importance of sustainable agricultural practices for forest protection and raising awareness for forest-based environmentalism. The lack of cultivation grounds make the province suitable for not only the Forest Monks efforts on reforestation but also the RIDF’s project of sustainable agriculture. The factors influencing environmental monks' networks include not only younger monks and elderly monks but also development workers, NGOs, ethnic groups, Thai government policies, development projects, the farmer's protest movements, and many others.¹⁰⁶ These factors are all a part of the Thai environmentalist movement within Nan province.

¹⁰³ Duangjai, Shrestha and Schmidt-Vogt, “Institutional Development of Natural Resource Governance in Thailand,” 241.

¹⁰⁴ Tegbaru, *Forests, Farmers and the State*, 57.

¹⁰⁵ Yongyut Trisurat, Wanchai Arunpraparut and Hiroaski Shirakawa, “Socio-Economic Drivers to Land Use/Land Cover Change in Nan Province, Thailand,” in *Thailand: Environmental Resources, Social Issues and Related Policies*, ed. Rajendra Prasad Shrestha, Traisurat Yongyut and Palle Havmoller (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2018), 27.

¹⁰⁶ Mayumi Okabe, “Making Sense of a Buddhist Monk’s Network as a Community Movement in Contemporary Thailand,” in *Communities of Potential: Social Assemblages in Thailand and Beyond*, ed. Shigeharu Tanabe (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2016), 222.

The rural forest scenery of Nan province places it at the centre of sustainable agricultural development. However, the rural environment that this province presents brings strong ties to folk and religious beliefs. The abundance of religious beliefs in the province allows for Forest Monks to better establish themselves including their work to locals. The Tree Ordinations in Nan Province exhibit the vital role that Forest monks play in sanctifying and playing a protective role for remaining forests.¹⁰⁷ The RIDF's SEP program in Nan Province produced a multitude of sustainable farming practices that were adapted to the local environment as well as the development of reforestation previously usurped land. The RIDF alongside the local communities conducted three types of reforestation; deep-rooted forests for long-term natural conservation, slow-growing forests with commercial value, and fast-growing forests that quickly yield fruit and other produce.¹⁰⁸ The rural forest scenery of the province played a significant role for both cases to centre their efforts on forest protection, reforestation, and sustainable forestry as fundamental practices within Nan Province.

Secondly, both case studies include a local's first viewpoint. They feature rural communities and their needs at the forefront of decision-making. The Tree Ordinations take into consideration deforestation as a threat to locals' livelihoods and provide the locals with a way to not only physically protect the forests but also to spiritually and mentally comfort those who live off the forests. The RIDF project empowered local farmers to change their agricultural methods for a SEP-based method in order to both expand sustainable development practices for agricultural use and to better the farmers for the future. The Nan RIDF project needed to understand local conditions before it could design a developmental model for the community to implement. Therefore, the project devoted time to surveys on topics such as geography, land use, household conditions, human capital, socio-economic conditions, household indebtedness, and natural resources.¹⁰⁹ These surveys resulted in a specific development model to help each of the villages where the RIDF would carry out its projects. Each of the case studies took into account local needs first before performing agricultural sustainable practices/rituals suited for the communal environment.

¹⁰⁷ Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation State*, 251.

¹⁰⁸ Petson, Prapha and Santiprabhob, "Community Sufficiency in Nan Province," 89.

¹⁰⁹ Petson, Prapha and Santiprabhob, "Community Sufficiency in Nan Province," 80.

3.2 Various Ways of Engagement

The major difference between the two case studies consists of the actors behind the programs. The Ecology Monks work independently with several prominent figures such as Phra Phrakhrū Pitak that take initiative for environmental protection but with no real organisational base outside of collaboration with villagers and NGOs. The Forest Monks' work, at times, even places them in opposition with the sangha which can diminish the respected position they currently hold if the sangha disagrees with their actions. This locally-engaged aspect of Forest Monks's actions rather than the assumption of a secluded and removed observation position highlights the different understanding of the Dhamma between sangha authorities and individual monks. Phrakhrū Suthachanawan from Yasothon Province emphasised that the 'role of monks as inheritors of the Buddha's teachings is to solve social problems'¹¹⁰, he and other Forest Monks are under the impression that preaching alone is no longer effective. Instead, monks must avoid only serving the rich, powerful people or governing officials as ignoring the problems of the socially marginalised would have led to the diminishing influence of monks in society.¹¹¹ The independent work of Forest Monks allows them the freedom to choose what, where, and how they are going to help, teach and protect, which often comes at the risk of potentially losing their respected status in the eyes of sangha officials.

While the Forest Monks work independently with occasional collaboration, the RIDF's project is under state sponsorship and it connectedly includes working with multiple actors such as the Department of Agriculture, the Royal Forest Department (RFD), Thailand Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), and the Office of the Royal Development Projects Board (RDSC). This collaboration gives the RIDF's project more financial aid in conducting a SEP-based sustainable agricultural plan. One notable outcome of the project was that even though farmers were working with RIDF's workers to learn about

¹¹⁰ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 208.

¹¹¹ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 208.

SEP-based farming there was a lack of continued training due to staff shortages,¹¹² which could have expanded the initiative and persuaded more farmers to participate.

The RIDF project holds an absence of religion in the sense that it is not present at all during the duration of the project, a significant difference to the first case study of Forest Monks and the RIDF's SEP project. The RIDF takes a development and sustainable economic perspective and outside of consulting with the opinions of farmers, Buddhist monks or their rituals were overlooked in the project. It is important to note that the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy applied to economic and environmental management is not opposed to mainstream developmental approaches; rather, it provides an alternative that helps fix a few of the failures of past and current development initiatives.¹¹³ Instead, the RIDF's economic-based approach placed the management of natural resources and the transfer of sustainable agricultural practices at the forefront of the project. This meant that farmers learned new ways of farming, tracking household finances, and investments in their crops in addition to enabling them to reduce reliance on outside actors by teaching them to produce their own consumer goods.¹¹⁴ All for the aim of agricultural sustainable development under the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy ideology.

Meanwhile, the Forest Monks' work was based on a Buddhist doctrine. The Forest Monks' main outlook is the combination of environmentalism with a Buddhist worldview. The sermons conducted at the Tree Ordinations combined Buddhist teachings alongside forestry management and protection including sustainable development. At Phrakhru Pitak's first Tree Ordination event, the most political aspect was a sign that was created before the ritual was to take place. A placard (Figure 7) was tied to a tree with the writing stating '*tham lai pa khue*



Figure 7: Ordained Tree with Sign 'to destroy the forest is to destroy life'

¹¹² Pornkasem Kantamara, "The 'New Theory' for the Agricultural Sector," in *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand's Gift to an Unsustainable World*, ed. Gayle Avery and Harald Bergsteiner (Allen & Unwin, 2016), 71.

¹¹³ Thanpuying Suthawan Sathirathai and Sirintornthep Towprayoon, "Sufficiency Thinking in Economic Development and Environmental Management," in *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand's Gift to an Unsustainable World*, ed. Gayle Avery and Harald Bergsteiner (Allen & Unwin, 2016), 116.

¹¹⁴ Kantamara, "The New Theory," 62-63.

tham lai chat’ which means ‘to destroy the forest is to destroy life’.¹¹⁵ The specific choice of the word *chat* has multiple meanings such as life or nation, however, it can also mean rebirth. The cycle of rebirth is an important part of the Buddhist reincarnation cycle. By destroying the forest they would destroy one’s rebirth. It invokes the concept of karma and raises the idea that destroying the forest is an act of demerit and consequently has a negative influence on how one is reborn, forming a clear indication of Buddhist doctrine tied with environmental discourse.¹¹⁶ The differences between these two case studies showcase the separate viewpoints the two projects take in their actions for agricultural sustainable development.

3.3 A Gendered Critique

A noticeable absence within both the Forest Monks and the RIDF’s farmer participants is women’s efforts toward environmental protection and awareness. The lack of women is most noticeable in Thai Buddhist environmental scenes such as Tree Ordination, where women were mere participants and observers of the ritual rather than active engagers. The Buddhist environmental movement is primarily a site for monks and men, with the only women involved being a limited number of NGO workers, who mostly focus on helping the villagers and academics who have come to observe the Forest Monks.¹¹⁷ The monks lead the Ordination rituals while the heads of the village and local farmers help to organise the ceremony. The ritual also attracts volunteers from other villages nearby to set up the venue to host monks and local government workers to observe the event and the sermons of the monks. In the Tree Ordination rituals women are sidelined to maintain the food preparation for such events.

The sermons given at the Tree Ordination highlight the importance of the forest, sustainable agricultural methods, and naturally Buddhist scripture that tell everyone to care for the environment. The stories used in the Buddha’s teachings hold underlying masculine discourses leaving the impact of women in such an environmental movement as Tree Ordinations absent. That is not to say that women were completely included and involved in the RIDF’s project either. Once again, the project addressed farming practices that were mostly male-led field labour while women’s duties remained on taking care of the

¹¹⁵ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 75.

¹¹⁶ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 76.

¹¹⁷ Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree*, 19.

livestock, household, and families. The RIDF project and the Forest Monks rituals can greatly benefit from women's involvement in such movements, particularly in looking at how women's knowledge of the household, their care of both the community and the livestock produces different environmental knowledge than men who have gained knowledge from hard labour.

Moreover, the lack of women's involvement in both case studies is frustrated by interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender; whereby women, indigenous peoples, poor people, people of colour, and the working class have disproportionately borne the brunt of the environmental costs of globalisation.¹¹⁸ In the Thai case, Forest Monks closely work with rural communities centering their impact around local communities. I would suggest a more integrated intersectional approach. While both case studies maximise the use of different agricultural practices, folk/religious beliefs, community organisation, and socio-economic status there is much that could be expanded upon, such as the ethnic divides in North-eastern Thailand between the different ethnic groups that are often not taken into consideration due to the Thai-centric focus both the Ecology Monks and RIDF projects take as well as the exclusion of women of such events.

¹¹⁸ Walter, "Activist Forest Monks," 331.

Conclusion

The Ecology Forest Monks in Thailand and the RIDF's Nan Province project set out to raise awareness for environmental sustainability regarding agricultural and rural livelihoods. The importance of religion in Thai social life affects not only the individual in their selected worship/practice but also the community and national domains as religion impacts a wider audience. Buddhism in contemporary Thailand still significantly impacts social life and the social change the nation has undergone in the last decades. Thai Buddhist Environmentalism originates from a standpoint of Buddhist teachings about the importance of nature and the environment in combination with the rising need to compact the negative effects of climate change on the environment. As the case studies have revealed, the Buddhist environmental movements are often independent with little collaboration with national sustainable development programs or initiatives, however, this does not mean that they fail to contribute to sustainable development efforts in Thailand. In general, the Forest Monks do create a space for environmental awareness and sustainable development in rural areas that contribute to sustainable development in Thailand.

Thailand's sustainable development programs both within the agricultural sector and other sectors need to take into consideration that development does not necessarily mean knowledge and morality and that underdevelopment is the absence of knowledge or moral deprivation. In rural areas, underdevelopment often does allude to a lack of certain privileges that urban areas have but that does not mean there is no sustainable or environmentally-friendly way of living that the community has not already mastered for years, especially as urban areas produce more pollution than rural areas. Taking into consideration the community sustainable development that occurs in Thailand often these communities are already established communities, such as the Chang Tok Tay Community Forest in Nakhon Ratchasima, that simply changed their living practices to suit an updated sustainable development perspective that often comes from recent climate change prevention needs. National programs should not

only focus on development in a viewpoint that completely changes the village structure but should operate in ways that improve and benefit the villagers, such as the RIDF's Nan project.

The Forest Monks engage in Buddhist doctrine for their environmental awareness and activism. In Thai Buddhism, there is something known as *Idhappaccayata* or the Law of Conditionality - that is understanding that they too are part of nature, which implies that they are responsible for it.¹¹⁹ Buddhist monks taking an active engagement in social change for their communities is not unheard of, however, it is unconventional for the institutional sangha's who preach an observational and non-interference stance. For the Forest Monks of Northern Thailand, community interaction for environmental change and forest protection is a given. Forest Monks' duties and work can be expanded upon with more local engagement as well as increased inclusion not just from able-bodied men in village areas but also from women and children, effectively having the whole community help in forest protection. Increased sermons and education by Forest Monks can also advance the spread of knowledge toward sustainable forest management.

A recommendation for further research that this thesis was unable to cover would be to conduct a study on Buddhist environmental practices across Thailand and to compare how the geographical change affects sustainable development between North, Central, and Southern Thailand including the islands. As the geographical scenery of Thailand is vast with mountainous regions in the North and Northeast meanwhile the South has more mangroves and freshwater rivers. How development monks operate in these sections of Thailand's geographical makeup would be an interesting stance for further research.

Another way to expand this study would be to look at Buddhist environmental practices across the dominant Buddhist nations of Southeast Asia to understand how Buddhism and environmentalism are understood and implemented differently even within the same region as well as how they could be nationally expanded upon outside the realm of religious local communities.

¹¹⁹ Sathirathai and Towprayoon, "Sufficiency Thinking in Economic Development and Environmental Management," 115.

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