

B. Forests: Introduction

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The articles in this section focus on conflicts over access to, and use of, forested lands. Both deal with Thailand, where deforestation has been proceeding at a rapid rate owing to the inability of the government to stop illegal logging, and to population growth, which causes farmers to search for new lands to exploit. Suvit Rungvisai (n.d.), in a paper (“National Resources in Thailand: A Legal Approach”) he shared with conference participants but which is not published here, observed that early in King Chulalongkorn’s reign, in the mid-19th century, approximately 80% of the territory of Thailand was covered with forests. Today, in contrast, he says (p. 14), “about 27% of forests are reported uncut.”

Scott Christensen and Akin Rabibhadana explore the social and political consequences of closing the land frontier. They observe that as forest reserves have dwindled, the Thai government has taken a more active role in trying to control use of the remaining forests. But government efforts have been hampered by contradictory policies, corruption, and present occupancy—many supposed forests already have people living in them. Ronald Renard explores the problem of dwindling forest reserves from the perspective of the residents of a single highland village, whose lowland neighbors are accusing them of polluting the streams on which lowland farmers depend. Although the writers focus on Thailand, the problems that they discuss are occurring in other Southeast Asian countries as international logging companies seek new forests to exploit, as expanding populations seek new land to farm, and as international development agencies fund hydroelectric dam projects.