

Regions

Chapter 4

Alan P Mammosser

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Introduction

People and places: regionalists

Regionalists are always in search of balance with the world around them. They want a balance of man and nature such that one does not destroy the other.

Man, using his many tools, has often found an enduring balance with the world, although this may in many ways be disrupted. And old ways of life have been greatly disrupted in modern times.

So the regionalist is in search of this balance where it may be preserved or even restored. He travels to see people and places, making friends and learning about their work.

Here we look at a few places where regionalists are at work. They are just a few, a sampling, all found in a half day flight from Dubai. There are surely thousands more such places throughout the world.

We look at them simply to gain some idea of the work of regionalists, to see how in some sense it is restoration and in other ways work to create new regions.

Of course travel is costly and one need not travel far to discover regions. You might explore the place around you, where you live, to find a fascinating region. Travel abroad is interesting but the regionalist always travels deeply wherever he may be.

In the hills above Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai is an old city of the Lanna dynasty; the term means 'new city' in the northern Thai language.

It is a large square enclosed in high, handsome red brick walls. A canal flows beside the tall walls, its water dark and quiet, almost still in the long, straight channels.

Beyond the walls the modern city sprawls across the plain of the Ping River, through lowland areas where cropland is dedicated to rice.

The city was a center of trade on the great river, seat of a kingdom that was long independent of Siam in the south. It governed a vast tropical state pressing up to the border of Burma, where valuable teak trees were harvested for centuries.

On heights above the city, on the dark forest-covered hills, stands a holy temple of the Buddha. The great holy place, the famous Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, has stood far above 'new city' for centuries.

It is where in ancient times the hermit Sudeva lived. Today the place is protected in a national park.

Up to the mountains

A thirty-minute drive leads up to the cool highlands, to a captivating region of forest and farms. Here are villages of tribal peoples and the terraced farming they have built up over decades, indigenous villages of the

Hmong and other highland peoples.

The tribes have long traditions and unique languages in 4000 highland villages in the northern provinces of Thailand.

They inhabit a mountainous realm rich in color, where the green forest darkens under the purple-gray sky and jagged, low hanging clouds of the rain season. Their villages are small within this realm; their terraced fields dug into the steep slopes surrounding.

An afternoon walk in April from one village to another, on a path through fields and forest, gives glimpses of life at end of the hot season, just before the rains begin. Women in colorful dress are bent in a hillside field, just below their village, harvesting thick lemongrass. A farmer lays down tender green ... in long rows in his freshly turned field, his young daughter in a colorful dress by his side. A woman kneels in a small shed cleaning and sorting tiny mustard seeds, her infant slung to her side.

The highland tribes are perhaps most famous for their colorful patterned textiles, their traditional dress made of hand-woven fabrics, the threads produced from hemp, colored with natural dyes. They are also remarkable for their religion of offerings made to the forest spirits.

The Hmong came into the region from southern China in the 1800s. In the 1900s they found a good cash crop in cultivation of the opium poppy, practicing swidden farming.

The government in Bangkok wanted to end this. What followed, over the course of many years continuing until today, was replacement of the poppy with food crops for markets in Thailand and abroad.

The Hmong turned their mountain farms to a great variety of things, traditional and introduced fruits, grains, vegetables and herbs. They combined their farming with forest conservation, making a remarkable landscape in the hills above Chiang Mai of small villages and terraced fields amidst the forest.

A Hmong village on a distant mountainside is not easy to see. From a high ridge the bright glitter of urban development appears below, sprawling into the valleys. But one must look carefully to see the high village across the valley, blended into the green like something low and tan of color in a distant clearing.

So a fine balance appears across the valleys and forest covered hills, a richly varied landscape of forest and terraced fields, lovely when low, shredded-cotton clouds descend from the purple-gray sky full of rain

Agricultural development

It was over 50 years ago when the King launched the Royal Project – the concan luan. With its help, highland people have created a great regional agricultural and conservation project; apparently one of the few in the world to have fully displaced poppy cultivation.

The project provides significant assistance. It begins with land management plans, village plans, area plans and master plans to divide forest areas and arable lands, with large areas of watershed forest conserved.

Farmers enhance their skills for water and soil conservation, for building up compost and organic fertilizer for their crops and fruit trees. After years of planning, research and conveying knowledge, the farmers began to harvest for market sales.

They produce a plethora of things, some long familiar in the cooking of Thailand and others adopted for the markets. The cool climate of the highlands supports many temperate and semi-temperate crops in addition to their natives.

Now the farmers are growing grapes, strawberries, raspberries, mulberries, kiwi, tomatoes of many varieties, cabbage and lettuce. They tend herbs: mint, japanese mint, lemon thyme, lemon balm, chamomile, stevia, strobilanthes (persian shield).

They plant trees: mangos, avocados, plums, figs and other fruits. They produce flowers and also coffee which is relatively new in Thailand. They manage livestock and fisheries.

A research and development institute has helped the farmers adopt more than 350 vegetable varieties. They receive post-harvest help with cleaning, packing, cooling and storage. Fresh and processed products sell to Thailand and to the world according to international standards.

The scale is impressive. Royal Project development areas encompass more than 1000 highland communities in the northern provinces. In 2023 the project counted four research stations, 38 development centers benefitting 13 tribes, some 37,500 households, more than 200,000 people.

Mr. Pitchit, a wiry, tough looking farmer, is chief of the research and development station at Nong Hoi, with 88 workers on 100 acres. He oversees the garden and greenhouses nurturing roses, rosemary, thyme, spearmint, chamomile, bay leaf, stevia, many sorts of lovely lettuce, cabbage, carrots, celery, coffee arabica, figs, yellow chili peppers and much else.

He oversees the station at the village of Mae Sa, with 20 workers on 20 acres, where long hoop houses nurture starter plants for the farmers, thousands of pepper plants, tomato plants, blackberries, grapes, kale, and many other things in long rows under the hoops. A packing house and cold storage hold the harvest for market.

Regional results

The Hmong seem to live comfortably amidst the forest. The farmers work the steep terraced slopes below their villages, planting in long rows in the dark earth. The result is a varied, nicely balanced landscape of forest and farms in the highlands.

But their success is measured by more than appearances. Their project achieves what a regional

project should always achieve; it generates income for the people. The Royal Project has reported significant annual income.

This shows on walks through the villages.

In the little village of Doi Pui a narrow street runs uphill, lined with shops for the tourist trade. At the top, a ramshackle little museum displays the daily labors and tools of times past. Such villages are a jumble of shops and small houses filled with families, low structures of wood and tin roofs, some on dirt floors.

Yet much nicer houses of white walls and gleaming tile have been built. And there is another sign of wealth – small homes for tourists. They're rather more like modernist huts of glass walls and windows, made quite comfortable for visitors to stay a few days in the region.

While farming and tourism flourish the forest remains intact. It is indispensable to the regional project, which sees three great uses of the forest: edible; firewood and household use; and conservation. These vital uses compel the ongoing work of forest restoration.

Forest conservation

Vital life endures in the watershed forests at the top of Thailand. Here, amidst many tributaries of the Mae Ping River, is Doi Suthep National Park where stands the great temple above Chiang Mai.

There are more than 650 tree species in this national

park according to Forest Restoration Unit researchers (FORRU) at Chiang Mai University. Common trees include oaks, dipterocarps and trees of the magnolia family. There are nearly 2,000 species of ferns and flowering plants, nearly 360 species of birds and a good number of animals.

The Institute monitors three levels of forest: evergreen (highest elevation at 1,000 meters); mixed evergreen/deciduous (mid elevations at 600 meters); and deciduous (lower elevations). Each contains unique species.

FORRU has worked on forest restoration for decades, developing a method to assess growth and measure carbon sequestration in each hectare, in the trunks, roots and leaves.

It stepped up its work after 2011 when severe floods gave urgency to reforestation of upper watersheds and the Royal Project reached out to FORRU for help. The researchers monitor thousands of trees each year as a basis to restore large areas of forest. They deploy a 'framework species' method, comparing the restoration areas they're working on with 'reference forest', which is an area of primary forest that is not more than slightly disturbed.

Looking to mimic the reference forest, they measure progress in four areas: biomass, structure of trees, ecological functionality, and biodiversity recovery through seed dispersal that fosters more plants and trees.

They usually cannot restore an area to same level of biodiversity as the reference forest. But they can make great progress by fostering seed dispersion that spreads to more areas and expands the high-quality forest.

“Now we know how, we have proved it, we can routinely restore tropical forest,” says Professor Stephen Elliott, FORRU, after working on forest restoration techniques for decades in this region. He works with young Thai researchers on restoration projects.

Conservation and communities

After restoration the forest must survive. So Steve and his team strive to tie conservation ever more closely to the highland communities. Now they’re looking at technologies and market innovations such as the new global market for carbon.

They have gained skill with drones, sending them 30 meters over defined areas of forest to measure the crowns of the trees. Combined with image processing software, they can determine size and density of trees, estimating the wood density and the carbon in the trees.

Because they can quantify carbon in the trees, in a specific area of the forest, they can give it value; value that is priced in the international market for carbon credits.

The difficulty, of course, is to ensure the people living amidst the forest receive the benefit.

Prof. Steve and his team are thinking about this. They're trying to actually create a more standard approach to forest restoration in the region; to automate it, so to speak.

They're working on a 'carbon monitoring package' using drones, perhaps deployed by the Hmong farmers themselves, to monitor and report to the registries overseeing the recording and sales of the carbon credits.

The idea is to let local people lead and receive the full benefit from the tons of carbon sequestered in the trees.

They've come a long way from growing poppies.