

Proverbs, Old Sayings and Community Rules Related to Forest Management and Climate Change of *Thais* in Viet Nam

Pham DucChien, Bui TrongThuy, and Tran QuangTrung

Introduction

More than 20 million people of Viet Nam live in or near forests, and most of them are minor ethnic people. Over time, their ancestors depended on forests for livelihood and daily life. To live peacefully with the forest and environment, they have learned and experienced how to manage and co-exist with the forest and the environment. This kind of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) has been accumulated overtime and to be handed down from one generation to the next mainly by oral tradition. Understanding and use of TEK, therefore, is very useful in order to manage and develop sustainably the forest and environment in the region.

The study was carried out in Son La Province, Viet Nam, focusing on the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of Thai people through their proverbs, old sayings and community rules in relation to sustainable forest management and climate change.

Objectives

The study has 3 objectives: (i) To gather proverbs, old sayings and community rules of Thais living within or near the forests; (ii) To examine the extent of understanding on proverb/old saying/community rule among Thais; and (iii) To analyze proverbs, old sayings and community rules in relation to forest management and climate change of Thais.

Methodology

Listing of existing proverbs, old sayings and community rules

A literature search of the existing proverbs, old sayings and community rules in relation to the forest management and climate change of Thais was conducted. This was the basis information for the research team to understand and make plan to gather and check the meanings of the proverbs, old sayings and community rules in relation to forest management and climate change of the Thais.

Gathering of proverbs, old sayings and community rules

The survey was conducted in Nhop Village, Chieng Bom Commune, Thuan Chau District, Son La Province in August to September, 2016, to gather proverbs, old saying and community rules of Thais. The research team firstly worked with the leaders of the Commune and the Village to select 15 suitable interviewees in Nhop Village. They were both Thai male and female elders, who have fair knowledge of the Thai proverbs, old sayings and community rules. To ensure the effectiveness of the interviews, the research team included a Thai youth, who could speak both Vietnamese and Thai languages, in case, the research team needed translation.

A set of questionnaire was used as a guide together the following information: (1) Proverb/old saying/community rule related to the forest management and climate change; (2) Meaning of the items provided; (3) Source of

the items discussed; and (4) Awareness on the level (individual, family, community, regional, national) of use of the items discussed.

Conducting recognition survey

The recognition survey was then conducted in Pan Village 1, Chieng Ly Commune, Thuan Chau District, Son La Province in October 2016. Twelve elders (more than 50 years old) of the village were interviewed to recognize the sources and meanings of the information provided. To examine the impact of proverbs, old sayings and community rules to the young, three young *Thais* were also selected for the interviews.

The questions used for the interviews were as follows: (1). Have heard of proverbs, old sayings and community rules as provided; (2). Understand the meaning; (3). Agree with the proverbs, old sayings and community rules; and (4). Reasons for disagreeing (if disagree).

The survey was conducted with assistance from some young *Thais*, who can speak both Vietnamese and Thai.

Results and discussions

Ethnic groups and Thais in Vietnam

Thai is one of 53 ethnic minorities of Vietnam. The population of Thai minority is 1,550,423 people, being the third largest ethnic group of the country. *Thais* distribute along the country, but settle mostly in the northern provinces of Lai Chau, Son La, Hoa Binh, Dien Bien, Yen Bai, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An (UNFPA 2011).

Thais may purely settle or live with other ethnic minorities in a village. A village of *Thais* is a stable populated organization, having boundary with other villages using natural terrain. *Thais* often choose their settlement near water source, suitable for agricultural cultivation and daily life. This is the main foundation for a village to sustain and develop economically. A village has the right to manage and use natural resources such as forest, farm field and land. The boundary of a village and its land and forest is determined by experienced village patriarchs using stream, river or mountain gorge. Even though the boundary is not official, it is respected and obeyed by local people (Lan 1998, Care 2012).

From a long time ago, *Thais* have created and maintained sacred forests around their village, including worship forest, sacred forest and ghost forest. These types of forests are very valuable in regard to Thai belief and attitude, and also for ecological environment protection (Cam Trong 1998, Ty 1998).

Proverbs, old sayings and community rules in relation to forest management and climate change

Forty two proverbs, old sayings and community rules (TEK) related to forest management and climate change of *Thais* have been collected. They include all four types of provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services.

Provisioning services

Thais understand very well the provisioning services of forests and the surrounding to their life. They teach each others and new generations that “food in

the forest, and cooked rice in the soil” . Furthermore, they highly appreciate the great role of forests to their living. Forest is very crucial to them because it feeds people, and even when people die, forest is as their home to receive them “forests feed when one lives, forests bury when one dies”. In addition, they also ask each others and new generations to protect and conserve forests as a food sources for them “do not cut big trees to get mushroom, do not cut ancient trees with hope to get sufficient food, do not cut trees to get fruits”.

Regulating services

Thai people have great experiences in terms of regulating services of forests. They think that “huge milpa is not equal as a small paddy field” . It means that milpa cultivation could not produce effectively and stably food. On the other hand, it could degrade strongly forest and environment. Water is very important for the Thai culture and development. So, Thais tell their young generations about the regulating services of forest, forest is a source of water and it can keep, regulate water: “no water without forest, or protect forest for the development of Thais and water sources”. Thais also understand that the natural phenomena related strongly to forests. If forests are destroyed, severe phenomena will happen: “lost forests, severe phenomena will occur”. Thais also experience about the weather by watching birds. They say that: “swallows fly low, it will reain over the pond bank; swallows fly high, rain will stop”. It means that if it is going to rain, the pressure is low, so that insects fly near ground, and swallow flys near ground to catch insect. Under high pressure (it is sunny), insects fly high, so swallow will fly high to catch insects.

Cultural services

Cultural services from forests are very important to Thais. They knew the important role of forest to their life, so that each village has its own ghost forest and spirit forest. They told each others: “damage forests like to destroy your house; burn forests like to burn yourself”. They respect ghost forest, spirit forest, in which ancient trees are very respected. They said that if lose ancient trees, severe phenomena will occur and damage villages. On the other hand, they understood that when ancient trees lost, forest are destroyed, so that nothing could protect people from natural phenomena.

Supporting services

Thais understand very well the role of supporting services of forests. They know very well that forest will provide good soil for cultivation. However, if forests convert into bamboo, the soil is damaged, and it is not good for cultivation: “it is difficult to cultivate in sat bamboo forest”. Water is very crucial to Thai daily life, and Thais specially respect forests as a water source “to conserve forest for stable wate source”. Thais also tell each others to conserve wildlife for them to serve people. People are advised not to take care wildlife, not to hun them in mating seasons, so that they will be stable for hunting.

Conclusions

The TEK is very important for the daily life of theThais as it has been accumulated for ages. TEK is rarely written, but to be handed down from one generation to another by traditional oral. TEK is also very important to modern

society when applied to help people to co-exist and interact sustainably with forests and the ecological environment.

TEK of Thais has gradually been neglected without the support and effort of the authorities and the people. Some Thai elders did not remember much their TEK that had been accumulated for ages. Many young Thai did not know and understand TEK of Thai due to a busy life and technical skills and knowledge. Some, particularly, who live in or near cities, could not speak the Thai language anymore. Some activities such as teaching Thai language, organizing traditional festivals, have been conducted, but the results were very limited.

In short, in order to conserve and apply TEK of the Thais in Viet Nam, more efforts are needed to collect, document and make those available for not only the Thais in Son La Province, but also for other people within and outside Viet Nam.

References

- Cam Trong. 1998. History and culture of Thai People. Agriculture Publishing House. Ha Noi
- Care. 2012. Indigenous knowledge of Muong, Tay, Dao, Thai and H Mong in forest management and protection and non-timber forest product consumption.
- Lan, C.T. 1998. Indigenous knowledge through oral tradition of Thai people in the Northwest. Pages 177-183 55 in Research Center for Forest Ecology and Environment, editor. Indigenous knowledge of mountainous people in agriculture and natural resource management. Agriculture Publishing House. Ha Noi.
- Ty, H.X. 1998. Concept and roles of indigenous knowledge. Pages 11-55 in Research Center for Forest Ecology and Environment, editor. Indigenous knowledge of mountainous people in agriculture and natural resource management. Agriculture Publishing House. Ha Noi.
- UNFPA. 2011. Ethnic groups of Vietnam.