

**POLICY BRIEF:****Ethnic Communities and Sustainable Heritage Management in Thailand****1. Summary**

This paper considers opportunities for policy changes related to heritage management in Thailand which more effectively link social, economic and environmental Sustainable Development Goals within the context of the country's diverse ethnic communities. The suggestions presented here suggest pathways to strengthen policy within an Asian approach to supporting the interlinked relationship between nature and culture. With a view towards creating policy coherence among different line ministries and enhancing ways in which terrestrial, coastal and marine resources are governed in a more inclusive manner, the paper offers two main lines of recommendations related to: (i) strengthening the legal and regulatory system to enable more meaningful involvement of ethnic communities in contributing to sustainable heritage management and (ii) building the capacity of ethnic communities, especially youth, to be involved in sustainable heritage management.

2. Diversity, sustainable heritage management and ethnic communities

Thailand's 20-year National Strategy calls for safeguarding and mobilizing the country's rich cultural and natural heritage for sustainable local and national development.¹ As a multicultural nation, Thailand's cultural diversity is showcased in its wide array of linguistic families, indigenous and traditional knowledge, heritage sites and intangible cultural heritage such as traditional lifeways.² Minority ethnic groups, many of whom reside in highland and coastal areas, account for at least 9.68 percent of the country's population.³

From the perspective of biological diversity, Thailand ranks in the top tier within Southeast Asia. Its 15,000 plant species account for 8 percent of the world's total. Forests covers a third of total land area, with conserved forests comprising 18 percent.⁴ The country has a vast network of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and other terrestrial, coastal and marine areas which are important at the local, national, ASEAN and global level. This includes three natural World Heritage properties: Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries (inscribed in 1991), Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex (inscribed in 2005) and Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex (inscribed in 2021).⁵ In addition to containing important ecosystems and habitats for species, these biologically important areas are also associated with local communities with diverse ethnic identities.

As assets for sustainable development, culture and biological diversity jointly contribute to many facets of environmental, social and economic sustainability within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indigenous knowledge can support sustainable agricultural practices and food security under SDG 2. Cultural knowhow such as traditional medicinal practices using local plants can improve health outcomes under SDG 3. An appreciation for biological diversity and cultural diversity is an important aspect of attaining quality education under SDG 4. Sustaining the heritage itself is covered in Target 11.4 related to safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, as well as SDGs 15 and 14 related to environmental protection on land and in water, respectively.

Over the past two decades since the landmark Fifth World Parks Congress in 2003, a significant global paradigm shift has occurred in approaches to sustainable heritage management which recognize and celebrate the intertwined nature between nature and culture. UNESCO and the Secretariat on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) call for a better understanding of the relationship between biological diversity and cultural diversity. "Areas of high cultural diversity are often areas of high biological diversity... Ensembles of biodiversity are developed, maintained and managed by cultural groups. Diversity of cultural practices depends upon...biodiversity for their existence and expression."⁶ Moreover, safeguarding biological diversity and cultural diversity can build resilience against natural and human induced changes.

¹ <http://nscr.nesdb.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/National-Strategy-Eng-Final-25-OCT-2019.pdf>

² More than 70 languages have been identified, belonging to five ethno-linguistic families: Tai, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien. <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJSL.2007.043>

³ The number of ethnic groups is an estimate from the 2002 Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's Ethnic Population Survey.

⁴ <https://www.cbd.int/countries/profile/?country=th>

⁵ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/th>

⁶ UNESCO and the CBD Secretariat define **biodiversity** as "the variability among living organisms from all sources, including inter alia terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species and of ecosystems." Meanwhile, **cultural diversity** "encompasses all communities in the world, each of them with their own identity determined by ethnicity, history, language, religion and art. It includes inter alia diversity of practices; ways of living together; value systems; knowledge; languages; and artistic expressions." <https://www.cbd.int/lbcd/>

Within this new paradigm, the role of communities has become recognized as central to sustainable heritage management as well as sustainable development. In the World Heritage context, “Communities” have been highlighted as one of the five strategic objectives of the World Heritage Convention. The World Heritage Operational Guidelines call for communities to be recognized as key actors in the process of identification, conservation, monitoring, management and sustainable development of a World Heritage property. The Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of indigenous peoples must be obtained prior to a site’s inclusion on the Tentative List and its nomination. Communities should be meaningfully engaged in the stewardship of World Heritages properties and equitably share benefits deriving from heritage.

Ethnic communities in particular play a special role in sustainable heritage management. In terms of living heritage, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage notes that “communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity”.⁷ In the context of heritage sites, the World Heritage Operational Guidelines note that “human activities, including those of traditional societies, local communities and indigenous peoples, often occur in natural areas. These activities may be consistent with the Outstanding Universal Value of the area where they are ecologically sustainable.”⁸

3. Ethnic communities, modernity and the erosion of biological and cultural diversity

Protecting biodiversity in Thailand faces challenges. From 1961 to 2009, terrestrial forest coverage has dropped from 53.35 percent to 32.1 percent. The shrinking of forest habitats for local flora and fauna has resulted in the loss of indigenous plant and animal species. Overfishing and other impacts on coastal habitats, such as mangrove forests, have reduced the population of marine animals.⁹ Human interaction, development, industrialization and urbanization pressures account for the main causes behind these trends. As part of a multi-pronged response, national biodiversity strategies now emphasize better community engagement and empowerment as one of the key mechanisms for improving biodiversity outcomes. For instance, working with indigenous and local knowledge of communities is an integral part of the ongoing National Ecosystem Assessment being conducted in Thailand under the aegis of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

Such growing acknowledgement of the role of communities, particularly ethnic communities, could provide a win-win approach for achieving both improved biodiversity and cultural diversity outcomes. International best practices demonstrate the importance of cultural knowhow in maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the environment. In Thailand, ethnic communities over the past few decades have faced the sustained erosion of traditional agrarian, riparian, and coastal lifeways. With the pace of urbanization, new agricultural techniques, modern education and an increasingly commoditized economy, many members of ethnic communities have acculturated to mainstream society or migrated away from their homes. Traditional systems of natural resource use and governance are not fully recognized under legal and regulatory frameworks. Moreover, many minority ethnic communities face negative perceptions among the

⁷ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

⁸ <https://whc.unesco.org/document/190976>

⁹ <https://www.cbd.int/countries/profile/?country=th>

public at large, exclusionary governance practices and even disenfranchisement in many areas of life.

As such, conflicts arise between customary tenure and resource use, including traditional knowledge of conservation, and other levels of decision-making, which does not facilitate the interaction between cultural and biological diversity. Restricted access to land and resources has reduced the ability of various ethnic communities to be self-reliant, leading to poverty, conflicts and illicit activities like poaching which reduce biodiversity. In some cases, lack of citizenship has further exacerbated the situation. The loss of indigenous knowledge, skills, wisdom and customary practices, particularly related to agro-ecology, has detrimental effects on cultural diversity and biodiversity at the local and national level. Such challenges are often amplified in the context of protected natural heritage sites.

4. Potential benefits of inclusive approach to sustainable heritage management involving ethnic communities

UNESCO and other partners have extensively documented how more inclusive approaches to managing heritage involving ethnic communities with a joint approach to promoting biological and cultural diversity can be beneficial. Inclusive management models that integrate indigenous knowledge and community management systems with modern governance systems, external stakeholders and scientific knowledge can achieve sustainability across a range of dimensions. With reference to the 5 Ps of the Sustainable Development Goals (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships), these benefits are as follows:

- **Inclusive management of heritage involving ethnic communities yields improved natural resource management and biodiversity outcomes (Planet)**
- **Inclusive management of heritage involving ethnic communities supports their well-being, such as improving livelihoods and sustaining cultural identity (People and Prosperity)**
- **Inclusive management of heritage involving ethnic communities strengthens relationships and reduces conflict (Peace and Partnership)**

The following good practices from around the world illustrate these benefits.¹⁰ The cases from protected natural heritage sites demonstrate how indigenous knowledge and local stewardship practices can complement modern heritage management practices.

- The Community Management of Protected Areas for Conservation (**COMPACT**) initiative by UNESCO, UNDP and the UN Foundation supported local communities to care for World Heritage properties. It demonstrated how community-based initiatives can significantly increase the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation in globally important protected areas, while helping to improve the wellbeing of local people and safeguard their cultural identity. For instance, in the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park in Palawan, Philippines, indigenous peoples were given responsibilities as forest wardens and fish wardens. Small grants supported forest enrichment as well as ecotourism and other forms of livelihoods.

¹⁰ These benefits were identified through exchanges with a range of stakeholders and experts in Thailand and abroad, and reflect national, regional and international good practices shared during the "Indigenous People and Sustainable Heritage" roundtable series organized by UNESCO Bangkok, the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre and Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute in 2021.

- The community conservation model at the **Manas Wildlife Sanctuary World Heritage** property in India illustrates both biodiversity and community revival success, especially in regions of armed conflict. Local communities used to be impoverished and hostile to park authorities during a long period of civil strife and insurgency, until a new shared governance approach was introduced at the local level. Former poachers who were local indigenous people became employed as protectors of the forest. Other incentives were created for fringe villages including livelihood support such as fisheries and plantations. Traditional ecological knowledge, particularly among youth, was strengthened. Together with improved scientific monitoring of tiger and elephant populations, the site was finally removed from the World Heritage List in Danger in 2011.
- The **Budj Bim Cultural Landscape World Heritage** property in Australia contains one of the world's oldest, most extensive aquaculture systems which has been maintained and used by the Gunditjmara people for over 6,000 years. In 2010, the Gunditjmara people received formal recognition of their rights and interest to land and water. This native title determination also recognizes their cultural practices. The site is managed by a combination of Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) management plans with national level protection laws, as well as the use of both Western science and indigenous knowledge.
- Through the **Joint Management in Protected Areas (JOMPA) project** in the Western Forest Complex in Thailand (2004-2009), the Department of National Parks worked with local communities in the implementation of joint activities. These included demarcating land use; developing common rules and agreements on national resource management; reforestation; constructing and maintaining forest fire boundaries; constructing and maintaining check dams; and establishing community funds. The project tested the approach to managing protected areas as part of a larger living landscape.
- The “**Tree beekeeping culture**” from Poland and Belarus was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. “Tree beekeeping culture includes knowledge, skills, practices, traditions, rituals and beliefs connected to wild bee breeding in tree hives or log hives located in forest areas. Tree beekeepers take care of bees in a special way by trying to recreate the primeval living conditions in tree hives without interfering with the natural life cycle of the bees. [They] constantly acquire new knowledge about the ecosystem. There are also numerous social practices resulting from the practice as well as culinary and traditional medicine traditions.”¹¹ Similar initiatives to support beekeepers in protected forests have also been promoted by UNESCO in Thailand and Viet Nam.
- Thailand has registered various forms of living heritage associated with ethnic communities in the national Intangible Cultural Heritage inventories. These include the Ku-Chuei (**Karen rotational farming**) and Kabang (**Moken traditional houseboat**). Both these practices reflect the inseparable ties between cultural heritage and sustainable natural resource use. Their inclusion on the national ICH inventories reflects the growing national consciousness about the significance of living heritage of ethnic communities.

¹¹ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/tree-beekeeping-culture-01573>

5. Policy recommendations

In response to the challenges and opportunities identified above, the following recommendations aim at enhancing sustainable heritage management in Thailand by involving ethnic communities. The recommendations are grouped into two main issues related to the legal and regulatory system and capacity building.

5.1 Strengthen the legal and regulatory system to enable more meaningful involvement of ethnic communities in contributing to sustainable heritage management

An inclusive, rights-based approach to heritage management which acknowledges the role of local communities, including ethnic communities and their cultural diversity, is the bedrock of various international statutory commitments which Thailand has already made. In addition to the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 ICH Convention, other key commitments include the Convention on Biodiversity and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.¹²

At the national level, Thailand has made progress in improving the legal and regulatory environment related to sustainable heritage management which offers greater possibilities to involve local communities. The 2017 Constitution under Articles 43, 70 and 92 supports the sustainable development of ethnic groups and communities. In 2016, Thailand promulgated the Promotion and Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act which provides the basis for identifying and safeguarding diverse cultural heritage those of ethnic communities. The updated 2019 National Parks Act makes provisions to “assist landless persons who have resided or earned their living in national parks” such as allowing the “collection or exploitation of seasonally renewable natural resources”.¹³ Two Cabinet Resolutions were passed to permit the Chao Lay and the Karen people to set up Special Cultural Zones to practice their traditional ways of life and livelihoods in 2010.

As next steps forward, the relevant Thai authorities should consider to further strengthen the legal and regulatory framework, in better alignment with international principles and good practices related to inclusive sustainable heritage management:

5.1.1 Expedite the review and adoption of draft laws related to ethnic groups in Thailand to provide a stronger legal basis for recognizing and promoting the rights of ethnic peoples, including their rights to cultural expression and meaningful involvement in managing natural heritage sites¹⁴

¹² Thailand's other commitments which uphold the rights of ethnic communities and individuals include *inter alia*: Convention on the Rights of the Child, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

¹³ <http://portal.dnp.go.th/Content/nationalpark?contentId=24139>

¹⁴ There are five draft laws now in process drafted by the following entities: Council of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand (CIPT); Parliamentary Commission on Children, Youth, Women, the Elderly, Disabled, Ethnic Groups, and Multiple Sex Persons; Move Forward Party; working group convened by the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre; and P-Move. The similar aspects of the five draft laws can be summarized as: (i) setting up the Council/Assembly of Ethnic Groups/Indigenous Peoples at the national level, (ii) establishing Committees at different levels overseeing the affairs of ethnic groups in Thailand, (iii) promoting and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and customary practices of land and natural resources management, and (iv) setting up Special Cultural Zones where ethnic groups can carry out their traditional ways of life

- 5.1.2 Strengthen other laws and regulations, notably those related to environmental conservation under the authority of MONRE, to more fully recognize and support community rights of ethnic communities**
- 5.1.3 Expand legal and regulatory mechanisms for conflict resolution through cooperation between MONRE, Ministry of Culture and other relevant agencies, using promising models such as the designation of Special Cultural Zones and the establishment of co-management committees involving government-civil society-ethnic communities, particularly at the local level**
- 5.1.4 Provide the legal and regulatory basis, as well as accompanying operational mechanisms under the authority of MONRE, to replicate and mainstream good practices from various pilot projects testing inclusive heritage management models that have been undertaken around the country**

5.2 Build capacity of ethnic communities, especially among women and youth, to be involved in sustainable heritage management

The self-identification and self-organization of ethnic communities in Thailand have seen notable milestones in the past decade. On the occasion of International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in 2014, the Council of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand (CIPT) was established by the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand (NIPT). At present, there are 42 indigenous groups throughout the country participating in the Council. Many organizations work closely with ethnic communities on various programmes involving education, documentation, training and transmission of ethnic lifeways, traditions and knowledge, including efforts by the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, the Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association and others.

As next steps forward, relevant civil society organizations, notably ethnic associations and representative groups, should consider the following recommendations to continue building capacity among ethnic communities, particularly among women and youth:

- 5.2.1 Promote the strengthening and further establishment of representative bodies of ethnic peoples at various levels**
- 5.2.2 Encourage and support ethnic communities to conduct research and collect data about their own cultural practices and knowledge, including inventories of living heritage related to the environment and natural resource management. These data should be stored in databases, ideally self-managed by ethnic groups in order to retain data sovereignty. If appropriate and with the necessary consent, the data can feed into other public databases which can be accessible by others.**
- 5.2.3 Build capacity among ethnic communities, particularly youth, to apply inventoried intangible cultural heritage and customary knowledge to natural resource management and other sustainable development targets in an integrated manner. At the same time, foster collaboration among the Ministry of Culture, MONRE, local government and other agencies to support safeguarding of inventoried intangible heritage related to ethnic communities and facilitate this multi-sectoral process.**

- 5.2.4 Support the development of educational content related to the way of life of ethnic groups, through both mainstream and alternative channels of education.**
- 5.2.5 Conduct training and capacity building within ethnic groups to strengthen the transmission of indigenous and local knowledge including natural resource management. At the same time, also raise awareness among government officials, media and the public to reduce prejudices and inculcate a greater appreciation for the value of involving ethnic communities in sustainable heritage management, particularly in protected natural heritage sites such as World Heritage properties, Tentative List sites, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.**

It is hoped that these recommendations will be useful in supporting Thailand's efforts to sustainably manage its diverse cultural and natural heritage through enhanced participation by ethnic communities.
