

DAWSON, NEIL [S19-P78]

Exploring dynamic relations between forests and people through environmental justice research: empirical insights from northern Lao PDR

Co-author: Thomas Sikor, University of East Anglia Sithong Thongmanivong, National University of Laos

Environmental justice research is emerging as a means to explore trade-offs in ecosystem management. Such approaches tend to recognise that stakeholders may not agree on a single definition of what is morally right, that plural conceptions of justice exist and may not be easily reconciled. Studies of environmental justice therefore look beyond tangible costs and benefits to comprise three interrelated dimensions: distribution of direct and indirect benefits from natural resources, procedure relating to decisions which govern them and recognition of culture, knowledge and needs of different groups in those processes. By looking beyond the distribution of gains and costs such an approach may serve to illustrate in detail the circumstances under which trade-offs or synergies exist between conservation and human wellbeing. While objectives of equity and justice are gaining credence in conservation policy, these terms require careful definition and, furthermore, application through empirical studies to assess their potential relevance to conservation practice.

This presentation describes mixed-methods research around Nam Et Phou Louey (NEPL) National Protected Area in northern Laos, a rich, yet threatened montane tropical forest. As a foundation for addressing justice issues, wellbeing was assessed using a framework drawing on Amartya Sen's capabilities approach. We assessed wellbeing and perceptions of justice relating to ecosystem management among 100 households through a series of semi-structured interviews, life histories and focus groups. Social research was supported with fine-scale mapping showing annual changes in land-use from 2000-2014.

Our study finds that around NEPL, rapid changes in economic welfare occurred simultaneously with rapid land-use change. Conventionally measured poverty rates fell 70% in 10 years, driven by transformation from subsistence shifting rice cultivation to cash cropping maize. At the same time, protected area and land-use zone boundaries were established. These changes are leading to a complex set of material, social and cultural outcomes for surrounding populations.

Access to land to produce or afford enough rice for a family, alongside opportunities to forage for meat and vegetables were central to local conceptions of wellbeing. Access to land differed considerably within villages, partially mediated by conservation interventions. Yet claims of injustice regarding land were not only related a) to material distribution, but were b) linked to procedural issues including those surrounding informal tenure, and c) inequities of recognition relating to changing social and cultural identities which are influencing attitudes and behaviour towards protected area management. Both new and old claims to land within the protected area have emerged or re-emerged, resulting in tensions between conservation and development trajectories. We discuss attempts to try to address some of the trade-offs alongside communities and protected area managers.