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‘Nature’ embodied, transformed and eradicated in Southeast Asian development

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‘NATURE’ EMBODIED, TRANSFORMED AND ERADICATED IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN DEVELOPMENT

Victor R. Savage

Introduction

The failure of social scientists to recognize both the radical historicity of human society and the radical historicity of nature thus leads to a failure to address the ecological crisis of our time with the realism, dialectical understanding, urgency, and commitment to revolutionary transformations in human society that it requires. (Foster et al., 2010, 37)

The above quote is a timely reminder that the environmental crisis cannot be addressed in separate academic arenas of science and social sciences, instead realistic solutions demand interdisciplinary research. In social science, formal and informal regions like Southeast Asia provide the best spatial containers of interdisciplinary dialogue on environmental challenges and climate change. This paper situates the human dimension of the region’s human-nature relationships and underscores the importance of social science interventions. While Jared Diamond and James Robinson’s (2010) *Natural Experiments in History* undergirds this interdisciplinary human-nature perspective, Joachim Radkau’s (2014) *The Age of Ecology* amplifies the global multi-disciplinary consciousness of environmentalism. In my view, three broad themes embed green consciousness and action in developing regions like Southeast Asia.

First, as Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen has defined, Gaia is in a new geological phase, the *Anthropocene* or the “New Human” that focuses on Homo sapiens as a major driver of environmental and climatic change. Armed with science, technology, possibilist confidence and modernity mind-sets, Southeast Asian governments and political leaders believe in the power of human beings in shaping environments, cultural landscapes and development. Consumed with the immediate situation of growth, many do not see the profound ramifications in the changing human-nature equation. Ironically, if uncontrolled human activities play themselves out in the *Anthropocene*, this geological age will not be about the ‘New Human’ era but the end of the human species. We are repeatedly reminded that we are at the ‘tipping point’ of global environmental disaster in this century and that Gaia’s “newly attained consciousness – which is made possible only by our global civilisation – will vanish, perhaps to be lost forever” (Flannery 2009, 12–13). Over 50 years ago, the Japanese social anthropologist Kinji Imanishi (2002) in his
thought-provoking book, *The World of Living Things*, using a Marxian analysis, discussed how at various point of Earth’s ecological history, a dominant ‘ruling’ species ruled the world and later died out from extinction. The irony this time is that Homo sapiens, the current dominant species, despite their intelligence, social and cultural systems, and technological prowess will subject themselves to mass suicide of their species. Elizabeth Kolbert’s (2014) *The Sixth Extinction* argues that Gaia is experiencing the sixth mass species extinction in the last half billion years and this time human beings might be part of the species casualties. Anthony Giddens (2009, 10) wonders if “other civilizations have come and gone; why should ours be sacrosanct?”

Second, the 193 states and political entities in the world and the 11 states in Southeast Asia are locked into the developmental paradigm based on a linear idea of progress, material betterment, increasing standards of living and higher quality of life. Such unbridled state developmental trajectories undermine human-nature relationships. Development must instead be seen in terms of what Edward Wilson (1984, 1) defines as ‘biophilia’ or the “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” Biophilia underscores our broader concept of development in terms of sustaining nature and all its organisms. Without a healthy understanding of human biophilic preservation, long-term development in the region will be undermined. This view in some ways underscores Manuel Castells’ (2004) argument of what underlies the global green movement and human identity: it is about socio-biological identity or what he calls “green culture” – to recognize the interconnectedness of all living creatures and to respect the value of each thread in the vast web of life (Castells 2004, 185). All cultures are thus woven into a human hypertext of “historical diversity and biological commonality” (Castells 2004, 185). To a large extent religions and spiritual movements are custodians of this ecological interconnectedness in nature – as found now in Deep Ecology, Sacred Nature, the Gaia thesis, Land Ethics and Deep Green Theory (Curry 2011). In Southeast Asia, where people are still deeply spiritual both in animistic beliefs and world religions, these spiritual human-nature interventions still resonate in specific terrestrial places and cosmic planetary space in varied ways.

Third, more than any other human catalyst and driver of development, capitalism and the drive for modernisation (modernity) are not only perceived panaceas for development but more so the predominant wedge in separating human beings from nature (Foster 2002; Sarkar 1999). Capitalism under modernization has been a powerful force in the conquest of nature. Social scientists have modified the rise of capitalism through the conceptual prism of ecological modernization, which translates to bending nature and green issues to fit human interests, desires and behavior. We are the predominant species in a hurry for self-gratification and self-actualization regardless of its ecological ramifications. And Southeast Asians, as dominant nouveau riche communities, are torchbearers of materialism, consumerism and status enhancements that threaten to undermine their national ecosystem and short-change their sustainable goals.

The three themes encased in the current global environmental challenge play themselves out in different ways with varied impacts on societies and communities. Unfortunately environmental and climate change do not have common outcomes in states, cities, villages and communities, hence their political and social manifestations differ. All three themes are pertinent issues in the 11 states in the Southeast Asian region. Using selective case studies drawn from states, cities and communities, human–nature relationships are unraveled in this chapter’s discussion of state social changes, economic programs and cultural influences. This chapter is meant to reflect on the current environmental state in Southeast Asia as products of historical continuities that unfold in the current nexus between state development and nature. These interventions are meant to foreground the plight of the region’s ‘nature’ capital, its environmental degradation and its ecological sustainability. At the end of the day the question that puzzles social scientists is why some
communities, societies and kingdoms against all odds seem to sustain themselves over centuries while others collapse and end up in the rubbish dump of history.

**Trade, colonialism and capitalism: nature valued and appraised**

While Southeast Asia has not been a pivotal region in global history on its own terms according to historian Wang Gungwu (Ooi 2015), it was a region that gained de facto global recognition because of three factors. First, Anthony Reid (1988, 5) depicts Southeast Asia as having a “common physical environment” that underscored common features in food, drinks, diet and betel chewing. For centuries in Western eyes the term ‘plenitude’ was used to define the region’s rich biodiversity (Savage 1984). An Indonesian proverb emphasizes biodiversity as: “different fields, different grasshoppers, different pools, different fish.” Andre Gunner Frank (1998) sums up the region’s biodiversity in economic terms: “Southeast Asia was one of the world’s richest and commercially most important regions.”

Second, Southeast Asia for centuries prior to the western marine connections in Asia was an active participant in Indian Ocean trade and cultural diffusion. The thalassic kingdoms of (Oc-Oe of Funan, Linyi [Champa], SriVijaya, Temasek-Singapura and Malacca) demonstrated Southeast Asia’s Indian Ocean economic linkages. The region was attractive to other Asian regions for varied natural resources, food delicacies, precious stones, marine resources and agricultural produce. Trade networks in the Indian Ocean ecumene diffused not only natural resources and artefacts between ports, thalassic kingdoms and natios (enclaves of separate jurisdiction apart from kingdoms) but also culture and religions (Barendse 2002). Revisionist historians (Wolters, Manguin and Gunn) are now giving more credit to Southeast Asian seafarers for “opening the entire sea route from India to China” (Hall 2011, 45). Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (2002, 402), in his engaging book, *Civilizations*, argues the Indian Ocean was a “major avenue for the transmission and transaction of culture” and the “world’s most influential ocean” despite Atlantic-talk and Pacific-talk.

Third, the region is saddled between two enduring ‘Great Traditions,’ India and China, and hence was greatly influenced by and intertwined with both civilizations in varied ways. Such populous countries provided markets for Southeast Asian produce for centuries. While the Chinese Imperial court viewed the peoples of Southeast Asia as ‘barbarians of the south,’ China’s huge appetite for natural resources and gastronomic delicacies led to the cultural appraisal of the region’s diverse natural resources – from bird’s nest to sea cucumber, from rhinoceros horn to hard woods, from pearls to jade. India’s influence in the region was more cultural, religious and political, though gold and the spices of the region were early imports. India’s Sanskritization according to Sheldon Pollock (2006) made no distinction between India and Southeast Asia – the cultural influence covered both areas as one seamless region of different kingdoms and cosmic states. India’s cultural, religious and political footprint in the region was the most lengthy and enduring and continues today in mainland Southeast Asia and in pockets in Java, Bali, Lombok, Kalimantan and Sumatra.

The downside of being sandwiched between two enduring civilizations is that scholars and the informed public tend to downplay any importance of the Southeast Asian region in favor of India and China. Yet there are growing positive appraisals of prehistoric peoples in the region making major technological developments surpassing or equaling those of its giant neighbors: the lignic phase (vegetative civilization); outrigger boats; blow pipes, agricultural origins and plant/animal domestication; socketed tools; Dongson drums; terrace agriculture; a variety of social systems; and folk medicines and houses on stilts to name some (Oppenheimer 1999; Bellwood 1985; Wolters 1999).
Southeast Asia remained the source for the vast and varied demands of natural resources from many ecosystems and indigenous communities – hunters and gatherers in the tropical forests to the *orang laut* or ‘sea nomads’ and from shifting cultivators to sedentary sawah ‘peasants.’ It was this continual foreign demand for resources that led to the variety of indigenous ports, cities and kingdoms that succeeded one another at various points in time. These changes are not the clichéd rise and fall of kingdoms, but reflect what Janet Abu-Lughod (1991) posits as the “restructuring” and “substitution” of varied world systems.

**The capitalistic system: is it sustainable?**

Any realistic appraisal of human-nature relationships must deal with capitalism, trade and land tenure systems. All three have played a major influence over the last 500 years in the way nature has been turned into natural resources, ecosystems monetized, land valued as property, and trade expanding economic transactions and ecological footprints. Dealing with capitalism is a tricky subject. Here I accept Rodney Stark’s (2005, 56) relatively neutral and somewhat comprehensive definition of capitalism as “an economic system wherein privately owned, relatively well organised, and stable firms pursue complex commercial activities within a relatively free (unregulated) market, taking a systematic long-term approach to investing and reinvesting wealth (directly or indirectly) in productive activities involving a hired workforce, and guided by anticipated and actual returns.”

While one might accept that in the thirteenth century, “a variety of protocapitalist systems coexisted in various parts of the world, none with sufficient power to outstrip the others” (Abu-Lughod 1991, 371), by the late fifteenth century the Western Age of Exploration changed the global trading landscape. The period of cultural and economic diffusion through trade for two centuries in the region needs no rehearsing here as it is best captured in Reid’s (1988) two-volume work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680*. It would be misleading to believe that European trade opened the Indian Ocean region to a global economy, when in fact trade via a maritime route (the Maritime Silk route) was already well developed before the Europeans arrived in the late fifteenth century (Gunn 2011; Hall 2011; van Luer 1955; Miksic 2013).

The region’s ‘spices’ (cloves, mace) in the Moluccas initiated Western colonization, emboldened capitalism, created intense Western economic competition in the region and led to one of the most concerted colonial state trading traditions in the world. The formation of colonial trading powerhouses, The Dutch East India Trading Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC), The English East India Trading Company, Austrian East India Company, the Swedish East India Company and the French East India Trading Company, was devoted to extracting natural resources and in some cases colonizing lands, and extending colonial hegemony through pin-prick colonialism from the 16th to 19th centuries. This European expansion into Asia is what Geoffrey Gunn (2011, 183) calls the “Eurasian Exchange” between East and West or what Oliver Wolters (1967) refers to as the “single ocean” trade. But clearly the Western intervention in Indian Ocean trade created intense competition for the region’s natural resources and thereby initiated the mass undermining of the region’s natural environment through exploitation, capitalism and ecological destruction because of the sheer demand by European and expanding Asian markets. In other words, the region became one Western theater of what Grove calls ‘ecological imperialism’ (Fernandez-Armesto 2002, 384).

The seeds of capitalism grew out of robust East–West trade but soon took root in Southeast Asia with a variety of impacts: 1) It created changing demands for natural resources, which left local communities reeling from boom and bust situations; 2) It provided varying values of natural resources and raw materials, which led to disparities of wealth between the colonialists, Chinese trading middlemen and the native producing communities; 3) The demand for the
region’s natural resources and raw materials were greatly enhanced as a result of the industrial revolution – the development of mining (tin, bauxite, iron, copper and coal) and plantation agriculture (rubber, oil palm, cinchona, coffee, tea and pineapples) were direct outcomes of the industrial revolution; and 4) it enabled rapid expansion of land colonization and major transportation inroads (roads, railway) into major natural resource and plantation areas. However, if one accepts capitalism was an Eastern innovation, Asian critics cannot blame ‘Westerners’ for depleting their natural resources and degrading the natural environment.

These capitalistic outcomes had impacts on changing human–nature relationships. The idea of the ‘village’ common lands changed with the capitalistic idea of property and the colonial government. Whether you accept James Scott’s (1979) moral economy (safety-first ethics) thesis or Samuel Popkin’s (1979) ‘political economy’ (rational peasant) argument, human–nature relationships were severely altered and eroded under colonialism. In many colonies in Malaya, Indonesia, Burma and Vietnam, the colonial administration took over all forest and vacant land as ‘Crown lands’ belonging to the colonial administration. The most impactful aspect of colonialism and capitalism was its creation of landless peasants (Elson 1997). More startling is Elson’s (1997) thesis that by 1910, the region witnessed an end to peasantry with all its ramifications of changing cultural and social systems and their land tenure implications. For historian Craig Lockard (2009, 200–201) capitalism with its emphasis on competition underscored a profound social impact – it “undermined the traditional values of cooperation and community.”

If one fast forwards the capitalistic system today the prospect of neo-colonialism seems to haunt the developing countries. While capitalism is the dominant economic regional system the prognosis of its tendency to widen disparities of wealth is disturbing. Thomas Picketty’s (2014) Capital in the Twenty-First Century argues that capitalism will not reduce economic inequality, lessen income gaps and reduce social inequity. In his analysis, “wealth accumulated in the past grows more rapidly than output and wages. This inequality expresses a fundamental logical contradiction.” Picketty (2014) continues to argue that no cultural and political intervention can change this economic situation. In short, “the past devours the future” (Picketty 2014, 571). The current flood of refugees from poorer African and Asian (Bangladesh and Rohingyas from Myanmar) countries is testimony to this growing situation of inequality.

**Colonialism: land colonization, land tenure and environmental impacts**

Pre-colonial Southeast Asian countries had rather loosely defined land tenure systems based on the Indian Laws of Manu or indigenous customary laws such as *adat* based on village usufruct rights, which was rarely endorsed by the prevailing political authority. Since the implementation of land tenure laws under the colonial Roman legal system, the colonial law system that defined the territorial boundaries of the state was prejudicial against the indigenous customary land tenure systems creating many conflicts over village ‘common lands’ and forested areas.

Rita Lindayati (2003) provides an interesting case study of how national politics has shaped land tenure laws in Indonesia and how it affected the use of forested areas. Forests in indigenous communities before colonialism was the village ‘commons’ dictated by *adat* law or *hukum adat* and this changed under Dutch colonial rule and maintained under the New Order (1967–1998) of President Soeharto. However, in the post–New Order Period under reformati, forested lands were once again accepted as ‘common lands’ under village *adat* laws. As Lindayati (2003, 257) argues, the policy shift to community-based forest management (under *adat*) is “a good start for both pragmatic (e.g., local people deal with natural resources on a day-to-day basis) and social justice (e.g., forest-dependent communities are usually poor) reasons.” In colonial Malaya,
however, the British authorities were more enlightened and preserved the customary land tenure areas of the Malay peasants by converting them under Malay reservations that were not subject to colonial land tenure laws (Wong 1977). In short, land under colonialism was capitalized and peasants were displaced, common lands (forests) were nationalized under Crown lands, fixed land taxes were imposed creating peasant indebtedness, plantations became widespread and the rest of ‘nature’ was valued and lost its irreplaceable value in ecological terms. In small places like Singapore, the value of cash crops like gambier for tanning of leather led to the massive deforestation of the island. Estimates show that 90 percent of the forest cover in Singapore was gone in 50 years in the nineteenth century (O’Dempsey 2014, 35). Unfortunately, regional deforestation is a recurrent theme for different reasons. The massive forest fires in 1997 in the region and its accompanying haze underscores once again the anthropocentric driven and capitalist incentives for deforestation as evident in the 2001 ASEAN Report Response Strategy (Asian Development Bank 2001, xiv–xv).

The colonial period was a long period of applying science and technology in changing landscapes, modifying nature and engineering environments in the name of development and what the French in Indo-China called the mission civilisatrice. Armed with ‘possibilist’ ideological orientations (science, technology, planning, progress and rational administration), colonial governments turned the region into one experimental environmental management laboratory based on plantation agriculture, dam building, infrastructure development (road, rails and bridges), botanical gardens, processing industries, hydro–electric power, land reclamation, and urban development and planning (see for example Biggs 2009 on the French and Vietnamese government interventions in the Mekong Delta).

Nature in indigenous knowledge: is it relevant?

Each society has its own way of organizing the world, and our own perspectives are so ingrained in us that we normally take them completely for granted. Often this classification of reality has its roots in the ancient past but major changes can also take place.

(Douglas Davies 1994, 3)

Jared Diamond (2012) in his book The World Until Yesterday gives us many case studies of why it is beneficial to study traditional societies; for him he found a “huge range of traditional human experience” to learn from and adapt in modern living. For example in Papua New Guinea, multilingualism is an important adaptive mechanism for indigenous peoples as a survival mechanism for trading, developing alliances, providing access to resources and even getting a spouse (Diamond 2012, 383). One of the key areas of benefit from studying traditional societies often cited by environmentalists is the human–nature relationship experience. As Carolyn Merchant (2005, 1) argues, radical ecology seeks a new “ethic of the nurture of nature and the nurture of people.” These qualities in human society are often exemplified in indigenous communities where co-existence with nature, human–nature harmonious relationships and respect for nature are embedded culturally (Peterson 2001).

In studying indigenous groups in prehistory and over time in Southeast Asia, there are three conclusions one can make with regard to human–nature relationships:

a) The region has a unique prehistory that reflects in many ways the ecological soundness of human–nature relationships in a region with biodiverse abundance and formerly sparse populations.
b) Wilhelm Solheim’s (1970) classification of the ‘lignic’ period or the vegetative phase in Southeast Asian prehistory is unique in global human prehistory. Southeast Asians more than any other peoples in prehistory have the largest experience and reservoir of knowledge of their vegetative environment and their ecological importance. The peoples of the region through innovation and indigenous genius have converted the forest resources and nature into an amazing variety of goods and domesticated crops (Sauer 1969; Savage 2012). While for most of Southeast Asian prehistory, indigenous communities were illiterate they were, however, ‘earth literate.’

c) Most indigenous peoples in the region tend to adopt ‘aterritorial’ behavior (Savage 2009). Whether on land or at sea, mobility seems to be a characteristic feature of communities in the region. Given the sparse populations, communities have always been accustomed to free movements and the process of culturally adapting to varied ecosystems on terrestrial areas, the coastal ecotones and the seas. Even amongst sedentary ethnic groups the value of migration is an in-build cultural attribute. The sedentary Minangkabaus have a cultural endorsed propensity for migration called “merantau” in which its menfolk are encouraged to merantau to ‘see the world’ just as the Dayaks have “meratus” mobility, a form of semi-nomadism which “offer the pleasures of autonomy as well as the stigma of disorder” (Tsing 1993, 61).

The Southeast Asian region is home to a couple of thousand tribal and indigenous groups who have lived in relative ‘harmony’ with their ecosystem for centuries. These ethnographic studies across different ecosystems provide insights into how varied communities and indigenous groups adapted to environments, exploited natural resources, managed nature and sustained livelihoods. Craig Reynolds (1995) contends the Southeast Asian ‘agency’ is their inventiveness, their genius to adapt, their flexibility and adaptability to adjust to varying conditions environmentally and socially. Southeast Asians in general have a “tolerance” for foreign culture and an “outward looking attitude and openness.” One can argue that in general Southeast Asians have a culture that is malleable to different conditions. While many societies and communities might embed their culture with history and past recollections, most Southeast Asian communities live in the present and are concerned with the “now” (Reynolds 1995) and adopt rather pragmatic means to living.

While critics denigrate swidden cultivators as wasteful, environmentally damaging and unproductive, the sustainability of tribal groups in the region over thousands of years tells us another story. Both Clifford Geertz (1963) and James Scott (2009) provide illuminating views on swidden adaptation to mountainous ecosystems and sedentary state administrations. In his thought-provoking book The Art of Not Being Governed, Scott (2009) provides lessons of how hundreds of tribal swidden groups in mainland Southeast Asia far from being primitive are “better seen as on a long view as adaptations designed to evade both state capture and state formation.” They are “political adaptations to nonstate peoples to a world of states, that are, at once, attractive and threatening” (Scott 2009, 9).

It is not surprising the practice of ecological responsible behavior still exists amongst the many pockets of indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia. The best sample of this is Harold Conklin et al.’s (1980) masterly atlas and analysis of the Ifugao in the Philippines; their sustainable subsistence over several thousand years was based on woodlots, swidden agriculture, hunting and gathering, and sedentary terraced rice farming in difficult mountainous terrain. The downside of this is that many indigenous communities are being eliminated, transferred to settled agricultural areas and given ‘modernized’ settlements and national education.

The stark examples of the elimination of indigenous communities lost to government-driven national development programs in Southeast Asia are numerous but the most poignant ones are
best captured by Georges Condominas (1977, xiv) on the ‘ethnocide’ of the Mnong Gar villagers (Montagnard) in Central Vietnam where the government wanted the Mnong Gar culture to “totally disappear, to uproot every trace of their ethnicity.” In Malaysia under former Prime Minister Mahathir, the government systematically removed the Penans from their natural habitat in Sarawak in the name of development. Aiken and Leigh (2015, 87) in surveying dam building in Malaysia note that “indigenous peoples’ lands and resources have been increasingly appropriated, enclosed and commodified for mainly private and state accumulation.” For the Malaysian government the forest was too economically valuable to be kept for the Penans.

Two studies of different sets of indigenous peoples give the cultural logic of human-nature relationships and the sustainability of peoples in the region. Edmund Leach’s (1964) ethnographic work on the Kachin in mainland Southeast Asia demonstrates that cultural identity is not a permanent ethnic identity but one that is negotiable depending on environmental, social and political circumstances. In order to survive, the Kachin oscillated between three different modes of human-nature relationships: they could be care-free roaming groups, swidden cultivators or sedentary cultivators tied to rice growing Shans – they were at different times, gumsa, gumlao and Shan.

Leach’s student Geoffrey Benjamin (2002) examined these tri-partite relationships on a broader regional scale. Using Malaysia’s indigenous groups as a basis, Benjamin criticized Heine-Geldern’s (1942) eight wave migration thesis of peoples from China descending in the region and the folk-scholarly “kuih lapis” (layer cake) ethnology. In the Heine-Geldern categorization, different production systems (hunters and gatherers, swidden, and sedentary sawah cultivators) are viewed as products of different stages and periods of migrations from the Yunnan, China. Benjamin’s thesis refutes this temporal argument in Chinese migration into the region; he proposed that each production group (hunters and gatherers – Semang; swidden communities – Senoi; and sedentary farmers – Malays) evolved in situ from within their own distinctive ecosystems (dense tropical forests; hilly-mountainous terrain; low-lying valley-delta areas) and developed a human-nature relationship best suited to exploit natural resources and culturally adapt to their ecosystems.

**Reflections**

The more we remain preoccupied with current events, the more that individuals and their choices matter; but the more we look out over the span of centuries, the more their geography plays a role.

(John D. Kaplan 2012, xx)

Taking a broad sweep of history and analyzing the geopolitical issues over the centuries, Robert Kaplan’s (2012, 34) quote above endorses what he advocates as “geography matters” in understanding global events, localisms and specific landscapes. Unfortunately, Kaplan’s geography matters thesis is locked in a Cold War mind-set of competing powers, rising states, balance of power analysis and national strategies. The geography that will matter in the twenty-first century will need to address more global issues arising from climate and environmental change, income inequalities between and within states, an urbanized Gaia and planetary sustainability. The future shift in geographical analysis must come not just from spatial analysis (a la Lefebvre’s production of space) but more so from understanding and managing human-nature relationships. The massive impact of climate and environmental changes on human activity and cultural landscapes has foregrounded human-nature relationships in global and local interdisciplinary interventions.
‘Nature’ embodied, transformed, eradicated

Time is an important variable in addressing the region’s human-nature balance in development programs and policies. Southeast Asian communities are caught between the indigenous circulatory and cyclical notions of time and the current Western linear views of temporal progress. Presenjit Duara (2015) argues that one needs to view ‘circulatory histories’ (based on transnational and trans-local flows) in which natural resources, ecosystems and environmental goods are valued, appraised and transformed at various times.

Despite the negative views on environment and development in the region, there are three positive signs that policy makers can count on. First, the Southeast Asian region is one of the few regions in the developing world with a strong regional organization, ASEAN. For a region that espouses some ‘cultural coherence’ and common geographical matrix (Wolters 2008, 1999), these commonalities can be leveraged by ASEAN to cement coordination and cooperation amongst states for the common good of communities within the region. One positive development is that ASEAN countries have grown politically more mature and now accept international-bound legal interventions to solve many bilateral border and trans-boundary issues. ASEAN countries must recognize that ‘global value chains’ that spur development are indeed regionally based. Thriving regions are those where ‘foreign value-added’ exports are based on high intra-regional trade: Europe with 72 percent intra-regional trade and East Asia with 56 percent compared to unsustainable South America where intra-regional trade is only 30 percent (The Economist 2015, 35).

Second, Singapore is a shining example from within the region having moved from Third World to First World in 50 years (Lee 2000). Singapore’s exemplification of stable, progressive development provides a substantive model and practical icon for national development within the region, albeit from a unique city-state perspective. Singapore’s ‘city in a garden’ is another vote of confidence about the relationship of nature and development. The most important ecological message for not only ASEAN countries but many others globally is how Singapore has reduced its water footprint (Tan 2009; Tortajada et. al. 2013).

Third, given the extensive impacts of climate change on current communities and societies in Southeast Asia, there is growing public and government recognition of environmental issues. We applaud the NGOs in trying to save nature, biodiversity, specific animals (orang utans, elephants, tigers and rhinoceroses), marine organisms, river, forest and lake ecosystems in the region. The model for environment has to be a cooperative endeavor between government, private organizations and civic groups and NGOs. In Southeast Asia, green spaces should not be ecological exceptions but the norm of biophilic relationships amongst all living organisms including human beings.

References


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