A Protected Forest Area in Thailand, and the Customary Use Rights of Local People

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In Thailand, the rapid decrease of forested areas has been recognized as a national issue since the 1980s. To maintain the forest environment, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) manages existing conservation forests, national parks, and wildlife conservation areas around the country. But these areas have been inhabited by local peoples for long time. Operating protected forest areas and securing the livelihood of local residents are both urgent issues in Thailand.

The objectives of this paper are to clarify the historical change in customary use rights of local people such as conducting shifting cultivation, gathering non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in hillside village of northern Thailand.

The historical land use change from 1950s to 2000s in the study village is analyzed by air photographs. The historical agricultural field use and gathering NTFPs and other forms of forest use by villagers are identified by interview research. Intensive research was conducted from January 2005 to April 2006, and supplementary short-term research was carried out in 2007 and 2008.

The villagers used agricultural fields and gathering NTFPs in different environmental circumstances according to the elevational differences from 500 m to 1500m a.s.l. They conducted the wise use of ecotone environment. But after protected forest area was established in 1991, the villager’s forest use and land use are limited less than the area 1000m a.s.l. The villagers tried to use highland area, more than 1000m a.s.l., as forest grazing area of cattle but failed. The forest protected area management should consider the multi purpose forest use of local residents.