

Preface

This book examines social and natural environmental changes in present-day Laos and presents a new research framework of environmental studies from an interdisciplinary point of view. In Laos, after the Lao version of perestroika, *Chintanakaan Mai*, in 1986, for better or worse, rural development and urbanization have progressed, and people's livelihoods are about to change significantly. Compared with those of the neighboring countries of mainland Southeast Asia, however, many traditional livelihoods such as region-specific/ethnic-specific livelihood complexes which combined traditional rice farming with a variety of subsistence activities, have been carried over into the present in Laos. The biggest challenge this book presents is to elucidate livelihood strategies of people who cope successfully with both social and environmental changes and to illustrate how to maintain this rich social and natural environment of Laos in the future.

Laos is a country rich in nature. The ancient tradition here is of a self-sufficient lifestyle lived in harmony with nature, in which natural resources are found in the forests and the rivers. This way of life is coming into contact, and conflict, with a more modern lifestyle that has developed under the new market economy. Moreover, climate changes possibly connected to global warming have influenced traditional rice farming. In these ways, the local people in Laos are faced with many intricate problems related to the environment.

Deforestation is the prime example of such problems. While recent land reclamation and urbanization has brought deforestation in part of the lowlands, Laos has maintained rich forests in mountainous areas. Nowadays there are international subsidies in place, and a policy of tree planting has been implemented in an attempt to curb the effects of global warming. As part of general environmental policy measures, traditional slash-and-burn agriculture has been seen to bring about environmental deterioration, and ever greater volumes of land are being used as continuous farming land for commercial crops. Other problems include the breakup and privatization of previously commonly owned forest, which has brought about shifts in social structure such as changes in how many people earn a living. While on the one hand levels of forestation in Laos might be sustained by the banning of swidden agriculture and the introduction of cash plants, at the same time water

cycles, native biodiversity, and livelihood sustainability are being significantly impacted. Thus the possibility of other, different environmental challenges are having to be faced. This is an example of how the “treatment” arbitrarily prescribed and implemented by so-called developed countries can lead to damaging side effects.

To correctly perceive social and natural environmental changes and find a better future direction, a multilateral dialogue is indispensable. Previous environmental studies can be divided into diagnostic-type studies that analyze mechanisms of nature and their relations with human society—broadly covered by traditional fields of earth sciences, ecology, geography, and so on—and treatment-type studies that consider technological or regulatory measures to tackle environment problems—covered by traditional fields such as engineering, agricultural science, and the social sciences. There have been few research projects to combine these two approaches. This book is an effort to integrate multiple approaches to environmental issues.

Our teams bring together graduate students and faculty members from diverse disciplines to work together with locally based staff to investigate and discuss each research situation. The aim is to come closer to finding methods of treatment that can be applied to maximum effect with minimum risk of adverse side effects. These efforts and findings are crucial to the effective construction of clinical environmental studies.

The studies in this book were carried out as part of the Nagoya University Global Center for Excellence (GCOE) Program “From Earth System Science to Basic and Clinical Environmental Studies” funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology from FY 2009 to FY 2013. The program brought together young scholars including doctoral candidates and faculty members from various disciplines to work together with locally based personnel in Laos to investigate and discuss each research situation. Intensive field surveys were conducted in Vientiane Prefecture, the capital of Laos, two highland villages, Mai Nathao in Namo District of Oudomxay Province and Kachet in Nam Bak District of Luang Phabang Province, and two lowland villages, Dong Khuai in Xaythani District of Vientiane Prefecture and Paksuun in Pak Kading District of Borikhamxay Province. All chapters of the book are based on original data from field surveys.

We are very grateful to the people of those villages for their kind help. We also wish to sincerely thank Dr. Bounthong Bouahom, Director General of the National Agriculture Research Institute (NAFRI) in Laos and researchers in NAFRI for their cooperation and support in our research. We hope this book contributes not only to area studies of Laos but also to environmental studies in developing countries.

Nagoya, Japan

Satoshi Yokoyama
Kohei Okamoto
Chisato Takenaka
Isao Hirota

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Yokoyama, S.; Okamoto, K.; Takenaka, C.; Hirota, I.
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