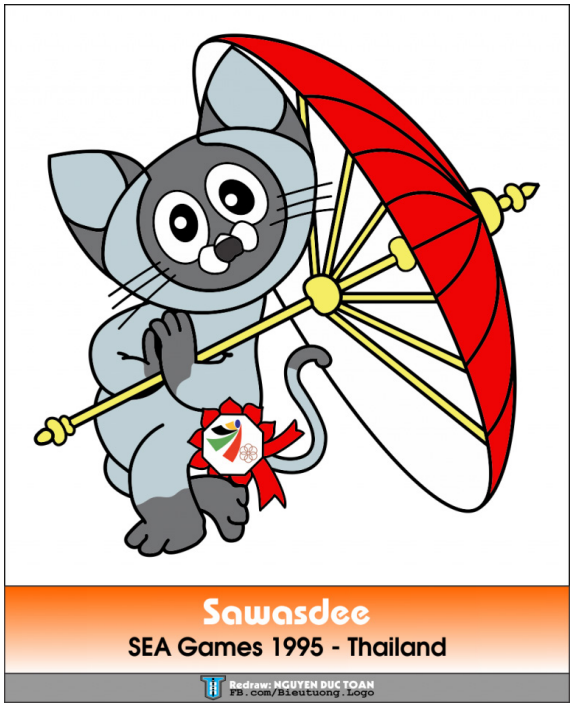
What We Think About When We Think About Extinction in/from South-east Asia, for example

Napak Serirak

I had just turned ten years old when Chiang Mai, my hometown, where I was living at that time, hosted the 18th Southeast Asian Games or simply 'SEA Games' in 1995. It was a spectacular event as it was the first Southeast Asian regional sports tournament held outside of the capital city of the host country. The 'Sawasdee cat', an anthropomorphic, comical cat holding an umbrella, was the SEA Games mascot. 'Sawasdee' is the Thai word for greeting someone. It was invented as Thai etiquette, along with 'khop khun' for thanking, during the late 1930s. The cat was derived from the Siamese 'Wichien Maat' cat, native to Central Thailand; whilst the motif of the umbrella was taken from a paper-made Bo Sang umbrella, the well-known Northern Thai craftwork from Bo Sang village, on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. It was, in a way, an arbitrary, uncanny, hybrid symbol. To my fading memories, my-ten-year-old-self might have wondered why it was a cat. And more precisely, why it was not an elephant, for it was supposed to be more closely related to the cultural representation of Northern Thailand, if not Thailand at large. Why did I think that way? Why does it matter?



Sawasdee Cat

When I began writing this text, I rediscovered a long-forgotten book. It was a new year present, given to me by my father's eldest brother and his partner. The book has no publication date; though it was credited as the first print; with 5000 copies. The year 1992 is inscribed in my uncle's handwriting; probably the date they gave to me. It is a hardcover copy of a Thai language publication on fauna in Thailand, emphasising reserved and protected species, written by a biologist, Surin Machjajib. Its title *Sat Paa Muang Thai* literally comprises the words 'wildlife' and 'Thailand', without any preposition, whether 'in' or 'of', thus it would be translated as either 'in' or 'of'. In this sense both 'in' and 'of' might be used to indicate the point of recognition, location or origin. Even though animals are always crossing national boundaries. Still, there are some particular animal species that are restricted to only one geographic region. A Tapanuli orangutan, a bonobo, or a Roraima black frog, for instance. Is there any species that is unique to

the territory of Thailand? Well, yes and no. There was. But not anymore. The last Schomburgk's deer in Thailand died in 1938. The species went extinct. In his introduction, Surin Machjajib (n.d.) warns that if anthropogenic environmental destruction still continues then not only Schomburgk's deer but other Thailand's wildlife species will also be extinct as well.



Schomburgk's deer

To follow and rephrase an anthropologist Hugh Raffles in his foreword to his book *Insectopedia* (2011), as he invites the reader to imagine an insect. Thus, this text is inviting you, too, to imagine an endangered animal of, or from, the region of Southeast Asia. What comes to your mind? An elephant? A tapir? A dugong? A sun bear? An orangutan? A rhinoceros? A tiger? A gaur? A pangolin? A whale shark? A macaque? A gibbon? A hornbill? A pelican? A pheasant? A giant catfish? A sea turtle? Or none of the above? Then what? What else comes to mind?

Just as Raffles talks about insects, the animals included above are more or less 'different from each other and from us.' And of course, 'so prosaic and so exotic, so tiny and so huge, so social and so solitary, so expressive and so inscrutable, so generative and so opaque, so seductive yet so unsettling. ... The stuff of dreams and nightmares. The stuff of economy and culture. Not just deeply present in the world but deeply there, creating it, too' (Raffles 2011, 3). Obviously, the lives of the animals are very complicated. Do anthropogenic climate and environmental change make our lives, say human, as well as theirs, say the animals, more complicated? Do our lives are always intertwined?

Before continuing on animals. Let's talk about the region of Southeast Asia. In brief, 'Southeast Asia' is a political-geographical invention during the second world war and firmly established during the Cold War. It was the period of decolonisation where nationalist ideology dramatically arose. However, the area in question has been somehow recognised as a regional entity, or entities, long before that period. Suvarnabhumi. Golden Peninsular. Further India. East India. East Indies. Malay Archipelago. Indochina. Nanyang. South Seas. etc. Revealingly, during the colonial period, parts of this region were partitioned or territorialised in as fragmented a manner as their colonial powers. The Straits Settlements. British Burma. French Indochina. Dutch East Indies. etc.

In tandem with this territorialisation, an establishment of the colonial regimes of government included changes in political and administrative structure and function, as well as in resource management and exploitation by means of European science and technology (Bryant 1998). As a political ecologist Raymond Bryant described the situation of 'resource dependency' within the region through the identification of places or countries with the large-scale production of resources or commodities, namely Burma, with rice, teak and minerals; Java, with coffee and sugar; the Philippines, with sugar, abaca and coconut; and Malaya, with tin, oil-palm and rubber, for example. In this regard, 'resource exploitation put South-East Asia as a whole on the (colonial) world map, and in the process created national and regional identities that are only today beginning to break down with the uneven spread of industrialisation through the region' (Bryant 1998, 31). Although not formally colonised, Thailand, which was known as Siam, was undoubtedly impacted by colonialism. Siamese elites were exposed to and adopted colonial mentality, hence Siam became the coloniser as well as the colonised. Whilst in terms of commodity production, the territory was identified with rice, teak and tin.

As producers of global commodities such as oil palm, rubber, timber, pulp and so forth, Southeast Asia, still to this day, has to cope with the challenges of deforestation, hence its wildlife and plant species are facing the threat of extinction. Thus, to speak of extinction is to speak of biological diversity, or in short biodiversity. But when does it matter? On what grounds?

The question of biodiversity is rooted in the study of natural history; differing from cultural or human history. Such knowledge production was also part of the colonising process resulting from colonial encounters. As literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt suggests that the discipline of 'natural history' has become the 'global classificatory project', especially the way in which it 'created the task of locating every species on the planet, extracting it from its particular, arbitrary surroundings … and placing it in its appropriate spot in the system'. As well as how it 'interrupted existing networks of historical and material relations among people, plants, and animals wherever it applied itself' (Pratt [1992] 2008, 26–31). Places, plants, animals and peoples as well as their social and cultural practices have been extensively discovered and exhaustively classified.

Whilst elephants have played crucial parts in Thai history and culture,



Elephant statue - Singapore

whether as a symbol of royal and national prestige, or as labour for timber and tourist industry, they are also easily incorporated into Thai cultural and historical narratives. However, I think that the incorporation of elephants into cultural representations of Siam/Thailand was somehow a distinct modern phenomenon. It was constructed under modern zoological knowledge in the context of colonial collecting culture in which the Siamese royals took part. Apart from having an elephant on the national flag which was first created in 1855 by King Mongkut (Rama IV), other noteworthy examples might be the two elephants that King Mongkut sent to Napoleon III in 1862 as well as the two bronze elephant statues that King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) gave to the governments of Singapore and Batavia (now Jakarta) after his visits in 1871. The images of elephants still associate Thailand as a country and especially as a global tourist destination. Think about elephant riding tourism in the past, to the present-day animal welfare volunteer tourism[1]; think about elephant wooden sculptures to elephant graphic t-shirts and pants.



Elephant statue - Indonesia

1
'Volunteer tourism' is a form of tourism that offer tourists (as paying volunteers) a range of experience of volunteering opportunities in, more or less, 'developing' or 'underdeveloped' countries, to 'offer support' (e.g. labour work, raise funds, etc.). Spanning issues of poverty, healthcare, childcare, teaching foreign languages, nature conservation, etc.

On the other hand, the repatriation of smuggled orangutans, from Thailand to Indonesia, has been described not only on animal welfare conservation grounds, but also with the overtone of diplomatic relations, as the orangutan has become an Indonesian national symbol. The orangutan has also been represented as a local, cultural symbol in/of Malaysian Borneo, namely in the states of Sabah and Sarawak. Living in the canopy of the rainforests on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra, their population numbers have been in decline. Anthropogenic environmental and ecological changes due to plantations, mining and developmental projects as well as poaching and hunting are claimed as the major threats to their species extinction. The idea of orangutan rehabilitation began in Sarawak during the 1950s. Later on, national park complexes, wildlife sanctuaries and rehabilitation centres have been set up across orangutan habitats in Indonesia and Malaysia. Such establishments were mostly initiated by transnational conservation organisations, not only involved with local governments, but also relying on local communities. Nonetheless, in order to 'save' a charismatic species[2], such as the orangutan, from extinction, the people involved have been unequally, hierarchically impacted, according to class, gender and nationality. Practically, local, indigenous people have been more exposed to risk and vulnerability than others (see, e.g., Parreñas 2012; Rubis and Theriault 2019).



Orangutan (2019)

Evidently, political and economic forces that give rise to such environmental challenges not only affect human, but also non-human animals, plants and their surroundings. After all, what does the political economy of environmental transformation tell us about the history, or rather histories, of colonialism and capitalism in/from the region of Southeast Asia? How could we think beyond the regional focus? At first glance, it reminds me of how a historian Willem van Schendel (2002) questions the academic politics of 'scale' of thinking, particularly on the academic regionalisation of the world, that creates and sustains an 'area' as well as an 'area studies'. In this regard, the problem, if there is any, might rest on the question of the 'scale' of thinking, in terms of space and time. As well as the tracing of the flows, connections and entanglements across time and space.

Spatially speaking, I propose that we must not think about species extinc-

2
'Charismatic species' is a term used in terms of 'conservation biology' as well as in environmental activism, to describe animal species with symbolic value, say, in order to raise awareness, or to gain popular support (e.g. raising funds) for environmental campaigning (eg. TV ads or documentaries that portray the endangerment of polar bear, elephant, penguin, panda, gorilla, chimps, orangutan, tiger, rhino, etc.).

tions from only the national or regional points of view. Rather we must think about the topic in question upon a planetary-scale, so that there is no thinking about extinction from 'Southeast Asia' or 'anywhere-as-if-it-is-there', but only from the localities of the planet, where everywhere matters. Thus, to think about extinction from Southeast Asia is to think about extinction from the planet. Though, obviously, this is not to imply that responsibilities should be evenly shared. On the contrary, when talking about unevenly distributed cause and consequence, we must not deny that uneven and unequal development (or what has been termed 'modernisation' as well as 'colonisation') are all significant parts of the story. Yet, when talking about the 'anthropogenic' environmental and ecological change, we must rethink the term 'anthropos' since it conceals such unevenly distributed vulnerability and responsibility.

And that leads to the last but not least point that I want to discuss, namely, on the question of time-scale. I open this text with the memories from the year 1995 and, twenty-five years on, whilst I was writing this paragraph it is at the twilight of 2020. Although 'twenty-five years is a long time.' But 'that's 25 years in human time. In geologic time, it's only the slightest breath. The vastness of geologic time is simultaneously incomprehensible and banal' (Raffles 2012). Remarkably, we could think about extinction only when we come to comprehend the geologic time-scale. For the species-specific evolutionary histories of humans and orangutans, as fellow hominid humans and orangutans are imagined as distant relatives 'built on an evolutionary family tree that began 14 million years ago, when the last common ancestor for hominids lived' (Parreñas 2016, 114). To conclude, as a 97 percent orangutan, this should be the time to rethink the distinctions and boundaries between 'human' and 'non-human', as well as the transgressions and entanglements between 'local', 'regional', 'global' and 'planetary' that have happened along the planetary-scale-of-history. It is time to rethink the intra-species unevenly distributed socio-environmental causes, consequences and responsibilities as well.

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Sawasdee Cat

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Author's Bio

Napak Serirak is an anthropologist and independent researcher. He received his BA in Economics and MA in Anthropology from Thammasat University; and was a lecturer in Sociology and Anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus from 2013 to 2017. Drawing from the history of sexuality, medical anthropology and linguistic anthropology, he wrote extensively on the cultural history of sexology in Thai society. In addition, his interests include colonial scientific expedition writing on Southeast Asia as well as environmental history and political ecology of nature conservation in/of the region, amongst others. This essay is part of what he has been working on lately.

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