

CHAPTER IV

CHIANG MAI WORLD – CONTEMPORARY LARGE-SCALE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN THAILAND

4.1 Introduction

Chiang Mai under the centralized Thai State has long held a leading focus among Thailand's urban areas. Its current prominence and promotion as the cultural reservoir of Northern Thailand has evolved from a true history steeped in Lanna traditions, landscapes, art and lifestyles, unique from those of Central Thailand. However, this distinct character was not always seen as a campaign to be endorsed by the state for its tourist appeal.

In the early 20th century, as Siam transitioned to the Thai nation-state, Chiang Mai remained aggressively elusive in its allegiance to Bangkok. Bangkok attempted to gain control with ambitious transportation and economic development via the construction of the northern railway, which reached Chiang Mai in 1921. This inaugurated a key modern trade link between the two urban centers and forever eased Bangkok's administrative access to Chiang Mai. As new goods reached Chiang Mai via railroad, new dependencies on Bangkok products were created while a steadily increasing rice export economy introduced the need for Bangkok to replace Northern Thai land management traditions with centralized plans for agricultural irrigation systems (Duongchan, 2007) and land titling. This trend later culminated with the vast state natural resource territorialization mentioned in Chapter III.

By the mid-1960s the construction of Chiang Mai University, Thailand's first regional state university, created a new draw to Chiang Mai. As new road systems linked the rest of Thailand to Chiang Mai, access to the city became even easier, ushering in a new era of economic development, urban migration and tourism. In 1960 the Tourism Authority of Thailand was established and from the second to the fourth National Economic and Social Development Plans (1968-1981) the state put increasing focus on tourism in Chiang Mai. This is the period when currently well-

known tourist favorites such as the Night Bazaar and Chiang Mai Flower Festival were started.

A much more profound government focus on Chiang Mai came in 1982 when the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986) officially pegged Chiang Mai as the center of the Upper Northern Region. This declaration set off a torrent of funding for large-scale urban development projects (ibid.) such as the Mae Ping River Bank Development, a failed attempt to build a cable car to Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep (see Chapter V), the 700 Year Stadium complex, and a dramatic expansion of the city's outer road systems. This period also emphasized the importance of tourism infrastructure and promotion. From 1977 to 1993 Thailand's international tourist numbers jumped from 1.2 million to 5.7 million per year (Mingsarn, 1994). By 2007 this number was over 14 million.

Although Chiang Mai had received dramatically heightened state support beginning in the early 1980's, it was the election of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001, a Chiang Mai native, that created an unparalleled era of financial investment in the city. Thaksin sought to make his hometown of Chiang Mai an economic, tourist and urban center of the Greater Mekong Sub-region and to do this he initiated and funded a bold series of mega-projects that included "Chiang Mai World".

4.2 Chiang Mai World

"It will be wonderful! Chiang Mai World will be like Disney World, but based on culture and the environment." Plodprasob Suraswadi, Natural Resource and Environment Ministry Permanent Secretary and DASTA chief (Chiang Mai Citylife, 15(8) 2006).

In 2005 Chiang Mai citizens became aware of a new, government-sponsored mega-project package slated for the Doi Suthep region of Chiang Mai. The mega-project, dubbed "Chiang Mai World" (CMW), proposed a long list of prominent projects and sub-projects spanning the city of Chiang Mai's urban, suburban, and mountain spaces. The project scheme ran the gamut from shopping plazas, convention centers and spas to roads and cable cars.

In its original form the Chiang Mai Word mega-project package was comprised of over a dozen sub-projects with an estimated budget of over 12 billion

baht. Many of the largest projects were situated on land that was previously within Doi Pui-Suthep National Park (see Chapter V).

The preliminary list of Chiang Mai World Sub-projects¹ included:

- The Chiang Mai Night Safari (with land annexed from Doi Pui-Suthep National Park)
- The Elephant Park Project, covering 6,000 rai of land adjacent to the Chiang Mai Night Safari
- The World Garden Project (Royal Flora Ratchaphruek Expo), under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives
- A cable car linking various tourist destinations around Doi Suthep, 15 kilometers long, with eight stations including the Night Safari, the Elephant Park and the Khruba Sriwichai Monument.
- A World Class Spa Project, near the Garden Project
- An Aquarium, under the administration of the Chiang Mai Zoo
- The Khruba Sriwichai Monument Development Project at the base of Doi Suthep, consisting of a shopping complex and a trolley station
- A world class theme park or amusement park
- A mass transit monorail system running from the base of Doi Suthep into Chiang Mai city.
- An amusement theme park including the highest ferris wheel in Asia
- An international convention center and exposition hall
- A center for decorative and agricultural plants
- A western ring road from Hang Dong to Chiang Mai University
- A four-lane bypass road from Chiang Mai to Mae Rim, passing through forest land in Doi Pui-Suthep National Park
- A resort style hotel and restaurant within the Chiang Mai Zoo

¹ This is the originally disclosed project list as revealed at the Wat Sri Soda community forum, 09 October 2005. For an expanded list of related Chiang Mai mega-projects, past and present, see Duongchan, 2007.



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The massive budget and intensive planning that was required to establish such a vast series of projects, immediately struck many people as a pipedream; however, some local opponents felt that if most of these projects became a reality then this pipedream would surely transition to nightmare. The planning for this mega-project was carried out primarily by central Thai government under the newly formed Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), a national semi-autonomous agency housed in the Prime Minister's (Thaksin Shinawatra) office and headed by Plodprosop Suraswadi, the Natural Resource and Environment Ministry Permanent Secretary. Additionally, DASTA was given broad jurisdiction over the national forest land and national park land included within its project boundaries.

With the coup d'état of September 19th 2007 and subsequent ousting of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, came the eventual halt and reassessment of many parts of the CMW package. Soon after Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was deposed, Chiang Mai civil society groups were quick to ask government agencies to review “irregularities” in the planning, funding and construction of the projects. The interim military government began a supposed review of corruption and this review was intended to investigate a variety of Thaksin-initiated ventures including the series of CMW projects. However, two prominent projects, the Chiang Mai Night Safari (CMNS) and the Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Exposition (RFRE), were mostly operational by the time of the coup and were neither cancelled nor postponed. These two projects, particularly the former, will serve as the core focus of this chapter.

With a mega-project of the budget magnitude of CMW, managed and funded by public, state-constructed administrations, it would seem clearly reasonable that project information and the development planning process should be easily accessible to civil society. However, the manner in which the preparation, coordination and execution of the CMW project were conducted drew notable public outcry in Chiang Mai and resulted in a variety of conflicts regarding suburban Chiang Mai natural resources, cultural preservation, civil society participation and even government agency jurisdiction. The project has revealed numerous issues and problems associated with current methods of promoting large-scale tourism development in Thailand. Importantly the relevance of civil society and local-level actors and their interaction and participation with state-sponsored development has been highlighted.

4.3 The Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Expo

2006 marked the 60th anniversary of H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne. Events and projects were arranged throughout Thailand to honor this “Diamond Jubilee”, but none were nearly as ambitious and on such a grand scale as the Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Expo (RFRE). The expo was planned to be a sprawling, 80-hectare exhibition of over 2.5 million plants with representative species from over thirty participating countries. Thailand had never come close to planning anything of this horticultural magnitude.



Figure 4.2 The Royal Pavilion at the Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Expo

The RFRE was a geographical neighbor to the CMNS, in Mae Hia District of Chiang Mai at the base of Doi Kham. The land was acquired from two government management bodies – Doi Pui-Suthep National Park and the Department of Agriculture, but the Expo was administered by DASTA and coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. During its three months of operation (November 2006 - January 2007) the RFRE hosted over 3.5 million visitors, far exceeding the initial estimate of 2.5 million. Although being touted by the planners as an enormous success, the RFRE project was rife with controversy, accusations of corruption, design problems and budget troubles from planning to finish. Just before the RFRE opened an article in *The Nation* made the snarky comment: “We wonder if

whether the floral expo had been given more time to prepare before opening its doors, would these problems have occurred? Or is it just the nature of Thais – we are never 100-percent prepared?” (09 NOV 2006 – The Nation). Immediately prior to opening, the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) claimed to have found “irregularities” in the organization of the Expo. These findings solidified a comment from Rapee Sakrik, a prominent horticulturist involved in the Expo who suspected preparations had been made without transparency. Mr. Rapee had previously been held up to be an honorary president of the RFRE, but the government quickly dropped this privilege after he made claims of the corruption (15 SEP 2006 - Thai Press Reports).

A logistical misstep of massive proportions failed to address the obvious question of what to do with the Expo land after the 3-month event finished. With only a few days left before the Expo closed in January 2007, the RFRE future management fate was still unknown, while multiple ideas were being suggested and the legal process pending. As the public relations officer Preecha Sananwatananont was quoted as saying on one of the Expo's final days: "The Agriculture Ministry has the idea of setting up a new organization to oversee it, but it might take several months to finalize the idea and introduce it legally.” (28 JAN 2007 The Nation).

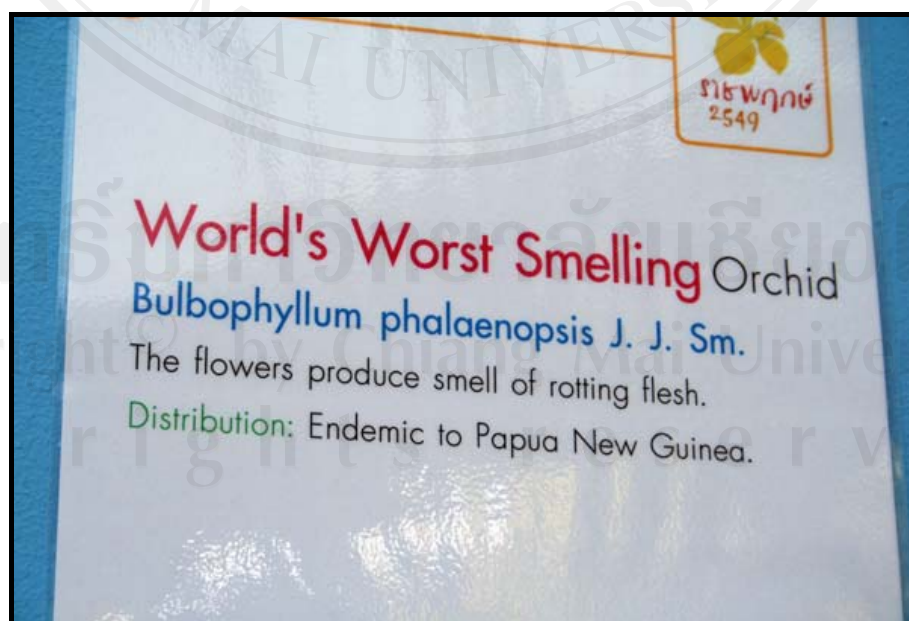


Figure 4.3 The RFRE had its fair share of problems

The originally proposed budget for the RFRE was 2 billion baht, but the final operating costs were in excess of 2.6 billion. Although the visitor total exceeded the initial estimate by nearly a million people, the final net profit of the expo was less than 60 million baht (01 FEB 2007 Thai Press Reports).

For the first year after the expo the final fate of the grounds was still up in the air with new rumors and ideas for use swirling monthly, none of which providing a steady use for the wildly expensive park. Budgetary and water constraints further limited the options for management and use (initial estimates by the post-expo management company, Suan Nong Nuch, stated that the post-expo, maintenance fees would be 3 million baht per day!). Currently the Expo grounds are still under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives who have allowed it to be used for a variety of events from OTOP² markets to the strangely placed Honda Racing Fest 2008, a series of high-speed races with cars zipping around the Flora Expo's smooth new roads.



Figure 4.4 Cars race through the Expo grounds while exhaust clouds rise over the ‘Gardens for the King’
(source: <http://www.grandprixgroup.com/honda/2008/>)

² One Tambon One Product – A Thai government program to support unique, locally made products of each tambon (sub-district). It was inspired by Japan's One Village One Product program.

Upon hearing that the site had been opened free to the public I recently returned for a visit. There were a handful of cars in the vast parking lots and when I entered the expo I asked the ticket booth worker (only collecting visitor signatures, not fees) how many people were now coming each day. He told me about 500, although when he saw me flip back the two short pages of the day's signature log, he quickly interjected that the day had been slow and that weekends were much busier (it was Tuesday afternoon).

As I walked through the mostly vacant grounds, it was eerily quiet compared to the mayhem of my last visit during the full-blown Expo. A drink vendor sat in his booth, reading comics while an empty tram rolled by in search of pedestrians who wanted a free ride. Many of the gardens I had enjoyed most during the Expo were now skeletons of scaffolding, torn shade cloth and textured concrete and the international gardens section was completely closed. I came to a walking path intersection and looked over at an already rusty, faded sign for the bathroom and laughed to myself thinking about the past news reports about the consistent problems with overflowing toilets during the height of the Expo crowds (08 NOV 2006 The Nation).

It's not as if all of the grounds were in sad shape. The landscaping on the hills and path borders was still mostly immaculate and I could see gardeners busy on the floral slopes. Of course the Royal Pavilion was still there as well, in its pristine teak and gold glory. Though, it all seemed like a lot of money spent and still to be spent, all so a few people could wander through a nicely landscaped park of fading monoliths. As if to freeze the beauty of the initial expo, a photo booth near the park entrance advertised prints with your picture superimposed onto a background of assorted original Expo images. This seemed to be a sad reminder that the Flora Expo grounds today were an ailing horticultural rival to the live photo opportunities and beauty of the initial Expo.

4.4 The Chiang Mai Night Safari – “The Face of the Nation”

The Chiang Mai Night Safari (CMNS) was a primary pet project of the Thaksin government and was coordinated by and funded through DASTA. It was slated to be the biggest of its kind in the world and proclaimed by Deputy Prime Minister Suwat Liptapanlop to be 'the face of the nation', which would pull in large

numbers of tourists and create at least 300 local jobs (The Nation, 17 JAN 2005). It was said to be modeled after the Singapore Night Safari and was predicted by its director, Plodprosop Suraswadi, to eventually exhibit 2000 wild animals from around the world.

The project officially began on March 25th 2002 when Prime Minister Thaksin appointed a nine-member committee to study the feasibility of the project. After a series of site visits and memos the construction for the Chiang Mai Night Safari (CMNS) began in late 2004 and by early 2005 the Night Safari was reportedly 80 percent complete. Although some local people had already been hired, the numerous “local jobs” had yet to come to fruition and in January 2005, police raided the CMNS grounds and arrested nearly 100 unregistered migrants from Burma³ working as construction laborers for the Safari's new facilities.

Hype for the CMNS grew increasingly louder and the government continued to insist that the Safari would open on time during the 2005 Songkran New Year Festival (April 13-15). This deadline came and went and it wasn't until July 2005 when the first 9 animals arrived, all from zoos within Thailand. A highly contentious wildlife deal between Kenya and Thailand was supposedly making progress towards being approved, but as time went on it became an increasingly longer wait for the “grand” opening. As one tongue-in-cheek reporter put it:

The 300 animals from Kenya that were 'arriving any day now' in January, are now 'on their way'. If this trend continues, by August they will have 'just been purchased'. It sounds like the place is going to end up the same as every other zoo in the country, only darker. The Chiang Mai Night Safari Zoo, like the Elite Privilege Card, is the brainchild of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This means - like China's Great Leap Forward - it will be an outstanding success no matter how much of a failure it is (18 APR 2005, The Nation).

The delay behind the acquisition of wildlife was only the beginning of the lack of transparency that local protesters grew increasingly vocal about.

³ Migrants from Burma, especially Shan, are commonly the largest percentage of laborers at construction sites throughout Chiang Mai. Many are hired illegally without permits because employers can pay them much less than the Chiang Mai minimum wage (as of January 2007 this was 159 baht/day). Thai laborers on the other hand are generally paid more and can be members of labor unions allowing for legal worker rights.

International Outcry - Losing Sight of CITES?

In late 2004 Kenya's President Mwai Kibaki made a trip to Thailand during which he reportedly sanctioned the exportation of 300 wild animals for the CMNS. Nearly a year later on November 9th 2005, Kenyan tourism minister Morris Dzoro and the Thai Minister for Natural Resources and Environment, Yongyut Tiypaiyat, signed a wildlife export deal witnessed by Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra at the Kenyan State House in Nairobi. This deal stipulated that Kenya was to donate 175 wild animals to Thailand in exchange for Thailand's expertise in wildlife management, training and support and 80 million Kenyan Shilling (which was to be used by Kenya to manage elephants) (Xinhua News Agency, 10 NOV 2005). However, on December 20th 2005, Kenyan Justice Joseph Nyamu issued an injunction after two Kenyan NGOs moved to court to challenge the newly signed wildlife deal (Kenyan Capital FM radio, 23 DEC 2005). Months prior to this there had been a simmering opposition in Kenya surrounding the news of the planned wildlife deal with Thailand.



Figure 4.5 Kenyan school children with their Thai/Kenya wildlife deal protest sign (source: Wildlife Fund Thailand)

A massive call to ban the export of Kenyan wildlife came immediately following the CMNS Director Plodprosop Suraswadi's announcement that the Safari would be serving “exotic” meals at its “6 star restaurant”. What was planned for the menu? “The zoo will be outstanding, with several restaurants offering visitors the chance to experience exotic foods such as imported horse, kangaroo, giraffe, snake, elephant, tiger and lion meat.” (Plodprosop Suraswadi as quoted in *The Nation*, 17 NOV 2005).

In response, Wildlife Fund Thailand Secretary Surapol Duangkae stated that consuming wildlife would certainly raise alarming moral issues and seriously degrade the country's image on wildlife trade issues. His comments were backed up by a coalition of 46 Kenyan and international NGOs that submitted an open letter to Kenyan president Kibaki highlighting the fact that some of the animals slated to be transported to Thailand included endangered species on Appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) such as serval cats, crowned cranes, lesser flamingos and hippopotami. Both Thailand and Kenya are signatories of CITES and thus not only would Thailand's CITES efforts be undermined, but so also would Kenya's, a country that saw a 50 percent reduction in wildlife from 1977 to 2004 due largely to the illegal bush meat trade, excision of forests, and widespread wildland encroachment (Kenyan Department of Remote Sensing and Resource Survey, 2004). The anger surrounding this issue continued to spread far. Comments on an international Internet petition⁴ against the CMNS's proposed exotic meal offerings ranged from the matter of fact “Is it necessary to even have to comment on this? This is 2006 people!” to the humorous “[The CMNS management] should be eaten!” and the pointed “This abuse of animals is particularly shocking in a Buddhist country.”

To contain this exploding situation Mr. Plodprosop later backtracked by insisting that his previous claims of exotic wildlife menus were simply innocent comments blown out of proportion by the media: “This is ridiculous! The Thai people eat crocodile or dogs. It is common. So they try to smear me saying we are going to eat elephants, lions and tigers.” Plodprosop Suraswadi (06 AUG 2006 - Agence France Presse).

⁴ <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/237795365>



Figure 4.6 Kenyan protestors hold a sign mocking the CMNS restaurant menu (source: Wildlife Fund Thailand)

Throughout its short life the CMNS has continually been on the defense as a steady supply of on-site problems have plagued the “zoo”. In 2006 a Siberian grey wolf escaped the Night Safari for weeks, eventually being captured by villagers near my house in Baan Pong Noi and later dying when back in the Safari's custody. There have been numerous animal deaths – dozens of birds (died from improper wing clipping by staff), giraffes, hyenas and two elephants who reportedly “ate the wrong kind of grass” which was laden with killer pesticides (10 OCT 2007 The Nation).

After numerous attempts by Chiang Mai civil society groups to close the Safari and following investigations into irregularities of all CMW projects, a debate ensued about who should manage the ailing Safari. Initially the idea was to merge the Night Safari with the existing Chiang Mai Zoo, but this was replaced with a cabinet-approved allowance for private company management. This was finally replaced in 2007 with a plan for a new state enterprise to manage the Safari under the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry.

When I visited the Chiang Mai Night Safari website in July of 2007, over 2 years after the Safari opened, the homepage still said “sorry under construction”. I wondered to myself if that meant the Night Safari or the Night Safari website. The website's main page did already have an interesting selection of Night Safari pictures

including a laser show, a colored fountain, and the building at the entrance with its animal statues. The Safari's long-term success remains to be seen.

4.5 NGO / State / Local Discourse

Within my brief case study of Chiang Mai tourism development projects there was a consistently overt dislike between the state, NGOs and the state's local supporters. A lot of this, I argue, is entrenched in long-standing stereotypes, misconceptions, and general mistrust of the "other side" which was born out of Thailand's recent political and environmental issues of the 1970s and 1980s (Hirsch, 1997, Missingham, 2003, Pinkaew, 2002). In 1996, a rightist literary journal printed the sentence: "Formerly we fought the communists, now we fight the NGOs. NGOs have replaced the communists" (Sakun Thai December 3, 1996 as referenced in Nelson, 2007). Problems between states and NGOs, however, are obviously not limited to Thailand.

With the case of the Chiang Mai World sub-projects it has been seemingly rare that a community gathering occurs where state actors meet and discuss projects and pending ideas with NGO members, citizens and community media. On the other hand, countless meetings have been organized within the local NGO community, which in my opinion have had the primary result of disseminating information among "concerned citizens" and mobilizing local forces for later meetings, collaborations or actions.

Because of the difficulty I encountered in arranging interviews with state actors or politicians involved in the planning and development of these large-scale Chiang Mai projects, I took keen interest in meetings that advertised opportunities to ask questions and hear the views of government representatives. Too often though, the higher-ranking officials would back out at the last minute or simply not show up at scheduled public forums or meetings. NGO members and other groups that I'll refer to as "NGO media", relayed their feelings to me that most officials were too scared to meet with them, fearing a lopsided public debate on development issues or outright attack that exposed the "truth" behind these projects.

Of the very few state officials I was able to interview, I found them to be quite genial and cooperative, and some even hinted at how they had been victimized or

marginalized by other more powerful government groups. The Doi Pui-Suthep National Park Director bluntly summed up the early Chiang Mai World modus operandi as “not only strange, but crazy” in the way that DASTA and Thaksin’s special committee completely ignored his jurisdiction and advice when creating the Chiang Mai World project plan (as mentioned much of the project fell within national park boundaries). On a few occasions I expressed my impressions to civil society stakeholders of how some of these seemingly moderate state actors were perhaps also somehow marginalized. The response was mostly that these particular state officials were in reality untrustworthy and two-faced, followed by brief examples of their “say one thing, do another” reputation.

In regard to the larger Chiang Mai World projects, textual examples of the undercurrent of animosity between state actors and NGOs were fairly easy to come by in the media. Lofty state officials behind these projects found it easy to discredit NGO groups as marginal and insignificant:

More than 90 percent of local people are happy. There are not more than 30 opponents, but they seem to be able to appear in the newspapers. [Some people] are against everything, even their own shadow (Plodprasop Suraswadi, Chiang Mai Night Safari Director - Agence France Presse, 06 AUG 2006).

In August of 2002, early in the initial planning of the CMNS, a coalition of civil society organizations submitted a formal petition asking the Chiang Mai Governor to help organize a public forum to disclose details of the Safari planning and its related projects, but the request was apparently not acknowledged. The petition was resubmitted in September 2002 on the eve of a large Safari planning workshop. Again the petition was mostly ignored and at the following day’s workshop Mr. Plodprasop was quoted in English as saying that “only 19 idiot NGOs disagree with the Night Safari project. Most local people agree with us” (Duongchan 2007).

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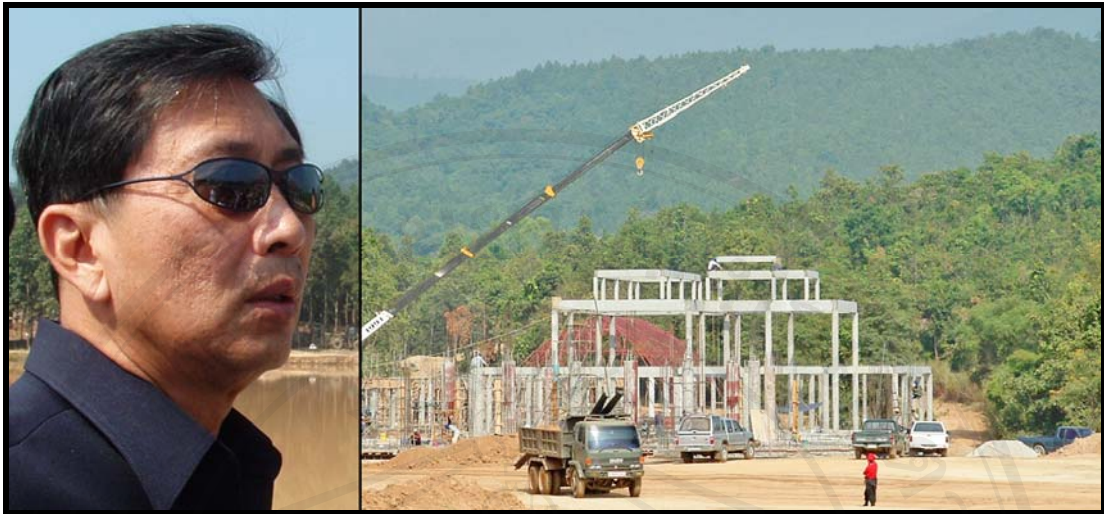


Figure 4.7 Plodprasop Suraswadi, the Chiang Mai Night Safari Director, tours the Night Safari construction site in November 2004 (source: *Paki Khon Hak Chiang Mai*)

Interestingly, the Kenyan NGO outcry, regarding the Kenyan government's planned export of wildlife to Thailand, elicited a very similar dismissal from the country's Tourism and Wildlife Minister: “[NGOs] who are making noises are simply trying to impress their international benefactors so that they may get cash donations. They are not interested in the animals at all.” (Morris Dzoro, Tourism and Wildlife Minister, Kenya - Kenya Daily Nation, 11 FEB 2006).

The term NGO holds a variable meaning and place among the discourse of Chiang Mai (Thai) development. For some people it instantly connotes civil society activism and support, while for some state planners, NGO is a brand for the seemingly endless opposition to development “change and progress”. As Plodprasop mentioned, the people from the NGO circles represent a group that is “against everything”. For or against, though, is simply a term of reference to where a group stands among the development debate and as I will reference in Chapter V, citizens are not completely opposed to every project, but want to be a part of the planning and decision making. Despite this, the CMNS has made attempts to publicly decry and deface the NGO community. An excerpt from the CMNS web page news section clearly illustrates their distaste for the civil society groups in opposition to the Night Safari. In an article titled (in English) ‘*People in the Nearby Communities Gathered Together Resisting the NGOs*’, the Night Safari website details how thousands of local people gathered to

show support for the Night Safari and protest against the NGOs who tried to stop the project:

On December 15, 2005 about 01.30 p.m., over 7 thousand people from the nearby communities, Maehea, Nongkwaii, and Namphrae district, Amphoe Hangdong, gathered themselves in order to resist the NGOs trying to stop the opening of Chiang Mai Night Safari. They took time for over an hour to show some sizable posters written with their intention of bearing Chiang Mai Night Safari. Some leaders of the communities stirred up their people and cheered up Dr. Plodprasop Suraswadi and the Prime Minister, Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra through a loudspeaker. They spoke that after November 16, 2005, the soft opening day of Chiang Mai Night Safari had enabled many people in Hangdong to produce 700-800 Baht-per-day income for their own. Hence, if there had been no Chiang Mai Night Safari, they could not have earned much more money. Finally, the community representatives gave bouquets to the executives of Chiang Mai Night Safari.

<http://www.chiangmainightsafari.com/en/news/news16.htm>



Figure 4.8 Photos showing the “seven thousand” anti-NGO supporters at the Chiang Mai Night Safari gathering. (source: www.chiangmainightsafari.com)

An important consideration of the Night Safari’s representation of NGOs is that the “protest event” at the Night Safari was also a Chiang Mai campaign stop for Thaksin Shinawatra. Thus, it is impossible to assume that all community members present were there to “to resist the NGOs trying to stop the opening of Chiang Mai Night Safari.”

In sharp contrast to the Night Safari event, 8 months later in August of 2006 I attended a community forum at Wat Doi Pao in Baan Nong Kwai directly next to the Chiang Mai Night Safari. The meeting was organized for villagers and civil society

members to speak with local government officials and representatives from the Night Safari about yet another major development project that was to be constructed in their district: a sprawling, 6,000-rai elephant park planned to be the new home of 200 elephants. This was the first and last meeting I attended regarding Chiang Mai World projects where concerned citizens had open access to the planners and enablers of any Chiang Mai World project.

I surely won't go so far as to say thousands of villagers showed up for this meeting, but certainly several hundred were there and most of the attendees were villagers from the exact same district that the Night Safari claimed to draw its local support from. The villagers were vocal about how the Night Safari had affected their lives and how they didn't want any more problems from another related project. People spoke of their concerns for water scarcity, maintaining forest access, obtaining land title and viability of project-related jobs. Most importantly the crowd simply asked to be informed of project planning *before* projects were begun.



Figure 4.9 Villagers listen while local officials answer questions regarding the proposed elephant camp.

When the meeting addressed the topic of project planning, however, discussions went sour. Villagers wanted to know how the Night Safari land (and that of the proposed elephant camp) was acquired from the national park, when some of them had been fighting decades for land rights within the park, a place they had called home long before the park's existence. The panel of local officials insisted that the entire process of planning had been legal and transparent and then they diverted attention towards the economic benefits and tourism the projects would bring to the

area. Finally, one prominent civil society member spoke up to ask the *kamnan*⁵ once again why the public had not seen the proposal for either the Night Safari or the elephant park. The *kamnan* grew impatient and told him that the meeting was ending and that they had already discussed these issues enough. The questioner persisted until finally, to the shock of the audience, the *kamnan* screamed into the microphone that he would not listen any longer. This was where the public forum ended.

Another excellent example of the nasty undercurrent between civil society activists and CMW proponents is a poster that was placed throughout Chiang Mai in August of 2006. The A3-sized notice displayed eight pictures of prominent civil society members including Suriyan Thongnoo-iad – deputy secretary of the Northern Farmer Federation, Uthaiwan Kanchanakamol – director of the Chiang Mai Community Radio pilot project, Chaloempol Sampetch, Chaipyapan Prapasawas, Suntaree Vechanont – all members of Paki Khon Hak Chiang Mai, Bannaros Buaklee – a journalist from the Manager Daily Newspaper⁶, Suebsawas Sanitwong – a member of Chiang Mai Hak Mae Ping (Chiang Mai Loves the Ping River) and Nikom Puttha from the Wildlife Fund of Thailand. The high quality color posters were printed in huge numbers and condemned the group of eight as obstructers to Chiang Mai's development. The poster also urged Chiang Mai people not to talk to, welcome, associate or commit any business affairs with these people. Those responsible for the poster remain a mystery and only revealed themselves as the "Descendants of Chiang Mai".

"I strongly believe that well-to-do and powerful persons might have sponsored this set of posters. Printing this poster in a great number and the quality of printing materials require substantial funds. The messages clearly underrate and discredit us. Parts of the message [about what we oppose] are outright lies." **Chaipyapan Prapasawas**

⁵ *Kamnan* is a government leader at the sub-district level.

⁶ The Manager Daily was formed in 1990 and has since been a regular critic of the government, while a loyal supporter of the constitutional monarchy. Most recently the newspaper was heavily against the Thaksin Shinawatra government. The founder of the newspaper is People's Alliance for Democracy leader Sondhi Limthongkul.

4.6 Transparent as Mud

“Actually, we know very little about the [mega-project] plans, although I agree to the project package in principle.” **Narong Tananuwat, president of the Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce**

One major obstacle to my research was that most of the CMW projects were conducted in near total secrecy. Initially I thought that maybe because I was a farang with moderate Thai language skills, I was inherently missing important local news, documents and meetings. What I soon realized though was that the public, NGOs and even Thai research projects (Duongchan, 2007) were finding it incredibly difficult to access CMW information. The very fact that information was so inaccessible became a key reason why civil society became so motivated against these mega-projects.

A common theme at community meetings was the lack of transparency surrounding the planning and execution of these large, state-sponsored tourism development projects. Local community issues and concerns could often only be raised after projects had been established or finalized, resulting in what one person referred to as “constant damage control” (personal communication, 2007). From a sustainable development perspective it seems quite clear that many of the problems resulting from these Chiang Mai projects are the product of the obvious and crucial misstep of spending public money on public projects sited on public land *without* the public's participation, knowledge and input: “Chiang Mai residents have no idea what's going on there [CMNS] because of the lack of community participation in the project” (Senator Niran Phitakwatchara of the Senate Committee on Social Development and Human Security - The Nation 03 DEC 2005).

The lack of transparency regarding the CMNS was not unique to Thailand. Even in Kenya, as news outlets were reporting about the impending wildlife deal with Thailand, the Kenyan government was still denying such a deal existed.

So who is mistaken here? The world media reporting about the deal or those who deny that such a thing exists? Wild animals are core to Kenya's tourism. They are our national heritage. Anything touching on them; their culling, their export or their translocation, is something that would interest many Kenyans. It is therefore imperative that the government comes clean on the deal. (Kenyan Standard, 09 NOV 2007)

The CMNS and RFRE were both established within boundaries of national park land, previously administered by the Royal Forestry Department; however with the establishment of DASTA, the administrative jurisdiction was transferred creating a new overarching ability to expedite the land's new use. When the Night Safari and Royal Flora Expo were being established a concern I repeatedly heard was how enough water would be provided to maintain these large-scale projects and how this would impact villages near the project sites. Immediately after the opening RFRE, local farmers were asked to conserve water to ensure a steady supply to the Expo. Villagers in Mae Ta Chang claimed that water from *Huay*⁷ Mae Ta Chang had been diverted to the RFRE and according to Wittaya Saengkaewmanee, the director of the Maetaeng Irrigation Project, The RFRE alone required some 2,000 cubic meters of water a day from the Maetaeng irrigation system. This likely created an incredible burden for an area with a long history of water scarcity and conflict (Chaiyapan, 2001, Poncet, 2006). The RFRE was at its height during the sunny cool season, the driest months in Northern Thailand, but also the time when lowland fruit farms near the Expo require huge mounts of water for flowering trees.

Although there had been some acknowledgement of tapping community and agricultural water sources for use at the RFRE site, I was unable to find any public admission of the CMNS following the same practices to fulfill its massive yearly water requirement of 1.4 million cubic meters. Verifying how the Safari would use water was difficult, however, since I could not contact the director of the CMNS irrigation project, who evidently also refused to speak with local media (Chiang Mai Citylife, 14(4) 2005).

In 2002 as the first hints of the CMNS were revealed, Plodprasop Suraswadi commented on how the Safari would be a nice complement to the existing Chiang Mai Zoo and that it would mitigate the zoo's existing water shortages by providing a new space for animals where water was more abundant (Chiang Mai Citylife, 11:8, August 2002). Immediately prior to opening the CMNS Mr. Plodprasop stated to the press that any allegations that the Safari would take water from nearby village water

⁷ *Huay* means stream, brook or creek

sources were untrue, and he claimed that they had established a series of artesian wells and reservoirs on project grounds (Bangkok Post 06 MAY 2005).

Obvious and physical examples of how Plodprasop's statements were completely false can be found in the village of Baan Mae Hia Nai, where the Night Safari established an ambitious underground water diversion project with intentions of drawing water from Huay Mae Hia, a primary water source for the villagers of Baan Mae Hia Nai, a topic I will address in Chapter V.



Figure 4.10 (L) The new cement weir installed on Huay Mae Hia for the Chiang Mai Night Safari's water diversion project – 2003 (source: *Paki Kon Hak Chiang Mai*) (R) The onset of the weir's sedimentation problems – July 2007.

Without access to project information, without any formal modes of participation in planning and with the Chiang Mai World projects inherently affecting their daily lives, civil society members were placed into a corner where they needed to react creatively and collectively. They had to produce effective ideological solidarity to achieve a voice that would be heard beyond a meeting or forum. The civil society movement needed to address the Chiang Mai World project through effective frames in order to have their views acknowledged. Chapter V will examine a few examples of how Chiang Mai's civil society attempted this.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter began with a brief background in the Thai state's increasing focus on Chiang Mai as a dominant urban center of Northern Thailand and a prime location for dramatic expansion of tourism and economic development. The Chiang Mai World project represents the most recent and arguably the most ambitious example of large-scale, state investment in Chiang Mai. But with this massive project scale has come an oversight of planning, budgeting and community involvement.

The first goal of this chapter was to present the details of two sub-projects of Chiang Mai World as a way to explore the state's missteps in current coordination of mega-projects. The blunders resulting from hasty, fast-track planning reveal many major issues; first is a lack of foresight. The Royal Flora project only had a plan for its first three months, and what came after that three months is still being debated two years later. The Chiang Mai Night Safari never received the initial lot of planned animals because the negotiations with Kenya were non-transparent in both countries, quasi-legal and ongoing even after the park was built.

Second, none of the projects were transparent in planning. The state made little, if any, effort to inform local citizens about what the project entailed, what its schedule would be and the proposed budget. The state has retained an impression that civil society is the enemy without realizing that many of the complaints civil society had are directly due to lack of participation and lack of information. By creating a system of community exclusion, the state has forced citizens to creatively include themselves and demand participation. Chapter V will attempt to address some of the ways in which Chiang Mai citizens have created a social movement space to construct negotiation within the case study's state mega-projects.