



Using Institutional Arrangements to Teach Undergraduates about Commons in Thailand

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1. Background and Rationale

- The International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI), in Chiang Mai, Thailand, teaches American university students about resource-dependent communities' ownership of and access to coasts, forests, and rivers through experiential field-based courses.
- Commons management issues are central themes in every course.
- American students have little experience with community-owned natural resources that are actively used for economically productive purposes, and generally lack prior ability to query these unfamiliar, complex issues on their own.
- The educational challenge is to "illustrate such complexity, without overwhelming or confusing the learner." (McKeown 2002:30)

2. Purpose

- To equip multi-disciplinary student groups with new analytical skills in asking questions about institutional aspects of commons use in diverse field settings, as well as applying this perspective to other situations following the program.

3. Methodology

- We help students understand socio-political and ecological issues of commons access and use through:

- 1) introducing common property theory through classroom exercises and discussion
- 2) giving students a guiding questions matrix regarding institutional arrangements (adapted from Sudtongkong and Webb 2008) to use in village and government/NGO interviews
- 3) using this matrix to compare different actors' responses to questions regarding the resource.

- Students use these guiding questions from the matrix (Figure 1) with village residents and governing bodies at least three times over the course of a semester in the following contexts: 1) Community-designated watershed conservation forest used for grazing cattle and collecting non-timber forest products, 2) Orchid conservation area of a swiddening village's protected forest inside a national park, 3) Community-protected mangroves, and 4) Teak forests and rivers used by fishing communities

Organization
Resource (river, forest, fishery, etc.)
Organizational history/timeline
Leadership and initiation of management group
Exclusion from resource (of whom? by whom?)
Boundary/limits (how defined by space/time, visual cues)
Permitted uses and extractions
Monitoring or patrolling (frequency, by whom, and means—on foot, vehicle, satellite, etc)
Ability to detain or deter illegal harvesters (legal, physical, and means)
Punishments for infractions (form, value, graduated or not; who assesses or enforces)
Link with other institutions (state, customary, in/formal)
Source(s) of information
Notes

Figure 1: Guiding matrix for answering institutional arrangements questions



Figure 2: Students learning about community-managed mangroves

4. Educational Outcomes

- Structured study of institutional arrangements was new to nearly all students
- Using the guiding questions matrix enabled students to specify actors' different perspectives and to uncover complexities of multiple users' resource claims and use
- Discipline of asking the detailed questions repeatedly helped students to internalize the topics and increasingly integrate meaningful questions more naturally into conversations about commons (Figure 2)
- Most students point to a specific field instance, while completing the questions matrix or comparing different actors' responses, as the moment at which they clearly understood commons-use dilemmas
- Most (11 of 15 surveyed) students report having directly used or applied the guiding questions elsewhere within six months of completing the semester program

5. Student Feedback

- "The matrix gave me the tools and knowledge to break down a situation that at first seems overwhelming, since otherwise I probably would not have known what questions to ask about how the resource was managed."
- "It became second nature to think of all the different categories...when learning about the institution.... My brain seemed to default to institutional arrangements."

6. References

- McKeown, R. 2002. Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit. Energy, Environment and Resource Center, University of Tennessee.
- Sudtongkong, C., and E. L. Webb. 2008. Outcomes of state- vs. community-based mangrove management in southern Thailand. *Ecology and Society* 13(2): 27.

