

Fahn, James David. 2003. *A Land on Fire. The Environmental Consequences of the Southeast Asian Boom*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

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A Land on Fire is an American journalist's account of the environmental ravages of economic development in Thailand during the go-go years leading up to the 1997 financial crisis. In the late 1980s, James Fahn, just out of college, found himself developing a career as a journalist for the English-language newspaper *The Nation* published in Bangkok. Fahn and his colleagues pioneered American-style investigative reporting at the paper. This book recasts his coverage in the 1990s as a topical chronicle, with chapters on resource development as well as on tourism.

Each chapter combines personal account, historical sketches, and case studies. The chapters can be read separately, and they are rich in details: names of places and people in the news in the 1990s; stories of Fahn as a working reporter on the edge of corruption, civil disorder, and environmental destruction. These perspectives would be useful to someone preparing to study Thailand or other countries in Southeast Asia.

A Land on Fire makes an obvious but important point: "whereas the green movement in the North tends to focus on the middle class, in the South not only is it centered more on the farmers and fishermen who rely on natural resources but it's also concerned more with who gets to use resources, not just with how they are used. This mixture of social and green activism . . . is closest in spirit to the environmental justice movement in the United States" (p. 7).

Fahn is a scientifically informed environmentalist, and his portrayal of issues is conscientious. He is alarmed by the drastic transition that he sees from rural poverty to urban squalor, and he conveys his dismay on nearly every page. His seems to be a credible view from an idealistic American who is both earnest and open-hearted in his embrace of Thai society.

Fahn offers judgments based upon his considerable experience. His reflections on corruption in the last chapter bring out both the strength and weakness of a journalist's approach. There is, on the one side, righteous anger at the venality of government officials. Fahn makes a compelling case that corruption is a significant factor in the environmental history of developing countries—one whose importance he judges as underestimated in academic writing. On the other side, however, Fahn's opinions are based mainly on journalistic anecdotes and the conclusions of a (young) Asia hand, rather than on the systematic appraisal of a social scientist or historian. His assertion that "development is marked not only by a rising level of wealth . . . but also by a respect for public institutions and the rule of law" (p. 323) echoes the World Bank, even though Fahn is decidedly skeptical of that organization and other bulwarks of conventional economic development.

Economic development is not for sissies. Natural resources are plundered.

Inequalities grow as agriculture, fishing, and other pre-industrial livelihoods are reshaped by global markets. Urban populations surge as people move from farms and forests. Urban dwellers, still dependent upon ecosystem services but often without an infrastructure that can deliver clean water, food, sanitation, and energy, struggle with challenges to public health and safety and to their economic livelihood. For both rural and urban people, nature matters. “Developing countries need to address their environmental problems not because the rich world tells them to, but for the benefit of their own people” (p. 8).

The roughly one-third of humanity now living in rich countries stand as both beacon and taunt to the other two-thirds. It is possible to become rich, to enjoy economic prosperity and environmental quality at historically unprecedented levels in mass societies. Whether that prosperity can be put on a basis that is sustainable for times longer than a few generations, and whether such sustainability can be achieved without further exacerbating the environmental and economic inequalities of today’s world—these are questions that one fears to answer in these times of global climate change, eroding biodiversity, and the baffling mirage of sustainable development.

If there is hope, it may lie in the Asian tigers, the nations that have grown with startling speed in the past 25 years. But in James Fahn’s portrait of the Thai environment, hope for prosperity and sustainability is hard to see through the smoke of industrial development and the fog of corruption. What Fahn provides is a portrait of some of Thailand’s people as they race toward prosperity. Education, a middle class, and courageous leaders have created an increasingly tenacious civil society. But how and which natural treasures might survive the tsunami of change remain open questions for Thailand and the world that it has, for better or worse, already joined.