

# Sacred Caves of Northern Thailand

Chiang Mai area

reconnaissance  
summer 2005

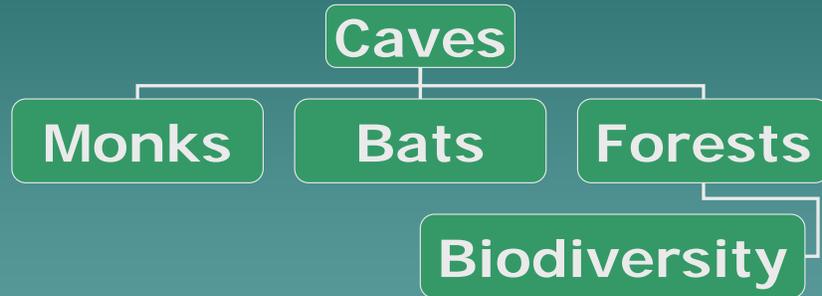
The images in this presentation are from the pilot phase of a long-term research project which is under development. The images are from some of the prospective study sites being considered for regular field research during successive summers. The photographs were all taken by Les Sponsel.

# ***This Sacred Earth,*** **Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., 2004**

- ◆ “Illuminating Darkness: The Monk-Cave-Bat-Ecosystem Complex in Thailand”
- ◆ pages 134-144
- ◆ Dr. Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, co-author

A background and theoretical essay explores possible ecological relationships among Buddhist monks, sacred caves, bats, forests, and biodiversity conservation. It was originally published as an invited contribution to the following festschrift: *Socially Engaged Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sulak Sivaraksa on His 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, David W. Chappell, ed. (Bangkok, Thailand: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 2003), “Illuminating Darkness: The Monk-Cave-Bat-Ecosystem Complex in Thailand,” (Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, coauthor), pp. 255-270. This was subsequently reprinted in the second edition of the benchmark anthology: *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), “Illuminating Darkness: The Monk-Cave-Bat-Ecosystem Complex in Thailand,” (Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, coauthor), pp. 134-144. The proposed research will explore, elaborate, and test ideas initially developed in this essay through a multidisciplinary, long-term research team composed mostly of Thai colleagues and students with specializations in anthropology, religion, history, biology, geology, geography, etc.

## Possible Ecological Relationships:



Archaeology reveals that humans have used caves opportunistically as habitation, grave, art, and ritual sites far back into prehistory for many millennia. This helps explain the attraction, fascination, and mystery that caves hold for most people. There are probably thousands of caves in Thailand. At least 112 Buddhist sacred caves have been identified in Thailand with some 60 described in detail by Christopher Munier in his book *Sacred Rocks and Buddhist Caves in Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 1998). According to Munier (p. 34), the earliest known use of caves by Buddhists in Thailand dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bats are the most important fauna in most caves. They are also keystone (critical) species in forests and other ecosystems as pollinators, seed dispersers, and insect predators while they forage widely at night. In Thailand, the 107 species of bats comprise 38% of the 280 species of mammals. Among the species of bats in the country, 31 roost in caves. The primary aim of the present research initiative is to explore in holistic perspective the possible ecological relationships among sacred caves, Buddhist monks, bats, forests, and biodiversity conservation.

## Some Hypotheses:

- ◆ If a cave is considered sacred, then this status protects roosting bats.
- ◆ In turn, this supports the ecological roles of bats as keystone species in forest and other ecosystems.
- ◆ Other biota, inside and in the vicinity of the caves, are also protected.
- ◆ Accordingly, sacred caves promote biodiversity conservation.

These are the primary hypotheses that are being developed for empirical testing in the field with qualitative and quantitative data collection on biological, cultural, religious, and other aspects of these and related phenomena.



Some of the mountainous landscape ecology of northern Thailand is displayed in these images. Mountains run along the western border of Thailand from the north down through the southern peninsula. They contain numerous caves, probably numbering in the thousands. Many caves are remote and difficult to access if not impossible. Some of the sacred caves are kept secret.

# Wat Pratat Doi Kam



Two excellent sources on Buddhist art and symbolism are these books:

Chicarelli, Charles F., 2004, *Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Introduction*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

Jansen, Eva Rudy, 1990, *The Book of Buddhas: Ritual Symbolism used on Buddhist Statuary and Ritual Objects*, Havelte, Holland: Binkey Kok Publications.



More than 95% of the Thai people are Buddhist to some degree, although popular religion often integrates elements of Animism and Hinduism as well. In spite of “Westernization,” the Buddhist religion is still extremely important in Thailand. Sanitsuda Ekachai has described this in her 2001 book called *Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads* (Bangkok, Thailand: Post Books). There are also different variations on Buddhism in Thailand, as for example, the distinct Chinese Buddhist temples. Buddhism is evidenced not only in the tens of thousands of temples and monasteries throughout Thailand, but even in the landscape where giant statues may be found. Indeed, an entire book by Mark Standen is devoted to *Buddha in the Landscape: A Sacred Expression of Thailand*, 1998 (Bangkok, Thailand: Mark Staden Publishing). The right hand of the Buddha points toward the ground inviting the Earth Goddess to witness his enlightenment. This impressive Buddha image in this frame was photographed by Les Sponsel at Wat Pratat Doi Kam near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The area surrounding such statues is also considered sacred, and thereby, most likely, some of the associated landscape and its biodiversity are protected as well.



In addition to Buddhism, elements of Animism and Hinduism may be found throughout Thailand, even in Buddhist temple complexes. For example, the shrine on the left is Kaongka, the Water Goddess of Hinduism. The shrine on the right is for the Hindu god Brahma. Both are on the grounds of the temple complex of Wat Pratat Doi Kam.

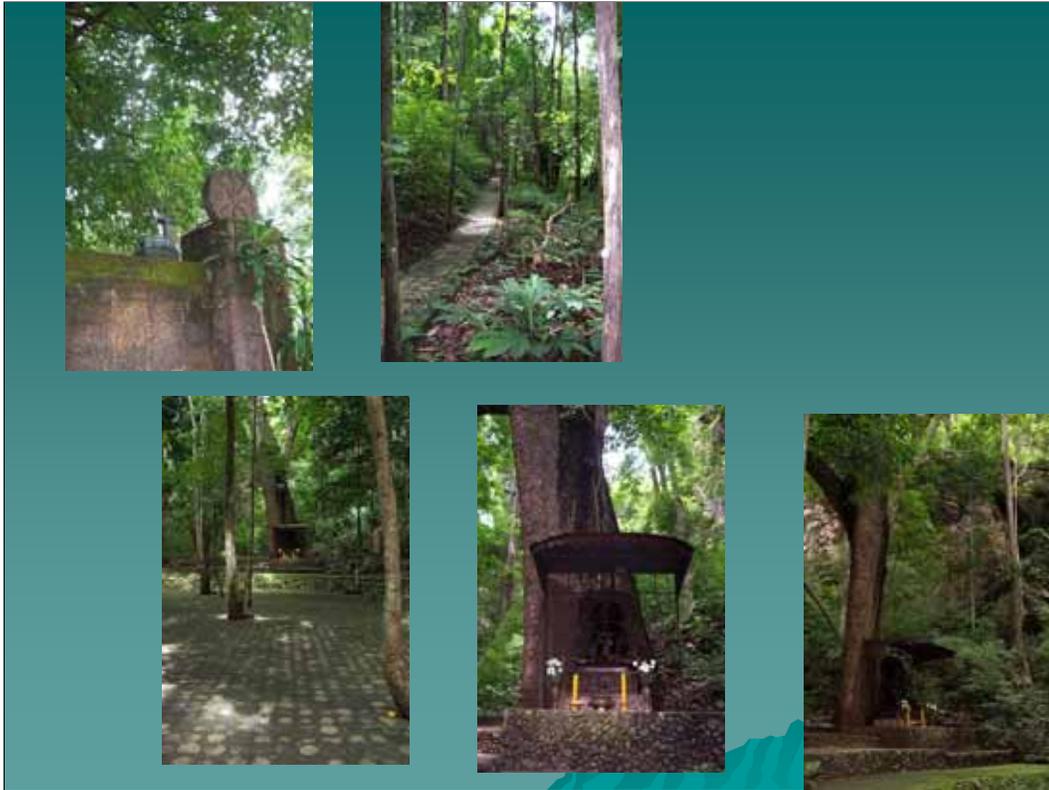
## Doi Tone



Like other holy personages of his time, the Buddha dwelled and meditated in caves as well as in groves of trees and forests among other places. This practice has been followed by many Buddhist monks and nuns over two and a half millennia into the present. Doi Tone Cave Monastery is devoted primarily to meditation. In an informal conversation one monk estimated that around 100,000 bats roost in the cave. Also he asserted that bats take refuge in this cave because they are effectively protected, whereas in other caves in the area they are hunted for wild meat. The image on the left is the approach to the cave entrance. The image on the right is looking outward from the cave entrance.



There are numerous material symbols for Buddhist rituals in the cave, including Buddha images, candles, flowers, and incense receptacles and sticks. Caves are a place in nature especially conducive to quiet seclusion for meditation.



Other areas in the vicinity of this sacred cave are also used for meditation. The photo in the upper right is from an outdoor meditation area with a statue of the Buddha surrounded by trees. It depicts the Wheel of Dharma (the Eightfold Noble Path) or primary teachings of the Buddha. The deer represents the location called Deer Park near present day Varanasi (Benares) in India where the Buddha first taught to his original five disciples. The photo in the lower right is a pathway for walking meditation. The three pictures in the lower half of the frame are different perspectives of a shrine which is the focus of seated meditation.

# Tham Tong



Only the cave entrance depicted here is regularly used for meditation. However, a wooden door opens deeper into the cave which some monks and lay people use for more secluded meditation. During an informal conversation, a lay woman mentioned that she has been coming to the cave off and on to meditate for over a decade. She said that the cave facilitates meditation because it is dark, quiet, and peaceful.



Along the rock cliffs adjacent to the cave there are also religious artifacts and symbols. For example, in the image in the upper left, the colored cloth identifies a sacred tree. Luxuriant vegetation surrounds the cave and valley below. The image in the lower right is a meditation hut (kuti). At least two dozen meditation huts were scattered in the valley overlooking the river. Accordingly, a large area in the neighborhood of the cave is a sacred landscape and in effect its associated biodiversity is afforded protection.

# Khao Cong Pran



Khao Cong Phran is a temple complex and associated cave located near the city of Ratchaburi about a two-hour drive westward from the capital city of Bangkok. A short cement stairway leads up to the cave. Located just inside the entrance are three large statues of the Buddha and more than a hundred smaller statues a little further into the cave. However, the odor of ammonia from the guano of some two million free-tailed bats (*Rhinopoma hardwickei*) is overwhelming. The temple allows local villagers to harvest the guano every two weeks to sell as fertilizer. The income is shared by the villagers and the temple and invested in various projects for education and development. Here in a sense is a mutualistic relationship between bats and villagers thanks to the sacred status of the cave.



From the cave a cement stairway winds up the mountain. At the top of the mountain there is an immense golden stupa (bell shaped repository for the remains or relics of deceased persons). A panoramic view of the valley below rewards the visitor who endures the climb to the top of the mountain.

## Umong Forest Monastery



The ancient Umong Forest Monastery on the outskirts of the city of Chiang Mai contains an artificial cave that houses various shrines with Buddha statues and other religious artifacts and symbols. A fairly extensive area of forest surrounds the monastery and has been protected from urban sprawl by virtue of its association. In other words, the monastery preserves an island of nature in an otherwise urban environment. An inventory of the biodiversity of this forest would be revealing.



The entrance to the artificial cave is seen in the upper left photo, a tunnel into the cave in the middle upper photo, and various Buddha images and other Buddhist artifacts in the remaining photos.

## Wat Maha That - Ayuthaya



Caves are just one context in which Buddhism is integrated with nature. Another is the famous bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) at the ruins of the ancient city of Ayutthaya founded in 1350. The tree embraces the stone face of the Buddha in its root system. These are among many types of situations in which Buddhism and nature are integrated and in which the former helps to protect the latter. Traditionally there was, in effect, a "system" of sacred places throughout Thailand that contributed to the conservation of biodiversity. Although each individual site may be small, collectively through space and cumulatively through time these are significant for biodiversity conservation. This assumes greater significance through the fact that small organisms compose the bulk of biodiversity. Thus, small areas can also be significant. For example, mammals comprise only about 4,000 species out of more than 1,032,000 animal species, and most of the latter are quite small, mostly invertebrates like insects (Edward O. Wilson, 1992, *The Diversity of Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 136). This argument has been elaborated in the following journal article: Leslie E. Sponsel, Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, Nukul Ruttanadukul, and Somporn Juntadach, 1998, "Sacred and/or Secular Approaches to Biodiversity Conservation in Thailand," *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 2:155-167. Unfortunately, traditional customs and institutions that promote biodiversity conservation have been almost totally ignored by biologists, environmentalists, conservationists, and governments. For example, see: Jeffrey A. McNeely and Sunthad Somchevita, eds., 1996, *Biodiversity in Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for the Scientific Community* (Bangkok, Thailand: Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, Office of Environment and Planning). The challenge ahead is to investigate and test scientifically the efficacy of traditional systems of biodiversity conservation in Thailand. The present project seeks to accomplish this through long-term, multidisciplinary, team, field research, including anthropologists, biologists, and other specialists, with a focus on the possible ecological relationships among Buddhist monks, sacred caves, bats, forests, and biodiversity conservation. Among other interesting complications, the project needs to explore different perspectives on caves and bats in the religions of Animism and Hinduism as well as Buddhism, and from the viewpoints of religious specialists like monks as well as lay people. Eventually the project also needs to consider human-bat interactions in secular contexts, such as bats as crop pests and villagers who hunt bats for wild meat. Accordingly, the project pursues, as one method, something ecological anthropologist Andrew Vayda called progressive contextualization, that is investigating a subject more broadly and deeply as research progresses.

## Some Interpretations:

- ◆ Caves, monks, and bats are each in their own way anomalous.
- ◆ These three anomalies are synergetic or mutually reinforcing and amplifying.
- ◆ This magnifies the role of sacred caves in biodiversity conservation.

## Preliminary Findings:

- ◆ Popular religion encompasses far more than Buddhism, including elements of Animism and Hinduism.
- ◆ Many sacred caves are well-developed with human infrastructure and religious material culture.
- ◆ Beyond bats, other fauna may be associated with caves, such as cliff swallows, bees, and snakes.
- ◆ Extensive areas of landscape adjacent to sacred caves may also be protected along with their associated flora and fauna.

Given the antiquity, multitude, and widespread geographical distribution of Buddhist sacred caves in many parts of Asia, the relevance of this project extend far beyond Thailand. Comparative research on these relationships in other Buddhist countries as well as in non-Buddhist countries may yield further insights.

## Recommended Books:

- ◆ *Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads* – Sanitsuda Ekachai
- ◆ *Buddha in the Landscape: A Sacred Expression of Thailand* – Mark Standen
- ◆ *Sacred Rocks and Buddhist Caves in Thailand* – Christopher Munier
- ◆ *Sacred Mountains of Northern Thailand and Their Legends* - Donald Swearer, et al.

These are the most important books related to this subject. Munier's book led me to begin speculating on the possible ecological relevance of sacred caves, although Munier does not pursue this matter. Individual temples sometimes have written down their history in a booklet in Thai and/or English. These can provide additional relevant information. An excellent introduction to Thailand is the book by anthropologist Charles F. Keyes called *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987).

- ◆ *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* – Charles F. Keyes
- ◆ *Natural Symbols* – Mary Douglas
- ◆ *Soul of the Tiger: Searching for Nature's Answers in Exotic Southeast Asia* – Jeffrey A. McNeeley and Paul Spencer Sochaczewski
- ◆ *Thailand's Vanishing Flora and Fauna* – Mark Graham and Philip Round
- ◆ *Bats: A Natural History* – John E. Hill and James D. Smith
- ◆ *Illustrated Landforms of Thailand* – Paitoon Pongsabutra
- ◆ *Karst Terrains: Environmental Changes and Human Impacts* - Paul W. Williams
- ◆ *The Sacred Mountains of Asia* – John Einarsen

Other information and sources can be found on my homepage:  
<http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/Sponsel>.

Included under "Religion" is a file on "Controversies" that rebuts the skeptics who assert that Buddhism has little if any relevance to contemporary environmental concerns.

