
Youth Empowerment for the Protection of Endangered Species in Thailand: A Case Study of Fighting Extinction Project

การมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในการพิทักษ์สิ่งมีชีวิตที่ใกล้สูญพันธุ์ในประเทศไทย: กรณีศึกษา
โครงการการต่อสู้เพื่อหยุดการสูญพันธุ์

Alexander Simon Rendell¹, Kanang Kantamaturapoj²

อเล็กซานเดอร์ ไชมอน เรนเดลล์¹, คานัง คันธมธูรพจน์²

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University^{1,2}

คณะสังคมศาสตร์และมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล^{1,2}

alexrendell22@gmail.com¹, kanang.kan@mahidol.ac.th²

Abstract

The objectives of this study are to explore the youth empowerment for the protection of endangered species in Thailand by studying case of Fighting Extinction Project and to propose directions to enhance youth empowerment in environmental education in Thailand. Qualitative approach was employed. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 key informants from Environmental Education Centre (EEC) Thailand, environmental experts, youth experts, and parents of youths who participated in Fighting Extinction Project. The main finding is that the Fighting Extinction Project was complied with four dimensions of youth empowerment; 1) involvement value and participation, 2) warmth and safe surrounding, 3) sharing power equally between youth and adult, and 4) integrated individual and community potential. However, there were still a gap between theory and practice in relations to participation in reflection of opinion essential for procedures between individual and political process, and participation in political process leading to changes. Two major recommendations were drawn from this study. Firstly, this study suggested the environmental educators to enhance field study in the course syllabus. Secondly, new forms of political activities such as environmental advocacy and environmental harm product boycott should be promoted in environmental education because these political activities empower the youth and lead to powerful social change.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Endangered Species, Fighting Extinction Project, Thailand

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในการพิทักษ์สิ่งมีชีวิตที่ใกล้สูญพันธุ์ในประเทศไทยโดยใช้กรณีศึกษาโครงการการต่อสู้เพื่อหยุดการสูญพันธุ์และเพื่อเสนอข้อเสนอแนะในการเพิ่มการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในการศึกษาด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม ผู้วิจัยใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพโดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกผู้ให้ข้อมูลหลักจำนวน 10 คนจากกลุ่มเจ้าหน้าที่ศูนย์สิ่งแวดล้อมศึกษา ผู้เชี่ยวชาญด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม ผู้เชี่ยวชาญด้านการพัฒนาเยาวชน และผู้ปกครองเยาวชนที่เข้าร่วมโครงการ ข้อค้นพบจากการศึกษาคือการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในโครงการการต่อสู้เพื่อหยุดการสูญพันธุ์เป็นไปตามทฤษฎีการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในประเด็นเรื่อง 1) การเข้าร่วมและมีส่วนร่วมในกระบวนการสิ่งแวดล้อมศึกษา 2) สิ่งแวดล้อมที่อบอุ่นและปลอดภัย 3) การแบ่งสรรปันอำนาจระหว่างเยาวชนและผู้ใหญ่ และ 4) การบูรณาการร่วมกับชุมชน อย่างไรก็ตาม ยังมีช่องว่างระหว่างทฤษฎีและการปฏิบัติในประเด็นเรื่องการสะท้อนความเห็นของเยาวชนในกระบวนการทางการเมือง และเรื่องการมีส่วนร่วมในกระบวนการทางการเมืองที่นำไปสู่ความเปลี่ยนแปลง ผู้วิจัยมีข้อเสนอแนะจากการวิจัย 2 ข้อ ข้อแรกคือ ผู้สอนการศึกษาด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมควรเพิ่มการศึกษามากสูติในหลักสูตรและ ข้อที่สองคือ ผู้สอนการศึกษาด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมควรเพิ่มการมีส่วนร่วมในกระบวนการทางการเมืองผ่านกิจกรรมต่างๆ เช่น การรณรงค์ด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม การคว่ำบาตรสินค้าที่ไม่เป็นมิตรกับสิ่งแวดล้อม เนื่องจากกิจกรรมเหล่านี้จะช่วยเพิ่มศักยภาพของเยาวชนและมีพลังในการนำไปสู่การเปลี่ยนแปลง

คำสำคัญ: การมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชน, สิ่งมีชีวิตที่ใกล้สูญพันธุ์, โครงการการต่อสู้เพื่อหยุดการสูญพันธุ์, ประเทศไทย

Introduction

The number of endangered species worldwide has been increased every year due to the natural causes and the human causes (Kaewmong, Chiakwathanyu, Chantra, Kanghae ;& Kittiwattanawong, 2016). Nearly 7,000 species of animals and plants have been illegally traded (UNDP Thailand, 2020). In 2015, over 23,000 species of plants, fungi and animals were known to face a high probability of extinction (United Nations, 2020). Thailand is endowed with rich biodiversity and natural resources. The biodiversity of Thailand is roughly 10 percent of the global varieties, with over 15,000 plant species, over 930 bird species and over 300 mammals, including over 300 reptile species, over 110 amphibians and over 1,400 fish species (Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, 2014). However, many organisms are under severe threat from human actions. Thailand not yet has no definite numbers on the biodiversity reduction as the world index. However, the rapid economic growth of country has given rise to a series of environmental challenges, including loss of biodiversity over the past four decades (IUCN Thailand Programme, 2016).

To end the loss of biodiversity, aiming at preserving endangered species, the United Nations sets up global sustainable development goals (SDGs). Goal 15 of SDGs focuses on reversing land and natural habitat degradation, and stopping biodiversity loss (United Nations, 2020). One target of this goal is to take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species (UNEP, 2020a). Following SDGs agenda, the UN Environment Assembly resolution 2/16 adopted in 2016 on “Mainstreaming biodiversity for well-being” acknowledges that the integration of policies to promote the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity with various sectors, including environmental education is a vital strategy (UNEP, 2020b).

Many scholars confirmed that environmental education has a significant role in wildlife conservation. Education for sustainable development is an important tool for raising ecological awareness and subsequent environmental protection (Brandli, Salvia, da Rocha, Mazutti, and Reginatto, 2020). Nature education experience is automatically contribute to environmental awareness, commitment, and action (Russell, 1999). Eagan, Keniry, and Schott (2008) stated that the environmental institutions play important role in forming the environmental leaders of future societies. The environmental educators provided training, disseminating of values and knowledge, and converting a theoretical concept of sustainability into real actions (Finlay;& Massey, 2012).

The conventional characters of the environmental education in Thai schools tended to be highly teacher-centered, no contact with real nature (Gallagher, Wheeler, McDonough, & Namfa, 2000). The participated environmental education is still a niche in Thailand. Environmental Education Centre (EEC) Thailand is a social enterprise dedicated to environmental education through structured activities centred both in the classroom, and real nature (EEC Thailand, 2020). The objectives of this study are to explore the empowerment youth for the protection of endangered species in Thailand by studying a case study on fighting extinction and to propose directions to enhance youth empowerment in environmental education in Thailand. Since the conventional study of environmental education in Thailand is teacher-centered and class-room based, the research on youth empowerment from student centered education related to the environment in Thailand is limited. This study is therefore significant to fulfill the research gap.

Fighting Extinction Project

Promoting sustainability by encouraging people's contact with nature is easier than motivating them to behave in an ecologically sustainable way (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011). Thus, the researchers selected the Fighting Extinction Project as a case study because it is an open project of youth participation in the protection of endangered species through the actual practice. The main objective of this project was to prepare children and youth to be environmental conservation leaders as well as building inspiration for biodiversity within the general public. The Fighting Extinction Project included 5 environmental camps to study 5 rare species in 5 provinces of Thailand 1) Kitti hog-nosed bat in Kanchanaburi Province, 2) Dugong, in Trung and Krabi Province, 3) Whale shark in Krabi Province, 4) Leatherback turtle in Phang-Nga Province, and 5) Eld's deer in Chiang Mai Province. The project had been conducted during 2016.

The total number of youths participating in this project is 22. The age of youths were ranging from 7 to 16 years old because it was an appropriate age to gain life experiences. The applicants were required to pass forest survival courses and the PADI diving courses of summer camps organized by EEC Thailand as prerequisite course. Besides, they had to write down the statement of purpose to attend this project. Since EEC Thailand is a for-profit organization, the selected participants must be able to pay for the fees.

All 22 youths spent a year during 2016 collaborating with EEC environmental experts to investigate the conservation status of the five endangered species. The activities in the project included 3 phases. The first phase was conducted in the classroom to study animal behavior, wildlife survey technique, as well as

simple research methodology. The second phase was conducted in the field by real survey and by interviewing local people. After the data was collected in the field, data was analyzed and written in 3 pages of research summary. The last phase was conducted in the conference room where they youth presented the finding of their own studies to the public. The research results and a short documentary were reviewed by experts and presented at EmQuartier Bangkok Theater on 2 April 2017. Various environmental specialists such as representatives from IUCN Thailand and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) as well as general public participated in this conference.

Method

This research used qualitative approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 key informants from EEC Thailand, environmental experts, youth experts, and parents of youths who participated in Fighting Extinction Project.

Interview data were transcribed and encoded to maintain the privacy of the interviewees. Data were analysed by examining the transcribed data and coding. A coding scheme guide was formed as the basis of the analysis to address issues such as: activities and youth participation in the Fighting Extinction Project, how the project collaborate with local communities and political parties to empower youth, what are the changes of youths after participation in the project, what barriers and constraints in empowering youth during the activities. From this a great number of characteristics were formulated. The data was analysed by using six Critical Youth Empowerment dimensions whether the youth had been empowered after participating the Fighting Extinction Project.

This study has been approved by the committee for research ethics (Social Sciences), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand (certificate of approval No. 2019/032.1402). The in-depth interviews, after informed consent, were carried out during May 2019-January 2020.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) Theory (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, and McLoughlin, 2006) as a framework to analyze youth empowerment in Fighting Extinction Project. CYE framework had been designed as the reference for building opportunity to empower youth. CYE includes 6 dimensions. The explanations of each dimension are elaborated as follows;

- *Involvement value and Participation*: as a part of CYE, young people must have opportunity to participate in the activity and should receive essential learning, such as leadership skills and participation skills (Jennings et al., 2006). Moreover, youth also want to participate in activities related to their own lives. Then, valuable participation can create opportunities for youth self-development as well as helps increasing self-esteem and self-awareness.

- *Warmth and safe surrounding*: the environment that makes young people feel self-value, respect and support is the key of CYE. Therefore, young people must feel comfortable and be given the opportunity to share their feelings and take risks in relax and be creative surroundings, enabled and leave a comment , having fun while conducting activities in the warmth and safe environment and

supported by adults. Then youths can step through the comfort zone and experience both success and failure (Jennings et al., 2006).

- *Sharing power equally between youth and adult*: within the CYE framework, adult leaders must support youth without having to dominate the power between children and adults. This is the key for youth empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006). Youths want to be involved in leadership roles in order to develop leadership skills and so youth can do that by adults must share their power with the youth, such as assigning youth to a committee. However, it is not easy for young people to have access to a level of power sharing between youth and adults in which some things require flexibility and convenience.

- *Integrated individual and community potential*: it is imperative for the youth empowerment program to provide opportunities for developing both the individual and community, in which both levels are connected (Jennings et al., 2006). Empowerment at individual level should produce a positive impact on the community level (Jennings et al. 2006). Reference is made to the Psychological power theory of Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, Franzen, and Reischl (2011), which emphasized that community empowerment processes shall include access to resources, tolerance for diversity, and open governance.

- *Participation in reflection of opinion essential for procedures between individual and political process*: reflection of opinion is an important part of youth empowerment. Although it is a dimension of information that excluded in Youth Empowerment Model (Jennings et al., 2006). From CYE data, without recognizing structural problems, both visible and invisible and social internal processes, it is impossible to empower youth. Most curriculums for youth tend to focus on activities and reflections on the lessons learned.

- *Participation in political process leading to changes*: participation in activities includes involvement in political and social processes. This is a significant change to CYE (Jennings et al., 2006). CYE believed that youths should have the ability to manage structure, social value and practice issues. Therefore, they must be able to influence and participate in trying to be a part of social change.

Result and Discussion

The empirical finding of this research was analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework and previous literature. This section discusses youth empowerment of Fighting Extinction Project by using six dimensions of Critical Youth Empowerment Theory; 1) involvement value and participation, 2) warmth and safe surrounding, 3) sharing power equally between youth and adult, 4) integrated individual and community potential, 5) participation in reflection of opinion essential for procedures between individual and political process, and 6) participation in political process leading to changes (Jennings et al., 2006).

1) Involvement value and participation

The literatures suggests that the key to youth empowerment is essential learning. Involvement and participation develops leadership skills and participation skills (Jennings et al., 2006). Youths were willing to participate in the activities related to their own lives, this then creates valuable participation which

ultimately leads opportunities for self-development as well as increase of self-awareness and esteem (Russell, 1999). The education process should allow youth participation, gaining knowledge and development of key skills whether it being team work skills or communication skills with society (Finlay & Massey, 2012).

This study found that the Fighting Extinction Project was designed in the way that youths entirely engaged in the design of education programs (EEC#2). The project focuses on freedom in the thinking and decision-making of the youth” (EEC#3). This allowed the youths to actively participate, giving them the freedom to share opinions, make decisions (EEC#1#2#3#4) and to take responsibilities (youth expert#1) which shows that their participation for Fighting Extinction Project was valuable (Parent#1#3).

“The process we emphasize is earning by doing, which is learning through activities.

The activities are a medium for learning, for the kid to go and see for themselves from what happens. We have the kids go to look in the real habitat.”

EEC#2, 28 October 2019

“The process here is youth engagement. The child themselves are a person that has passion for and participation in. Their opinions were always responded whether it was right or wrong. It may not be what adults think will work, but if they want to try then what I’m saying is that with a process like this, it should be a youth engagement and that they are the persons to take responsibility”

Youth Expert# 1, 30 May 2019

By empowering the students with knowledge, especially with knowledge on endangered species, students develop empathy and sorrow for the near extinct species and empathy is a very important characteristic in building a child (Youth Expert#1). The skills acquired through Fighting Extinction are “life skills” (Parent #2). Another key skill developed in process is teamwork (EEC#1#2), the youth pursued their studies in groups by dividing the duties together, the group will elect a leader within the members of the group, the leader will collect the information, take care of the members, consult with the mentor of their fields, while the members will find information and reflect on their investigation (EEC#3). Working together teaching students how to work collaboratively rather than individually which this in itself is another set of valuable skills for the youth (youth expert#1, parent#3). In the opinions of key-informants (EEC#3, youth expert#1), youth can disseminate gained knowledge from this project to their families and friends. This study supported the previous study (Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013) about the idea of “Peer educators”. Not only are they involved in being educated themselves, but another benefit are they are educating each other young people are taking responsibility for leadership roles in catalyzing the spread of learning and action among other young people.

From the above findings, we concluded that Fighting Extinction Project fully complies with youth empowerment as it truly engages the youth creating valuable involvement and participation impacts.

2) Warmth and safe surrounding

An important component in helping the youth feel empowered is to create opportunities for the young people to feel comfortable in taking risks, while also having fun in a warm and safe environment supported by adults (Jennings et al., 2006). Moreover, the Adolescent Empowerment Cycle reiterates the importance of “self-esteem” and “self-efficacy”. Both sources place emphasis on the emotional needs of the young to obtain a sense of self-empowerment. Creating an atmosphere as such will help the young step out of their comfort zone and feel more accepting of both success and failure (Pearrow, 2008).

According to the interview, the key-informant highlighted how activities currently being used to inspire learning has to be fun, innovative and creative because the youth are drawn into interactive activities and will enhance their motivation to learn (environmental expert#1). The activities that involve the youth in Fighting Extinction Project was fun so that it successfully motivated children to learn (EEC#1#2#3#4, environmental expert#1, youth expert#1, parent#1#3).

“Opportunity, environment, and comfort” is important because without this, the “child won’t feel like they can do it”.

Parent # 1, 30 May 2019

From the above findings, the Fighting Extinction was able to foster an environment in which the young can feel comfortable enough to take risks with the support of many adults and, subsequently, develop a sense of empowerment which consistent the Critical Youth Empowerment Theory. This study aligns with previous study that the interactive activities provide the opportunity for the group members to challenge themselves and each other by thinking through issues in a unique way while also engaging in fun activities (Pearrow, 2008). In additions, this study supports the previous finding (Fulford and Thompson, 2013) that youth desired to feel comfortable and loved by those around them as well as having a sense of belonging would demonstrate more caring, friendly and cooperative behavior than their peers. Since Fighting Extinction Project was organized in the form of environmental camp, this study supported the previous study that camps experiences provided one avenue for youth engagement and also promote a number of positive developmental benefits to youth (Browne, Garst, and Bialeschki, 2011).

3) Sharing power equally between youth and adult

Normally adults hold legitimate power and are ultimately responsible for decisions. Thus, the Critical Youth Empowerment stated that creating equitable power-sharing within the contexts of youth empowerment programs is a challenge (Jennings et al., 2006). In theory, youth-center power is associated with youth empowerment programs.

This study found that the Fighting Extinction project allow sharing power between adults to youth by giving opportunity of independence to the youth to study and exchange opinions with EEC environmental experts (EEC#1#2#3#4). All people involved in Fighting Extinction Project were equal and independent. In the opinions of camp organizer and environmental experts (EEC#3, environmental

expert#1), they mutually agreed that in the absence of independence, youth may have feelings of inferiority and helplessness. The key-informants from EEC, environmental experts, and youth experts had the same opinions that manipulation of adult would destroy youth's independence to think and to innovate new things (EEC#3, Environmental expert#2, youth expert#1).

"We focus on freedom in the thinking and decision-making of the youth. We are all equal in the camp"

EEC# 3, 29 October 2019

The finding of this study aligns with the previous study (Browne et al., 2011) that young people who feel engaged in a given setting feel their voice is valued by peers and adults. This study also confirmed the finding of previous scholar (Fulford and Thompson, 2013) who found that the results of not sharing power equally to them, could result in long term personality effects as well as having effects on the communities or societies surrounding them.

4) Integrated individual and community potential

In order for the youth to feel empowered, it is imperative to provide resources and opportunities that will simultaneously develop both the individual and the community (Jennings et al., 2006). The Psychological Empowerment Theory (Eisman et al., 2016) highlights how empowerment can come from gaining comprehensive knowledge and acceptance over a particular social environment. Therefore, self-empowerment can come from activities that successfully integrate and disseminate positive knowledge to the greater community.

As one of the main goals of Fighting Extinction, all participants in the program were given the opportunity to have close interactions with people in different societies and communities. Key informants from EEC and youth expert group have a mutual opinions that collaborating with local communities to learn about local animal was great strategies to make local people are proud of their indigenous knowledge (EEC#1#2, youth expert#1). Also, the youth can learn about local wisdom directly from resource persons and this knowledge cannot be found from the internet (EEC#2).

"Having opportunity to look at area, touch and talk with communities makes them see the different dimensions of the problem. Then they are able to see clearer what the solution is."

Youth Expert # 1, 30 May 2019

This study aligns with the previous study (Hacking, Scott, and Barratt, 2007) who found that when the children worked with the community, they enjoyed learning the local knowledge. The children showed a rich vein of local environment expertise gained from their everyday experience. Children enjoyed and benefited from exploring the expertise of their peers and local communities.

5) Participation in reflection of opinion essential for procedures between individual and political process

Reflection of opinion is an important part of youth empowerment. From CYE, without recognizing structural problems, both visible and invisible and social internal processes, it is impossible to empower youth. Most curriculums for youth tend to focus on activities and reflections on the lessons learned (Jennings et al., 2006).

This study found that the Fighting Extinction Project provided a platform that allowed students to connect with experts in the environmental field and present their co-findings to a wider national and international audience. Moreover, since the conference audiences included high ranking officers of international organization such as the Green Peace Organization, IUCN, UNEP, and multiple international schools. In the opinions of parents, this event empowered the youth by giving opportunity to exchange their knowledges to the political decision making (parent#1#3). Presenting in front of the public emphasized the importance of their research and, thus, enacted their sense of empowerment (youth expert#1). The key informant from environmental expert group stated that the youth may not have direct power in making a change, but such youth empowerment activities like Fighting Extinction have allowed youth to present their concerns to policy makers could indirectly make change in environmental politics (environmental expert#2).

“Students gained the opportunity to become persons qualified to serve society in the future”

Parent # 3, 4 January 2020

This study aligns with the previous study (Wang, 2006) that youth photo voices were not directly affect the policy makers but it found to be effective for garnering media attention which consequently pressured the policy makers to consider.

6) Participation in political process leading to changes

Participation in political and social processes is a significant change to youth empowerment. The youth would not be fully empowered if they do not have the ability to manage structure, social value and practice issues (Jennings et al., 2006). Therefore, the youth must be able to influence and participate in trying to be a part of social change.

This study found out although the youth could not attend the political process directly, they were able to encourage people in the society to concern about problems of endangered species (environmental expert#2). In additions, the youth would have vision in conservation. When they grow up, they will grow up with a true conservationist heart which also shows that the impacts are not just present impacts, but are impacts to social changes in the long run (EEC#3).

This study confirmed the previous study (Sloam, 2007) that young people normally disconnected themselves from the politics in terms of voting, party membership and conventional political activity;

however the youth in UK have increasingly turned their attention to a wide range of political activities such as new social movement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored youth empowerment in Fighting Extinction Project by using Critical Youth Empowerment framework. The analysis was based on experiences and opinions of 10 key informants from EEC Thailand, environmental experts, youth expert, and parents. The main finding is that the Fighting Extinction Project was mostly complied with four dimensions of youth empowerment; 1) involvement value and participation, 2) warmth and safe surrounding, 3) sharing power equally between youth and adult, and 4) integrated individual and community potential. However, there were still a gap between theory and practice in relations to the fifth and sixth dimension in the CYE model; participation in reflection of opinion essential for procedures between individual and political process, and participation in political process leading to changes. Although there were numerous findings showing that the youths made impacts on leading to change on an individual and community level, very little was raised on youth contributing to change on a political level. Research findings did show that they could influence political change. The research does not have any evidence of directly changing any political processes.

Two major recommendations were drawn from this study. Firstly, contacting with real nature and local people truly enabling youth's learning. Thus, this study suggested the environmental educators to enhance field study in the course syllabus. Secondly, the political activities must be promoted in environmental education. This political process does not limit to only engaging with political party. New forms of political activities such as environmental advocacy and environmental harm product boycott should be promoted in environmental education because these political activities empower the youth and lead to powerful social change.

Disclosure statement

Alexander Simon Rendell is one of the founders of the Environmental Education Center of Thailand (EEC Thailand) as the organization's goal is prevent extinction, which became the research topic and the he had actively participated in this case study.

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