Pollution and Waste in Thailand

Buddhism is often stereotyped as an “environmentally friendly tradition.”¹ As you will see, it is true that some Buddhists see environmentalism as an important part of their tradition. However, the subject is strongly debated, and some Buddhists believe that ideals of conservation are a form of Upādāna, or attachment to worldly things,² which many Buddhists strive to overcome. For example, in Thailand, a nation in southeast Asia which is over 87% Buddhist,³ Buddhist monastics have fought over environmental issues. Santi Asoke, a Thai Buddhist group, built their lives around simplicity and harmony with nature, following a strict vegetarian diet and using only natural materials for all their needs. However, for complex political reasons that were partially due to their environmental beliefs, they were condemned by the Thai sangha—or monastic community. Santi Asoke was expelled from the sangha in the 1980s and some of their members were even imprisoned as illegitimate monks.⁴

The day-to-day behavior of Buddhists also often contradicts the stereotype of a “green” tradition. In fact, environmental degradation, pollution, and shrinking natural resources are major problems in nearly every predominantly Buddhist nation.⁵ In Thailand, pollution and waste have begun to reach a point of crisis. Nearly 2 million tons of toxic waste is illegally dumped in the country annually, and only around 500 of the nation’s 2500 open air landfills are properly managed.⁶ The country is one of the world’s largest consumers of plastic bags. In fact, the average citizen of Thailand uses eight plastic bags per day—to compare, that’s nearly 40 times the usage of the average citizen of France. In the capital, Bangkok, over 11,000 tons of trash are produced every day, only 16% of which is recycled.⁷

² Ibid., 163-4.
³ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).
This huge waste, combined with the low rate of recycling, has clogged pumping machinery in the low-lying city, which has regularly caused major flooding throughout Bangkok’s busy streets, despite the fact that the government pulls around 2,000 tons of waste out of the city’s drainage systems every day. Thailand’s coastal location has made their waste issues internationally significant; it is one of five countries responsible for over half of the plastic pollution in the world’s oceans—China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam make up the other four.

On the other hand, faced with these extreme problems of waste and pollution, a group of Buddhist monastics in the Sisaket province of northeastern Thailand came up with a novel solution. In 1984, the monks began collecting bottles from area citizens to promote recycling and to begin to clean up the local countryside that had fallen victim to Thailand’s waste problems. They collected so many, they decided to use the bottles as construction materials, and began building a temple. By 2009, they had used over 1.5 million bottles in their construction project, largely of green Heineken and brown Chang beer bottles—despite the fact that alcohol consumption is often taboo for Buddhists. However, the monks have noted that the bottles allowed them to not only build sustainably, but were also easy to clean, provided good lighting, and their colors have not faded over time.

Today, the temple, called Wat Pa Maha Kaew but more commonly known as Wat Lan Kua, or “the Temple of a Million Bottles,” is a large complex of around 20 buildings all constructed with glass bottles. The buildings include the main temple, a crematorium, multiple prayer rooms, a hall, water tower, bathrooms, and living quarters. No part of the donated recyclable products goes to waste: the bottle caps are used to create beautiful mosaics which decorate the temple. The monks continue their commitment to recycling and sustainable building, and have indicated that they will continue to expand their complex. Abbot San Kataboonyo said, “The more bottles we get, the more buildings we make.” Thus, while much of Thailand’s Buddhist population continues to struggle with low recycling rates, monastics in Sisaket province have found a unique way to make their contribution to a more sustainable world.

---

8 “Plastic Bags Clogging Bankok’s Sewers...” *The Straits Times*
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
**Additional Resources**

**Primary Sources:**

**Secondary Sources:**
- Photos and story of Wa Pa Maha Chedi temple: [http://reut.rs/2pTNvYy](http://reut.rs/2pTNvYy)
- PBS video on Thai Buddhist monks responding to other environmental problems in Thailand (2010): [http://to.pbs.org/2o6Ogyu](http://to.pbs.org/2o6Ogyu)

**Discussion Questions**

- In what ways can Buddhism said to be internally diverse in light of Buddhist responses to pollution and waste management in Thailand?
- How has the environmental context of the Sisaket province of Thailand affected the practice of Buddhism there? What other ways might climate change impact the practice of Buddhism, in Thailand or elsewhere?
- Alcohol consumption is often discouraged or even not allowed in Buddhist doctrine, particularly for monastic communities. With that in mind, how might different Buddhists react to Thailand’s “Million Bottle Temple,” which is constructed mostly of beer bottles?
- Read “Smokey the Bear Sutra” by the American Buddhist environmentalist Gary Snyder. This poem was written and composed by a Buddhist in the United States—a very different context than Thai Buddhists discussed in this case study. How does this artistic representation of Buddhism treat the intersection between religion and the environmental problems contributing to climate change? How is this American Buddhist representation similar or different from the representations of Buddhism in Thailand above?