CHAPTER 5

PAST CONFLICTS AND RESOURCE USE IN POSTWAR LAO PDR

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1 INTRODUCTION

Forests in mainland Southeast Asia have throughout history been affected by regional conflict, but perhaps more so in the modern era (see Chapters 2 and 9). In the Indochina War, which engulfed this area for several decades during the middle of the twentieth century, forests became variously not only a buffer between hostile groups and a refuge for both civilian populations and combatants, but also a battlefield. The war between Vietnamese and American forces has had both direct and indirect impacts on forests in Lao PDR. Because forests provided for some the cover and resources critical for survival and for others marketable goods, the forest became a target of military attack. Extreme conflict in this region thus resulted in fragmented forests in some areas and impeded forest management in almost all areas, leaving vast tracts of forest as virtually an open access resource. The government’s lack of a coherent forest management plan and the difficulty of exercising control over forest resources resulted in widespread, unregulated timber harvesting. Consequently, tackling forest management problems became a primary concern for the postwar government.

A landlocked country in the heart of Southeast Asia, Laos is home to approximately six million inhabitants (2004 est.). Forests, the country’s major natural resource, play a significant role in both the national and local economies. In the early 1960s forests covered 17 million ha and 64% of the country. A nationwide survey in the early 1990s, however, revealed that forest cover had fallen to 47% or 11.2 million ha (NOFIP, 1992). The alarming loss of rich natural forest is not only of global concern but also has serious implications for the national economy and livelihoods, especially given that so many rural inhabitants are highly dependent on forest resources for daily subsistence needs as well as cash income.

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1 Lao People’s Democratic Republic, hereinafter referred to as Laos.
The period of the Indochina War, indeed, ever since World War II, has been a time of massive population movement throughout mainland Southeast Asia but especially in Laos (Goudineau, 1997). New settlements have been established and the area of agricultural land expanded as people moved from one region to another for most of the 1960s and 1970s (Goudineau, 1997; Whitaker et al., 1971). Northwest Vientiane Province in particular experienced a large influx of population throughout the period of the war as migrants from the north moved into this area. Forests in the Phou Phanang and Phou Phadaeng mountain ranges located west of National Route 13 in Vientiane Province served both as a military base and buffer between warring forces (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The influx of war refugees to the Phou Phanang area continued until 1975. Since the installation of the new government in 1975, increased government concern over forest degradation and environmental problems has provoked restrictions on resource and land use in the Phou Phanang area. These problems were

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2 Considering both regional and civil wars, the period of conflict lasted from 1953 to 1975.