Introduction: Natural Resources and the Shape of Asian History, 1500–2000

Greg Bankoff and Peter Boomgaard

Historians of Southeast Asia have often ignored the question of natural resources, mainly accepting them as a given and passing on to what they identify as the central issue, trade. Anthony Reid’s important two-volume revisionist history of the region even goes so far as to classify the early modern period as “an age of commerce,” emphasizing exchange as the economic activity of significance (Reid 1988–93). Yet exchange is only one aspect of a process that includes both the market destination and the production source as part of a global commodity chain. And while it is certainly not our intention to ignore any of these components, the focus of this volume is on the way the extraction and export of natural resources affects the development potential of the societies and locations wherein they lie (Bunker 1984). Southeast Asia has never been just an entrepôt, simply a “gate to China” through which goods produced elsewhere passed. It has also been an important supplier of raw and semiprocessed materials. It has historically been part of a worldwide, if bounded, network of exchange that predates 1500 and that tied the region closely to India, China, and Japan (Abu-Lughod 1989). That this network evolved over the past five centuries into a global commodity system in no way lessens the significance of the preexisting ties and their effects on the peoples and environments of the region.

The central concern in this volume is the paradoxical question that has intrigued scholars of all persuasions and disciplines for generations: does the presence of natural resources within the territorial confines of a state predispose its inhabitants to material prosperity and well-being or does it lead ineluctably to exploitation and immiseration? Are they a blessing bestowed by Nature or a curse made by Man? Even attempting to answer this riddle requires first trying to determine what exactly a natural resource is and coming to the conclusion that it does not so much exist as it is made to become (Zimmermann 1933). That is, what constitutes a natural resource is determined more by utility than by any innate properties. As such, of course,
it is a culturally defined artifice, dependent on the relation of a people to their environment at any given time. It has even been argued that the very concept of a natural resource with “the feeling tones that it carries” is very much the product of Western industrial capitalism’s “insatiable appetite” to seek out new sources and novel ways of consuming Nature’s prodigious bounty and that it is doubtful whether any other societies ever regarded the natural world in quite the same way (Spoehr 1956, 93). While so categorical a distinction between “industrious” and “industrial” societies seems to create an unjustifiable dichotomy between non-Western and Western ones, clearly the technological innovations and mass consumer demands of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were of an unprecedented order and have much bearing on our current understanding of the term (de Vries 1994).

What Are Natural Resources?
The “wealth of nations” that Adam Smith had in mind in his treatise on economic development (and after which the subtitle of this book is a pastiche) was still primarily agricultural—the productivity of the land. And agricultural products certainly comprise an important aspect of natural resources. While recognizing agriculture’s relative profitability and continuing ability to absorb capital, Smith realized that the availability of abundant mineral deposits and an expanding population would likely herald more intense industrial development and high profit in this sector (Kula 1998, 14–21). Minerals, therefore, also constitute an important aspect of natural resources. Thus agriculture and mining, to which can be added forest products and marine resources, constitute the basis of any discussion of natural resources. A further distinction, however, needs to be drawn between those that are perceived as renewable and those that are not. Renewable resources are those that regenerate themselves such as trees, plants, and animals, while nonrenewable resources are ones that are exhausted through extraction such as oil, coal, or tin. In fact, all resources are renewable in a sense but the issue is over what period of time; geophysical processes will recreate deposits of oil, coal and tin but only in the course of millennia. The whole concept of renewability is intimately linked to a human dimension of time as measured in terms of seasons or decades. Correspondingly, all natural resources can be utilized in a nonrenewable manner; that is, utilized over too short a period of time to allow regeneration naturally and so become exhausted in this manner (Davenport and Scapple 2005, 277–79). This notion of temporality is not only central to how natural resources are categorized but also lies at the heart of what constitutes a resource. Without demand, a plant or mineral is just that and nothing more. Only when people find a use for a material does it become a resource. Demand and culture, however, vary over time: today’s resource can be yesterday’s waste product and vice versa. The Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) officials’ hunger for ship-timbers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led them to differentiate only teak or jati from other tropical hardwoods on Java and