Interview: Currents of Despair: The political ecology of migration and trafficking in the Mekong region

David A. Feingold and Denise Brennan

Abstract

One of the special issue guest editors, Denise Brennan, conducted this interview with David Feingold to learn more about his experience of witnessing the impact of climate change and ecological changes on people's lives and livelihoods in Southeast Asia.

Suggested citation: D A Feingold and D Brennan, 'Interview: Currents of Despair: The political ecology of migration and trafficking in the Mekong region', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 25, 2025, pp. 175-183, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.2012252513

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One of the special issue guest editors, Denise Brennan, conducted this interview with David on 15 May 2025 to learn more about his experience of witnessing the impact of climate change on people's lives and livelihoods in Southeast Asia. The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Denise Brennan: David, can you start by giving us some background about your work over the years and how people have been referencing the climate, even if with a different vocabulary, and how they have been articulating their life around nature, the environment, and climate?

David Feingold: I first went to Asia in 1961, as an undergraduate at Dartmouth, to work at the Japanese Atomic Energy Research Institute. Many large companies were building the first atomic energy power plant for the Japanese Government in a small village. I was looking at the social impact of all these engineers and staff from all over the world on this community. Then I went to Vietnam for my senior thesis research and, after that, to Cambodia and Thailand.

When I went back to the United States, I joined the Southeast Asian Studies programme at Yale and studied Thai and anthropology. I had an inspiring teacher, the great French scholar Paul Mus, who was a specialist on, among other things, the Khmer Empire. One of his key points was that the Khmer empire, the Angkor Empire, was a hydraulic empire—not simply economically and politically, but symbolically; Cambodian origin traditions link political legitimacy to water. The origin myth of Cambodia involves an exiled prince or a Brahmin from India landing (sometimes shipwrecked) in Cambodia.[1] He falls in love with a Naga Princess. Nagas are represented as seven-headed cobras, but can take human form. They are water spirits. To marry the Naga princess, her lover had to travel to her father's palace under the sea, clinging to her shawl. The Naga King blessed the marriage and sucked up a vast amount of water, revealing dry land that was given to the couple as a dowry. This was the legitimating myth for both the kings of the Khmer Empire and of Funan before that, linking the rulers to the land and water.

The economic strength of the Khmer Empire derived not simply because of the control of irrigation and surplus rice production, but because of the control of easily accessible fish protein as well. The Tonle Sap, which is where I've been doing work most recently, is probably the most productive freshwater ecosystem in the world, and the third or fourth largest source of freshwater protein in the world. In an average yearly catch in Cambodia, there are about a hundred species of fish. There are 200 species of fish identified in the Tonle Sap lake and 500 in the overall freshwater systems in Cambodia. There are ancient Khmer inscriptions that talk about 'harvesting fish'. The Tonle Sap expands five to six times its area during the rainy season, and contracts during the dry season. The fish would be trapped in small remaining pools of water and women would collect them in baskets. Since ancient times, people have been salting and fermenting fish—it's

[1] The version in which it is a Brahmin who marries a Naga Princess ignores clearly written taboos on Brahmins travelling over the ocean, though there is debate about how strictly these rules were enforced.

called *prahok*—which can be preserved over long periods. It's a vital source of protein, calcium, and other nutrients. Since ancient times, the preservation method meant that fish product could be traded over long distances .

After graduating from Yale, I went to Thailand where I began my research with Akha people, a highland group in the mountains of Thailand, Burma/Myanmar, Laos, and Yunnan province in China. Later, I conducted my dissertation research, spending two years in an Akha village on the Thai-Burma border. At that time, their main livelihood was growing opium and rice. Opium is a very delicate crop: not enough rain early on or too much wind and rain at harvest time, and the whole crop can be wiped out. There could be 300 per cent variation in yields from a field from year to year. Yet, conditional on weather, farmers could predict yields quite accurately through the growth cycle. Moreover, you could often use the same field for twenty years, whereas upland rice fields you could use, at most, for three years.

But you have much higher labour input into growing opium than into growing upland rice. Most of the labour in opium is weeding and harvesting. And when the petals fall off the flower, there is the capsule on a stem. When the top starts turning brown, you go through, you have to walk backwards. Then you use either a double-bladed knife or triple-bladed knife, depending on the group, and you slit the poppy. You have to slit it carefully, because if you don't slit it deep enough, you don't get the maximum resin; if you slit it too much, it goes into the capsule. Then, you go back the next day and you scrape off the resin that's come out—raw opium. And that's a lot of work; about 80 per cent more labour than the input into upland rice. Most of the labour input into upland rice growing was clearing the fields—cutting down trees and burning them—and planting and harvesting the rice. What is interesting is that the work of a woman or a child in opium production was equal to men's labour. In rice production it wasn't, because most of the labour input was in field clearing, which was heavy labour in which men had a comparative advantage. Women and children worked in rice production too. But in terms of labour productivity, their labour wasn't equal to men's labour, whereas in opium production it was.

Thailand ultimately became the world's most successful case of reducing opium production. An unintended consequence, however, was the devaluation of women's labor relative to men's within highland economies. And that pushed women out of the villages, because by going out and migrating, they could earn significantly more to help their families than their labour at home was worth.

I started to work on trafficking in 1996-97. Thirty years earlier, there were no minority women in the sex industry in Thailand. But now you had policies that effectively devalued women's labour and pushed them into the most lucrative source of income that they could go into, which sometimes was highly exploitative.

This is one instance of how political economy and ecology intersect to shape livelihood strategies and mobility.[2]

Denise: And why did opium production drop?

David: It's a complex discussion. Starting in the 1970s, Thailand came under very heavy pressure from the US and the international community to supress opium production. This left highland communities vulnerable to attack and often extortion by law enforcement. I've described this vulnerability as 'defined cultural criminality'—a situation in which a legal or long-tolerated widespread cultural practice (in this case, opium cultivation) is redefined by the State in such a way it creates a large class of 'criminals'.

Even before that, however, other crops became easier to market, because of the expansion of strategic roads into the highlands. A great advantage of opium was high value per amount of weight, and, therefore, lower transport costs. With improved roads and access to vehicles, you had less need for opium now that you could get more varied, less labour-intensive crops to market.

There are other things that happened too. Burma had been—and still is—the main producer of opium in the region. Continuous warfare has plagued Shan and Kachin States since 1962, and political instability favours the production of drug crops over food crops. Suppose you have to run away because the Burmese army is coming to burn down your village. You can carry off a year's production of opium in your wood basket. You can't do that with rice. And there's also the currency function, because in highland economies, traditionally, there was a liquidity problem. Opium was high value, yet infinitely divisible.[3]

Denise: I'm really interested in this political-ecological economy. So what years are you talking about when women started to outmigrate?

David: It started in the 1980s in different areas and by the 1990s, it had really taken off.

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[2] For a more extended discussion of these issues, see: D A Feingold, 'The Hell of Good Intentions: Some preliminary thoughts on opium in the political ecology of the trade in girls and women', in G Evans *et al.* (eds.), *South China and Mainland S.E. Asia: Cross border relations in the post-socialist age*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2000, pp. 183-203, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-11123-4_10.

[3] D A Feingold, 'Money, Myths, and Models: Opium, economics, and history on the Thai--Burma frontier', in V Navaratnam *et al.* (eds.), *Opiate Drug Consumption Patterns in Asia*, The National Drug Centre, Penang, 1981, pp. 146-158.

Denise: That's when I started reading about Thai women in sex work and either I didn't notice or the early literature didn't make ethnic distinctions, because I don't recall seeing anything about this.

David: Well, it wasn't until my programme at UNESCO that we noticed it because most people didn't know that and they didn't go in those areas where most ethnic minority women ended up. So in the highlands, you had a movement from smoking opium on to heroin, which is a smuggler's drug, not a consumer's drug, because it takes approximately 10 kilos of opium to make one kilo of heroin, so it's much more compact for smugglers. As the government suppressed opium cultivation, people moved on to heroin. And to biologically more efficient modes of administration—from smoking heroin to shooting it. And this coincided with the arrival of HIV/AIDS. In Thailand, the epidemic began not as a sexually transmitted disease but as an injecting drug users' epidemic. Over time, it spread from injection networks into broader sexual transmission.

The girls and women who had outmigrated and worked in the sex industry, as well as their customers, generally had little accurate knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Moreover, since at the time, about 50 per cent of highland people did not have Thai citizenship and were not allowed to work outside of their district, most were in a position of significant structural vulnerability. This meant that they tended to end up in the lowest, most exploited end of the sex industry with the least ability to exercise choice of customers. If a woman tested positive for HIV, she was sent back home. This was true of lowland Thai women as well. This contributed to the early explosive expansion of the HIV epidemic in the north of Thailand. At the time, there was not yet any effective treatment. The point here is that there was an intimate and complex relationship between the political ecology of opium and the migration and vulnerability patterns of minority girls and women, and patterns of the spread of HIV in Thailand.[4]

But to go back to opium production, the people that I was working with were highly attuned to changes in their environment. I used to go out with people when they were picking the fields. What you wanted for an opium field was alkaline soils, so you looked for limestone outcroppings. In addition, people would sometimes taste the soil. I was out with one of my neighbours one day, and he was picking out a field, and I was looking at it and I said, 'it doesn't look that good to me'. And he said 'I know if I went further away, I'd get a better field. But it would take me half a day to go there and back because we have young children and they walk slowly and play'. So he chose a field that was less fertile, but closer. Akha would also always grow corn in a field before they grew opium, because it would increase the resin output of the opium poppy. In other words, people who live

[4] D Feingold (dir.), *Trading Women*, Ophidian Films Ltd., Philadelphia, 77 min, 2003.

in forests must be attuned to the details of their environment. Because if they weren't, they would starve.

None of this was discussed in terms of climate. I also did a two-year project in Peru in 1990-1991. In Peru, there are about 4,600 different kinds of potatoes. My favourite was what they call the 'make your mother-in-law cry' potato, because it's very knobbly and hard to peel. The belief is that if a girl can peel it successfully, her future mother-in-law will have to let her son marry her, and will cry. Different potatoes are adapted to different temperature, or altitudes. People noticed that potatoes that used to grow at lower heights now only grow at higher heights because of climatic warming. So local people were very much aware of this as climate change early on. Not necessarily the causes, but they had a very concrete measure, which happened slowly, over the years.

Denise: There have long been conversations about women who migrate for sex work because there are no income earning opportunities at home. But was it ever related to the climate and changing weather patterns?

David: In practice, most people don't experience climate change as an abstract global process. They experience ecological change—alterations in their local environment—which can have a variety of complex and reinforcing causes. For example, the fishermen that I've been working with in Cambodia have been experiencing diminished fish yields. And they've been forced, because of food insecurity, to use nets where the holes are too small. They know a lot about fishing and they know this isn't a good thing—because if they catch the juvenile fish, they'll never grow up to be big fish—but the fishers have to eat. Moreover, nets with too small holes are illegal and make the fishing families vulnerable to prosecution, confiscation of their equipment, or shakedowns by the police. They're experiencing differences in the lake level. It's a very complex ecology. You have what's called the flooded forests. In order for the flooded forests to flourish, they need a certain amount of time when they're out of water and then a certain amount of time when they're in the water. Because, when the fish spawn, the small fish swim into the flooded forest; there's lots of bugs for them to eat and the water level has to be too low for the big fish to come in and eat them. The problem is that now in Tonle Sap, you have too much water in the dry season and not enough water in the wet season.

I was part of this big Luce Foundation–funded project looking at the impact of the Mekong dams on communities in the lower Mekong. The Mekong Culture WELL project is centred at Michigan State University and involves Chiang Mai University and Mae Fah Luang University in Thailand, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Massey University of New Zealand, and UNESCO. It's made up of fish specialists, remote sensing people, anthropologists, and geographers. There have been many studies showing that the Tonle Sap system is, if not crashing, then going down dramatically, and that this is having and going to have huge impacts—not

only on Cambodia, but on Vietnam as well. It is not simply that large quantities of fish and crustaceans from the Tonle Sap are shipped to Vietnam. If you go all the way down to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, one of the most fertile rice growing areas in the world, that continued fertility and productivity is dependent on silt and nutrients that flow down from the Tonle Sap system. The Mekong Delta is what's called a destructive delta, which means that each year, even before the current situation, there was not enough silt deposited to make up for what was being washed away by the sea.

Therefore, you're getting increased salinisation and eventually, rice growers won't be able to grow rice, so many of them will have to go and do something else. This will result in decreased food production and likely increased outmigration. Our question about what was happening in Tonle Sap was: is it the result of climate change or is it the result of the dams? There's a brilliant paper from the project, which disambiguates the impact of dams and climate.[5] And it's not that the climate isn't important in the long term, but most of the change is due to the impact of dams. So the fishing families are experiencing ecological change; they are keenly aware of changes in their environment, but not necessarily of the causes

Now, if you go back twenty years or so, fishing people generally didn't migrate. The most they would do is go to town during the dry season and work in a factory or a market and then go back home. And I'm sure you've read about the exploitation of people working on Thai fishing boats. There are many Cambodians on the boats. But none of them were fishermen in Cambodia. So, the fishing people, because there are whole families that fish—men will pull up the nets and so on and women steer the boat and also sell the fish in the markets—now must change their strategies and think about migration. And the poorest people cannot afford to migrate through the legitimate labour migration channels, and they don't have support networks in Thailand.

Denise: Something that is just driving me crazy is this interest by international organisations and governments on the alleged relationship between climate-related disasters and trafficking.

David: Yes, climate change is like the 'flavour of the month' in anti-trafficking. I mean, everything takes place in the climate, but the connection is often tenuous. You remember the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004? I was in the US and I got a call from ABC News, wanting to know about trafficking. And I told them that no one can move anywhere; if they find any traffickers, they should hire them to deliver antibiotics.

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5 H Dang *et al.*, 'Hydrologic balance and inundation dynamics of Southeast Asia's largest inland lake altered by hydropower dams in the Mekong River basin', *Science of the Total Environment*, vol. 831, 2022, pp. 1-12, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.154833.

You had ridiculous things. There was this story on television all over the world, of a little blonde girl in Thailand, who supposedly had been trafficked. What had happened was that her uncle had come and taken her out of the hospital when she was better. It was all done above board and everybody knew about it. So there was no evidence of any trafficking. We did a study and we took every single case that anyone had any evidence of. We found two cases of trafficking, which were in Sri Lanka, and were of two boys trafficked for child soldiers, because it was during the civil war. It had nothing to do with the tsunami. But proving that something doesn't happen is very difficult. Of course, some people later said 'oh, there was no trafficking because we raised awareness'…

The same thing came up with Nargis, the typhoon in southern Burma in 2008. There was this organisation that was collecting money to take kids who were potential trafficking victims and send them to a shelter in northern Thailand. So, the UN couldn't get boats in, but people were getting trafficked? Again, I said, let's hire these traffickers to deliver food, medicines, antibiotics…

Denise: So David, what have we not talked about? What else do you want to add?

David: Well, I am not saying that natural disasters cannot result in situations where people's livelihoods are destroyed. And then they must migrate and can end up getting trafficked. For example, a few years ago there was a dam that collapsed in Laos. The people in that area, in Attapeu, still don't have proper houses. So the chances that some of them might migrate under whatever conditions are available is not unrealistic. But the idea that a natural disaster occurs and immediately there are these traffickers twirling their moustaches and taking people away is just not plausible.

What I find more interesting is to look at the extent to which ecological change influences people's migration strategies. People migrate for all sorts of reasons. But climate change can change things suddenly—what crops you can grow, what inputs you need for those crops… Or it can change things gradually, like you catch less and less fish.

In Cambodia, people in the area around the lake are the highest consumers of fish per capita in the world—by some estimates, between 67 and 76 kg per person. If the availability of fish drops, it means you have less to eat, people have less protein. It can influence the actions of people who are quite a distance away and not necessarily directly observing the causes. However, is also likely to influence their migration strategies.

Many of the fishing people on the Tonle Sap live on floating houses on the lake. In the dry season, they pull them up on land or tie them to trees. There was a government scheme, which was to have these floating houses permanently on the land. The government was trying to diminish the population on the lake to

lessen the stress on the fish populations, so it offered some people land. If they stayed on the land, they would get some money and make their houses permanent. They gave them the land. These people are very good fishers, but they're not very good farmers. And they have fallen into debt because, also, when the government gave them the land, they didn't give them the title to the land, but they were still able to take out loans on land that they didn't have title to. In some places, the government created reserves that included this land, despite no obvious special environmental value (like bird nesting areas, etc.). So the people were left with land they couldn't use and in debt. And from where their land was located, to get to their boats and back was five hours.

I mean, you're dealing with things that impact an ecology, but basically, it's the political ecology that you're dealing with.

Denise: David, this has been amazing, thank you so much for sharing. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

David: The last thing I wanted to say was that water has great cultural significance in Cambodia. For example, I spoke of the founding myth of the country, which can be traced to even before Angkor. The whole political and cultural legitimacy of Cambodia is connected to water and the Nagas, the water spirits. And belief in Nagas and the spiritual qualities of water are not limited to Cambodia. There are believed to be seven Nagas in the Mekong river. And there's a big concern that the dams are now disturbing the homes of the Nagas. So there's this whole ritual and spiritual significance attached to water and different bodies of water. And as the climate changes, you're dealing with more than physicality; you're also dealing with the ways in which people relate to their environment and order their lives.

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