



Southeast Asian Ecotheology Model: An Analysis of the Role of the Thai Sangha in Mitigating the Ecological Crisis

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Abstract

Ideally, the ecological crisis in Southeast Asia should be addressed through strong technocratic policies and scientific approaches. However, the reality shows that environmental mitigation efforts often remain ineffective due to the absence of ethical foundations and the erosion of spiritual awareness in the human–nature relationship. In this context, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Thailand offers an alternative approach through ecotheology, combining spirituality, ecological awareness, and social activism. This research aims to analyze the role of the Thai Sangha as a regional ecotheological model and evaluate its relevance for developing a Southeast Asian ecotheological framework. The study employs a qualitative library research method using content analysis and comparative review of academic literature, religious documents, and ecological monastic practices such as tree ordination, green monasteries, and community forest management. The findings reveal that the Thai Sangha has successfully transformed Buddhist spirituality into tangible ecological action, providing an effective response to environmental crises. Thailand’s ecotheology shows significant potential to be adopted regionally when institutionalized and implemented through cross-sectoral collaboration involving the state, local communities, and environmental NGOs. This study proposes a foundational academic framework for developing a Southeast Asian Ecotheology Model, based on local spirituality, ecological consciousness, and community participation as transformative strategies for mitigating ecological crises in the future.

Keywords: Ecotheology, Thai Sangha, Theravāda, Tree Ordination, Southeast Asia.

Abstrak

Secara ideal, krisis ekologis di Asia Tenggara seharusnya ditangani melalui pendekatan ilmiah dan kebijakan teknokratis yang kuat. Namun, realitas di lapangan menunjukkan bahwa upaya mitigasi lingkungan sering tidak efektif karena minimnya fondasi etika dan hilangnya spiritualitas ekologis dalam relasi manusia-alam. Dalam konteks ini, tradisi Buddhis Theravāda di Thailand justru menawarkan pendekatan alternatif melalui ekoteologi yang memadukan spiritualitas, kesadaran ekologis, dan aktivisme sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis peran Sangha Thailand sebagai model ekoteologi regional dan mengevaluasi relevansinya bagi penyusunan kerangka ekologi Asia Tenggara. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah penelitian kualitatif melalui studi pustaka dengan analisis isi dan studi komparatif terhadap literatur akademik, dokumen keagamaan, serta data tentang praktik ekologis monastik seperti *tree ordination*, vihara hijau, dan pengelolaan hutan komunitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Sangha Thailand telah berhasil mengubah spiritualitas Buddhis menjadi aksi ekologis nyata yang mampu menjawab tantangan krisis lingkungan. Ekoteologi Thailand terbukti memiliki potensi regional apabila diformulasikan secara kelembagaan dan diterapkan melalui sinergi lintas sektor seperti pemerintah, komunitas lokal, dan LSM lingkungan. Penelitian ini menawarkan fondasi akademik awal untuk membentuk Model Ekoteologi Asia Tenggara yang berbasis spiritualitas lokal, kesadaran ekologis, serta partisipasi komunitas sebagai strategi transformatif dalam mitigasi krisis ekologis masa depan.

Kata Kunci : Ekoteologi, Sangha Thailand, Theravāda, Tree Ordination, Asia Tenggara.

INTRODUCTION

The global ecological crisis continues to intensify and has become one of the most significant challenges confronting twenty-first-century human civilization. Climate change, deforestation, water pollution, food insecurity, and biodiversity loss indicate that anthropocentric paradigms and exploitative economic systems have reached a critical point. Southeast Asia, despite being widely recognized for its rich biodiversity and abundant ecosystems, has paradoxically become one of the regions most vulnerable to environmental degradation due to industrial expansion, urbanization, and weak environmental regulations (Nicolas Febriso Naibaho & Martina Rosmaulina Marbun, 2025). Amid the failure of technocratic approaches that merely emphasize material solutions, there is a growing need for alternative models integrating ecological concerns with cultural wisdom and local spirituality. Consequently, religion is increasingly perceived not merely as a private domain, but as a moral resource capable of transforming how humans understand and treat nature.

Within this context, ecotheology has emerged as a new approach that positions nature as part of humanity's ethical responsibility. Ecotheology does not merely reinterpret religious texts; rather, it reconstructs religion as a social actor in mitigating ecological crises. Southeast Asia possesses strong historical and spiritual capital for developing a regional ecotheological framework, considering its diverse religious traditions and enduring village-based communal structures (Kapoh et al., 2024). Several studies further argue that the ecological crisis fundamentally stems from the spiritual crisis of modern humanity; therefore, ecological solutions require moral transformation that cannot be separated from religion. This raises an important question: does religion remain relevant as an ecological force in the modern era?

Thailand subsequently emerges as a significant case study in the development of a religion-based ecotheological model in Southeast Asia. The dominant Theravāda Buddhist tradition has generated various ecological movements led by the Sangha, including tree ordination rituals, the establishment of green monasteries, community forest conservation initiatives, and ecological education programs for rural communities. This monastic-based ecological activism demonstrates that religion is not confined to ritual practices alone, but also manifests in concrete and transformative social action. The Thai Sangha has successfully constructed social legitimacy through religious symbolism, community-based mechanisms, and direct involvement in environmental protection. This has positioned Thailand as one of the pioneers in integrating spirituality and ecological conservation in Southeast Asia.

However, despite its significant potential, the Thai ecotheological model has not yet been fully integrated into national or regional ecological policies. Sangha movements often remain sporadic, dependent upon certain charismatic figures, and lacking firmly established institutional mechanisms. Ideally, Thailand's ecotheological movement could serve as an inspiration for constructing a Southeast Asian ecotheological framework; nevertheless, the reality reveals institutional, political, and cultural challenges that require critical examination. This situation raises fundamental questions: to what extent is the Thai Sangha's ecotheological model relevant for adaptation in neighboring countries? Can spirituality function as a collective force in confronting regional ecological crises? And is ecotheology capable of becoming a new paradigm for formulating sustainable environmental policies?

These questions constitute the primary foundation of this study. The main objective of this research is to analyze the ecotheological model of the Thai Sangha in responding to ecological crises, while also evaluating its relevance as a reference for other Southeast Asian countries. This study further seeks to identify the theological foundations, ecological practices, and social structures that enable religion to play a strategic role in mitigating environmental crises. In addition, the research examines the potential for developing a regional ecotheological framework grounded in spiritual wisdom and local ethics, both in

Buddhist-majority countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, and in countries with different religious traditions such as Indonesia.

The contribution of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this research enriches Southeast Asian ecotheological studies by providing a systematic analysis of the role of the Thai Sangha as an ecological actor. Practically, this study opens pathways for developing spirituality-based ecological policies and offers a conceptual foundation for establishing transnational ecotheological networks across Southeast Asia. Therefore, this research does not merely discuss a local model, but also proposes an initial foundation for constructing a more structured, integrative, and visionary regional ecotheological paradigm in responding to contemporary ecological crises.

Studies concerning Southeast Asian ecotheological models and the involvement of Thai Buddhism in mitigating ecological crises are not entirely new. Numerous scholars have examined the relationship between Buddhist teachings, environmental movements, and ecological sustainability practices through various approaches, ranging from philosophy of religion and social movements to ecological spirituality. Nevertheless, studies specifically positioning the Thai Sangha as an institutional actor in constructing a Southeast Asian ecotheological model remain relatively limited.

Jungho Suh, in his article “Buddhism-Based Intentional Communities Becoming Ecovillages: A Case of Sisa Asoke in Thailand,” discusses the transformation of the Sisa Asoke Buddhist community into an ecovillage grounded in Buddhist values. The study demonstrates that principles of simple living, sustainable consumption, and organic farming constitute forms of ecological praxis within Thai Buddhist communities (Suh, 2024). The similarity between Suh’s study and the present research lies in the focus on the relationship between Buddhism and ecological consciousness. However, Suh primarily emphasizes local community transformation, whereas this study highlights the role of the Thai Sangha within the broader and more institutional framework of Southeast Asian ecotheology.

María Teresa Uribe Jaramillo, through her work “Budismo ambiental, budismo comprometido: una mirada al movimiento budista ambiental tailandés,” examines environmental Buddhism in Thailand through the perspective of engaged Buddhism. The study finds that the Buddhist values of compassion and interdependence are reconstructed into ecological ethics and environmental social movements (Jaramillo, 2015). The similarity with the present research lies in the discussion of Thai Buddhism’s involvement in ecological issues. The difference, however, is that Jaramillo focuses more on environmental Buddhist social movements, while this study emphasizes the construction of an ecotheological model and the authority of the Sangha in mitigating ecological crises.

Yaoping Liu, Pharatt Run, and Metteyya Beliatte, in their article “Eco-Sattva: A Buddhist Response to the Plastic Waste Crisis in Thailand,” analyze the response of Thai Buddhism to the plastic waste crisis through the concept of Eco-

Sattva. Their study demonstrates that Buddhist spirituality can shape ecological behavior through moral awareness and environmental responsibility (Liu et al., 2025). The similarity with the present study lies in the analysis of Buddhist values as a basis for ecological mitigation. However, Liu and colleagues focus specifically on plastic waste issues and individual behavior, whereas this research discusses ecotheological models on a broader socio-religious scale within Southeast Asia.

Katie Javanaud, in “The World on Fire: A Buddhist Response to the Environmental Crisis,” discusses the philosophical response of Buddhism to the global environmental crisis. The study argues that the roots of ecological crises are associated with greed and consumerist lifestyles that contradict Buddhist teachings (Javanaud, 2020). The similarity with the present research lies in the use of Buddhist perspectives as the foundation of environmental ethics. Nevertheless, Javanaud primarily emphasizes universal philosophical dimensions, whereas this study focuses on the practical and institutional role of the Thai Sangha within the Southeast Asian context.

Based on previous studies, it can be observed that research on Buddhism and environmental issues in Thailand has been extensively conducted, particularly in relation to social movements, ecological spirituality, and environmental ethics. However, previous studies tend to remain partial and have not integrated theological, institutional, and social dimensions within a single Southeast Asian ecotheological framework. Furthermore, the position of the Thai Sangha as a religious authority in constructing public ecological awareness has not become the central focus of earlier scholarship. Therefore, this study offers novelty through an integrative analysis of the Southeast Asian ecotheological model by positioning the Thai Sangha as a strategic actor in mitigating ecological crises based on Buddhist values.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs a qualitative research design using a library research method, strengthened by secondary data derived from field reports concerning the ecotheological practices of the Thai Sangha (Abdurrahman, 2024). This approach is utilized because the focus of the study is not on direct empirical data collection through field observation, but rather on an in-depth analysis of ideas, theological concepts, and ecological practices that have been documented in various academic works, environmental organization reports, and religious documents. The study aims to understand the construction of a Southeast Asian ecotheological model through a systematic exploration of ecotheological theories, ecological monastic practices, and their relevance to neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia.

The methodology applied in this study includes content analysis and a comparative-critical examination of various literary sources. The primary sources consist of academic articles and reports concerning the Thai Sangha, tree ordination practices, green monasteries, and ecological perspectives within the

Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Secondary sources include journals on ecotheology, environmental philosophy, religious documents, interfaith studies, and research on community-based conservation in Southeast Asia. Data analysis was conducted through processes of data reduction, thematic categorization, theological interpretation, and inductive conclusion drawing. The validity and reliability of the data were ensured through triangulation of literature sources, repeated readings, and verification of argumentative consistency using a textual hermeneutic approach. The preparation of the research manuscript was systematically organized through stages of problem identification, literature review, theoretical framework development, thematic analysis, and the formulation of a regional ecotheological model as the final outcome of the study.

DISCUSSION

The Conceptual Foundation of Ecotheology and Thailand's Position within Southeast Asian Discourse

Ecotheology is an interdisciplinary field of study that integrates theology with environmental studies (Wasil & Muizudin, 2023). In its simplest sense, ecotheology seeks to understand the relationship between humans, nature, and God by examining how spiritual beliefs influence the ecological behavior of religious communities. The escalation of global environmental issues such as climate change, water crises, biodiversity loss, and deforestation has encouraged many religious scholars to reconsider humanity's attitude toward nature. In this context, ecotheology emerges as a critical approach that emphasizes not only doctrinal religious aspects, but also the ethical implications of human treatment of the environment. Consequently, ecotheology serves as a bridge between spirituality and environmental advocacy while simultaneously creating a new space for dialogue between religion and modern science.

In the global context, ecotheology has developed rapidly since the 1970s, particularly in Western countries influenced by radical ecological movements, green politics, and critiques of anthropocentrism within Abrahamic religions. However, this discourse later expanded into Asian regions, including Southeast Asia, where it encountered challenges distinct from those of Europe and America. In Southeast Asia, ecotheology is not confined to Abrahamic traditions such as Islam and Christianity, but also encompasses local belief systems, indigenous customs, and Buddhist teachings. This diversity renders Southeast Asian ecotheology far more complex because it interacts with cultural plurality and unique socio-economic conditions. Moreover, the urgency of ecotheological discourse in the region has intensified because Southeast Asia is among the areas experiencing the highest levels of natural resource exploitation in the world.

Ecotheology in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the history of economic development that has frequently conflicted with environmental sustainability. Modernization and industrialization have generated economic growth, yet they have also left behind severe ecological degradation, including

deforestation, river pollution, and the proliferation of plastic waste. As a result, a growing awareness has emerged that religion plays a crucial role in shaping environmental ethics within society (Madina, 2021). Researchers increasingly argue that religious doctrines, when critically interpreted, can become a strong foundation for cultivating ecological consciousness. Therefore, ecotheology in Southeast Asia is now understood not merely as an academic discourse, but also as a cultural and spiritual strategy for overcoming ecological crises through the transformation of human worldviews.

The development of ecotheology in Southeast Asia has also been marked by the involvement of religious institutions in environmental preservation movements. In Indonesia, for example, concepts such as “Environmental Fiqh” and the “Eco-Pesantren” program initiated by the Indonesian Ulema Council have emerged. In the Philippines, Catholic churches actively participate in anti-illegal mining campaigns and forest conservation initiatives. Meanwhile, Vietnam and Myanmar have begun integrating environmental education into religion-based educational systems. These developments indicate that ecotheology has shifted from the realm of theory into social praxis. Within this context, Thailand occupies a unique position because of its rich Theravāda Buddhist tradition, which has transformed Buddhist monks into significant actors in environmental advocacy.

Thailand has become a focal point in Southeast Asian ecotheological discourse due to the active role of Buddhist monks in eco-Dharma movements and spirituality-based environmental preservation models (Prasert, 2024). Theravāda Buddhism perceives nature as an integral part of human life rather than merely an object of exploitation. Teachings concerning karma, harmony, and non-violence (*karuṇā*) provide the moral foundation for adherents to respect all living beings. Many monasteries in Thailand even function as environmental education centers where communities learn about organic farming, water conservation, and local forest preservation. This phenomenon demonstrates how religion can become a transformative social force when employed to advocate for environmental sustainability.

One particularly notable example of Thai ecotheological practice is the phenomenon of “tree ordination.” Buddhist monks perform special rituals by wrapping trees in saffron-colored robes as a symbolic form of *upasampadā*, thereby rendering the trees sacred and prohibiting them from being cut down (Morrow, 2012). This practice represents a creative attempt to integrate religious symbolism with environmental conservation. Rural communities respect these trees in the same manner that they respect monks, thereby reducing forest exploitation without direct conflict with customary authorities or the government. This model has subsequently become a reference point for other Southeast Asian countries as a form of ecotheology grounded in local wisdom and contextual theological innovation.

Thailand’s position within Southeast Asian ecotheological discourse has been further strengthened by networks of environmentally engaged Buddhist monks, commonly referred to as “engaged Buddhist monks.” These monks not

only teach Dharma, but also act as socio-political actors advocating for ecological justice. In several rural areas of Thailand, monks collaborate with environmental NGOs, universities, and indigenous communities to implement reforestation and river conservation programs. This approach illustrates that ecotheology is not solely concerned with theological doctrine, but also with advocacy strategies, community-based research, and sustainable public policy. In this regard, Thailand has become a living laboratory for the practical implementation of ecotheology.

Nevertheless, Thailand is not free from ecological challenges. The Thai government frequently grants land exploitation permits for tourism industries, plantations, and mining activities that negatively affect local ecosystems. Conflicts between economic interests and environmental ethics remain highly significant, and it is precisely within this tension that ecotheology functions as a moral critique of exploitative development policies. Environmentally engaged monks are often perceived as counter-hegemonic actors resisting capitalist logic. However, they receive strong support from rural communities directly affected by environmental degradation. This demonstrates that ecotheology is capable of fostering ecological solidarity and collective awareness grounded in spirituality.

At the conceptual level, Thai ecotheology is often associated with the Buddhist teaching of interdependence (*paticca-samuppāda*). This principle explains that all phenomena are interconnected and mutually dependent; therefore, damage to natural elements inevitably affects the balance of human life. Such a perspective enriches ecotheological discourse in Southeast Asia because it offers an alternative to the anthropocentric and dualistic paradigms that frequently dominate Western thought. Thai Buddhism demonstrates that spirituality can serve as the foundation for cultivating profound ecological awareness while simultaneously orienting itself toward social practice. Consequently, many scholars believe that Southeast Asian ecotheology possesses significant potential for constructing a holistic global environmental ethic.

When compared with other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand possesses a distinct advantage in sustaining ecotheological discourse because it is supported by a strong religious tradition and extensive monastic community networks. Unlike Indonesia, which must accommodate multiple religious traditions, or the Philippines, which is predominantly influenced by Christianity, Thailand possesses a relatively dominant Buddhist identity, making it easier to mainstream ecotheology within educational systems, local policies, and social life. This does not imply that Thailand is free from obstacles; however, its cultural foundations enable ecotheological discourse to develop in a more systematic and directed manner.

With the increasing severity of climate change and environmental degradation, Thai ecotheology has begun attracting attention within international forums. Thailand is frequently presented as an example of how spiritual values can be translated into community-based conservation programs. Scholars from Japan, the United States, and Europe often regard Thailand as a case study of Asian ecotheological practice. This demonstrates that the role of

religion in environmental preservation is not merely an academic discourse, but also possesses practical implications for public policy and social movements. In this context, Thailand has successfully positioned itself as one of the significant centers for ecotheological development in Southeast Asia.

The Theravāda Tradition and the Theological Foundations of the Thai Sangha's Environmental Movement

The Theravāda Buddhist tradition is one of the oldest forms of Buddhist teaching still widely practiced throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, and Cambodia. In the Thai context, Theravāda functions not merely as the official religion of the state, but also as a force shaping social structures, culture, and even public policy (Aryatama et al., 2024). This tradition positions the Sangha—the community of monks and spiritual practitioners—as guardians of moral values and social harmony. As the global environmental crisis has intensified, Theravāda teachings have increasingly been reexamined to assess their relevance in addressing ecological problems. This development has given rise to Buddhist ecotheology, which emphasizes the interconnectedness between humanity and nature as inseparable components of the cycle of life.

The theological foundations of the Thai Sangha's environmental movement can be traced to the Tipitaka, the sacred scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism. Within these texts exists the understanding that human existence does not stand independently, but rather depends upon environmental balance and ecological harmony. Buddhism views nature not as an object of human domination, but as a living space that must be respected. The Tipitaka warns that greed and unlimited desire (*tanhā*) constitute the root causes of suffering, including environmental destruction. Consequently, resolving ecological crises requires not only technological advancement, but also an inner transformation capable of shaping an ethical worldview toward nature. This perspective forms the basis for the emergence of spiritually grounded ecological movements within the Sangha.

One of the central concepts in Theravāda Buddhism that serves as the foundation of environmental ethics is *mettā*, or universal loving-kindness. *Mettā* teaches that compassion should not be limited to fellow human beings, but must extend to all living creatures (Kendi et al., 2022). In practice, many monks in Thailand teach *mettā* meditation as a means of cultivating ecological awareness so that individuals no longer perceive nature merely as a source of exploitation, but as a fellow entity within the broader web of life. This concept establishes the psychological and spiritual foundation of environmental advocacy because it nurtures empathy toward plants, animals, water, and land as interconnected elements of existence.

In addition to *mettā*, the teaching of *karuṇā*, or compassion, constitutes another essential component of the Thai Sangha's environmental movement

(Pesonen, 2022). *Karuṇā* implies that the suffering of other beings must be understood and responded to through ethical action. Environmental crises are therefore perceived as forms of collective suffering resulting from humanity's moral imbalance. Accordingly, the principle of *karuṇā* encourages environmental preservation movements as direct manifestations of spiritual practice. In many Thai monasteries, *karuṇā* functions as the foundational principle of socio-ecological activities such as reforestation programs, organic agriculture, and ecological education for rural communities. Thus, the Sangha's environmental movement represents not merely activism, but also an expression of profound spiritual empathy.

The concept of non-violence also makes a significant contribution to the formation of the ecological theology of the Thai Sangha (Farhan & Hadisaputra, 2022). Non-violence in this context does not merely signify refraining from harming humans, but also includes prohibitions against damaging nature and biological life. Within the Theravāda tradition, indiscriminate tree-cutting or river pollution is regarded as a form of violence because it destroys the habitats of other living beings. This principle subsequently becomes the normative foundation for environmentally engaged monks in campaigning for ecosystem preservation. It demonstrates that Buddhist spirituality possesses direct implications for ecological ethics and can function as a moral force in confronting exploitative capitalism.

The Tipitaka also contains important teachings concerning interdependence among living beings (Fattah et al., 2024). This doctrine emphasizes that no phenomenon exists independently; rather, all things condition and influence one another. Forest destruction, for instance, inevitably affects human social, economic, and spiritual life. By understanding interdependence, the Thai Sangha cultivates the belief that caring for nature ultimately means caring for oneself, while destroying nature creates new forms of suffering. This principle constitutes one of the central pillars of Buddhist ecotheology because it positions humans as part of nature rather than its rulers.

The Theravāda tradition in Thailand subsequently gave rise to a movement known as eco-Dharma, namely the application of Buddhist teachings to environmental conservation (Pratiwi et al., 2024). Monks do not merely deliver sermons within monasteries, but also directly participate in activities such as tree planting, river preservation, and assisting rural communities in sustainably managing natural resources. One of the most widely recognized practices is "tree ordination," in which monks wrap tree trunks with saffron robes so that the trees are regarded as sacred and protected from logging. This tradition demonstrates how religious symbolism can function as a medium of ecological protection while simultaneously fostering spiritual awareness among local communities.

The Thai Sangha's environmental movement has also expanded through collaboration among monks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and indigenous communities. They recognize that environmental problems require a holistic approach integrating spirituality, local wisdom, and

modern scientific knowledge. In many rural areas, monks serve as mediators between local communities and the government, thereby helping to peacefully resolve ecological conflicts. The Sangha's role as guardian of ecological ethics has earned them respect not only as religious leaders, but also as community figures capable of generating social and ecological transformation.

Nevertheless, theology-based environmental movements within the Sangha are not free from challenges. Economic modernization, tourism expansion, and capitalist pressures frequently generate conflicts between economic interests and spiritual values. Some environmentally engaged monks have even faced legal and political pressure when opposing environmentally exploitative projects. Despite these obstacles, Theravāda teachings provide a strong moral foundation for critically evaluating unsustainable development. In this regard, Dharma functions as an ethical instrument for assessing public policies and determining whether particular actions contribute to collective well-being or instead create suffering for future generations.

Monastic Activism and Ecological Practices: A Study of the “Tree Ordination” Movement and Other Sangha Initiatives

Monastic activism within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Thailand has developed into a unique and significant socio-religious phenomenon within Southeast Asian ecological discourse. Buddhist monks are no longer positioned solely as spiritual leaders who teach Dharma within monasteries, but also as agents of social transformation directly involved in environmental protection. This transformation emerged as a response to Thailand's increasingly alarming ecological conditions, including deforestation, land conflicts, river degradation, and the excessive exploitation of natural resources. From this context emerged the “eco-Sangha” movement, or ecological monastic communities, which seek to integrate religious teachings with practical environmental conservation.

One of the most iconic and widely recognized forms of monastic activism is “tree ordination.” This practice involves a symbolic ritual in which monks wrap trees with saffron-colored robes in a manner similar to the ordination of Buddhist monks. The purpose is to render the trees “sacred,” thereby discouraging them from being cut down or damaged. This tradition developed in the late 1980s when the deforestation crisis in Thailand reached a critical level. Buddhist monks recognized the need for a spiritual strategy capable of awakening ecological awareness among rural communities while simultaneously providing moral protection for forests without direct confrontation with corporations or the government. Tree ordination therefore became a creative means of integrating theology with ecological conservation.

The tree ordination movement demonstrates that religious rituals can function as effective instruments of environmental protection. Once a tree has been “ordained,” local communities are generally reluctant to cut it down because doing so is believed to constitute a sinful act or generate negative karma.

In this way, Buddhist teachings become not merely moral theories, but also social instruments capable of transforming environmental behavior in concrete ways. This activism redefines the human–nature relationship spiritually, where forests are no longer viewed solely as economic resources, but as living entities deserving of respect. In several villages, tree ordination has even transformed forest areas into sacred zones or natural monasteries that continue to be preserved today.

In addition to tree ordination, there has also been the emergence of “green monasteries” as centers of spirituality-based ecological education. These monasteries function not only as places for meditation and the study of the Tipitaka, but also as spaces for training in organic farming, clean water management, waste recycling, and local biodiversity conservation. Some monasteries even designate the surrounding forests as protected ecological areas. Thus, monasteries become not merely places of worship, but also practical laboratories for living harmoniously with nature. The green monastery model integrates spirituality, ecology, and community education into a unified and holistic praxis.

Buddhist monks also play an important role in community forest management. In several rural areas, monks act as mediators between indigenous communities and government authorities to ensure that forest areas can be managed sustainably without large-scale commercialization. The monks formulate local regulations grounded in Dharma that govern tree-cutting, the distribution of forest products, and water management systems. These activities demonstrate that the Thai Sangha possesses the capacity to transform spiritual teachings into forms of local policy. In fact, some forest communities jointly managed by monks exhibit stronger conservation outcomes than state-protected forest areas.

Prominent figures within this movement include Phra Manat and Phra Paisal Visalo, two Sangha leaders widely recognized as pioneers of Thailand’s Buddhist ecological movement. Phra Manat is known for establishing networks of ecological monasteries in rural regions that focus on ecological education, nature meditation, and community forest advocacy. Meanwhile, Phra Paisal Visalo has actively written books, delivered sermons, and led communities promoting simple and environmentally conscious lifestyles. He established Suan Mokkh, or “The Garden of Liberation,” a nature-based meditation center that functions as a space for dialogue between religion, environmental activism, and the philosophy of sustainable living. The roles of these figures demonstrate that monks can become ecological leaders without losing their spiritual identity.

The involvement of monks in environmental advocacy is not merely motivated by moral intention, but is deeply rooted in theological teachings. The concepts of *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and non-violence constitute the ethical foundations of ecological behavior that position nature as part of the moral community. Furthermore, the principle of interdependence within the doctrine of *paticca-samuppāda* emphasizes that human life depends upon ecological balance. Consequently, protecting forests and rivers becomes

inseparable from safeguarding social and spiritual continuity. The ecological movement of Buddhist monks therefore represents not simply activism, but also a reinterpretation of Dharma within the context of modern ecological crises.

Nevertheless, this movement has not developed without challenges. Industrialization, tourism expansion, and capitalist pressures often conflict with the Sangha's principles of ecological conservation. Monks opposing land exploitation occasionally face political pressure or are accused of obstructing national economic interests. Some activist monks have even experienced criminalization due to their resistance to large-scale deforestation projects carried out by corporations. Despite these obstacles, the eco-Sangha movement continues to survive because it receives strong support from rural communities, civil society activists, and environmental NGO networks. This demonstrates that ecological solidarity can emerge from sustained collaboration between spiritual and social forces.

The tree ordination movement and other Sangha ecological initiatives have also contributed to the emergence of spirituality-based ecological education. Many universities in Thailand now use these movements as case studies in anthropology, environmental studies, and religious studies programs. Researchers from Europe and the United States have likewise regarded Thailand as a reference point for successful ecotheological practices capable of transforming community behavior. This indicates that spirituality can function as both a scientific and social force in addressing global environmental crises. In this regard, the Thai Sangha represents not merely a religious institution, but also a living laboratory of practical ecotheology.

Monastic activism in Thailand demonstrates that religion can transcend the boundaries of formal ritual and become a transformative force within socio-ecological life. Buddhist monks perform dual roles as spiritual guides and protectors of nature. They build bridges between meditation and conservation, between Dharma and practical environmental action. This approach offers inspiration by illustrating that environmental preservation requires not only technical policies, but also inner awareness, ecological empathy, and strong moral vision. Therefore, the Sangha movement may be regarded as an ecotheological model that successfully translates spirituality into concrete action.

Overall, the tree ordination movement and other Sangha initiatives affirm that the Theravāda Buddhist tradition possesses substantial capacity to generate ecological activism grounded in ethics and spirituality. Practical initiatives such as community forest management, the establishment of green monasteries, and the leadership roles of figures such as Phra Manat and Phra Paisal Visalo demonstrate that environmental preservation can become an integral part of the spiritual path toward enlightenment. Through its Sangha, Thailand has shown that ecology is not merely a technical matter, but also a moral, philosophical, and spiritual concern. Consequently, monastic activism can serve as an inspiration for other Southeast Asian countries in formulating ecological strategies that are more humane, religiously grounded, and sustainable.

Interaction between the Thai Sangha, Government, NGOs, and Local Communities in Ecological Mitigation Programs

Over the past several decades, the Thai Sangha has emerged as an important actor in ecological mitigation amid increasing environmental degradation caused by industrialization, urbanization, and economic expansion. Buddhist monks no longer perform solely spiritual functions, but also act as environmental mediators connecting the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities (Panya Lita Teri et al., 2024). This role emerged from the need for ecological approaches that are not merely technocratic, but also humanistic and spiritual. While environmental policies are often constrained by bureaucratic limitations and conflicts of economic interest, the Sangha offers a moral and cultural language that is more readily accepted by rural communities. Consequently, the Sangha occupies a strategic position in building bridges between state authorities and grassroots communities in ecological mitigation efforts.

Collaboration between the Sangha and the Thai government often begins at the local level, particularly in community forest management initiatives. In provinces such as Chiang Mai and Ubon Ratchathani, Buddhist monks serve as moral advisors to village officials in formulating forest conservation policies. They also initiate declarations of “sacred zones,” where certain areas are prohibited from commercial exploitation. Through religious symbols such as tree ordination ceremonies, the Sangha has successfully provided spiritual legitimacy to environmental policies that were previously difficult to implement. Local governments therefore perceive the Sangha’s role as complementary to formal legal and administrative approaches, enabling environmental policies to gain broader public acceptance.

The relationship between the Sangha and environmental NGOs is also close and productive. Many non-governmental organizations recognize that Buddhist monks possess strong cultural influence over rural communities, making their involvement highly effective in accelerating conservation programs. NGOs frequently collaborate with monasteries to organize training programs in organic agriculture, reforestation, flood mitigation, clean water management, and indigenous land mapping. In several regions, such collaborations have resulted in local regulations governing the sustainable use of natural resources. In other words, the Sangha functions as an intermediary connecting modern scientific knowledge with local traditions, ensuring that ecological transformation does not appear foreign or threatening to community identity.

Local communities constitute both the groups most directly affected by conservation and ecological mitigation projects and the Sangha’s primary partners. Buddhist monks often facilitate community dialogues to identify local needs while teaching the principle of *pratītya-samutpāda* (interdependence) in

order to deepen understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. Through this spiritual approach, ecological behavioral change is not driven solely by governmental directives, but also emerges from internal moral awareness. In several villages, the Sangha has even become the primary reference point for decisions concerning land use and natural resource management. This phenomenon illustrates that Buddhist ecotheology has become integrated into the social system and cultural identity of rural Thai communities.

A concrete example of the interaction among the Sangha, government institutions, and NGOs can be observed in community forest management projects led by figures such as Phra Paisal Visalo. He frequently collaborates with civil society activists and village officials to strengthen conservation regulations grounded in local wisdom. In addition, several green monasteries function as ecological training centers that provide workshops on climate change mitigation and environmental risk mapping. In this context, the Sangha not only grants moral legitimacy to environmental policies, but also contributes effective educational methods for transforming community behavior. Spirituality-based ecological education thus becomes an alternative to modern scientific educational models that are often detached from local cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, this collaboration does not always proceed smoothly. Tensions frequently arise between the Sangha's spiritual approach and the economic logic of governmental institutions or private corporations. Several conservation programs initiated by the Sangha have conflicted with industrial logging, gold mining, or mass tourism development projects. In such situations, environmentally engaged monks often face political pressure or are accused of obstructing national development. Despite these challenges, communication between the Sangha and the government is generally maintained in order to avoid direct confrontation. Buddhist monks tend to adopt dialogical and non-confrontational approaches, employing concepts such as karma and virtue as ethical arguments for criticizing exploitative policies.

The success of collaborative efforts is also evident in the use of monasteries as socio-ecological laboratories. Several monasteries have developed rainwater management systems, local seed banks, tree nurseries, and sustainable agricultural models. Local governments occasionally support these initiatives through village development funds, while NGOs provide technical training and field equipment. This collaboration has produced a model of "spiritual ecology" that combines local values, scientific innovation, and collective social awareness. Programs of this nature demonstrate that ecological mitigation depends not only upon regulations and technology, but also upon moral values and local belief systems that provide ethical foundations for collective action.

Ecological mitigation programs involving the Sangha, government institutions, NGOs, and local communities have ultimately produced a pluralistic and participatory model of environmental governance. This model does not rely exclusively upon top-down regulations issued by central authorities, but also creates space for bottom-up initiatives rooted in the experiences of rural

communities. Governments have increasingly recognized that environmental conservation cannot succeed without the cultural and spiritual support of local populations. Consequently, the Sangha functions as a medium connecting public policy with ecological consciousness embedded within local society. This collaborative approach has even begun to serve as a reference point in regional Southeast Asian policy discussions concerning community-based conservation models.

This collaboration demonstrates that ecology cannot be separated from the cultural, social, and religious dimensions of society. The success of the Thai model illustrates that environmental preservation cannot be achieved solely through technical or legal approaches, but requires moral and spiritual transformation rooted in local identity. Therefore, the Sangha should not merely be understood as a religious community, but rather as a strategic actor shaping the ecological future of Thailand and Southeast Asia in a more sustainable direction.

The Southeast Asian Ecotheological Model: The Relevance of the Thai Sangha's Contributions for Neighboring Countries

Thailand's ecotheological model has developed into one of the most significant examples within the discourse of spirituality-based environmentalism in Southeast Asia. Over the past several decades, the Thai Sangha has not merely focused on conventional religious practices such as meditation and moral instruction, but has also explored the role of religion in responding to global ecological crises. This approach positions religion not merely as a spiritual ritual, but also as an instrument of transformative action aimed at structural change as well as ecological education within society. Consequently, Thailand's ecotheological model can be understood as an evolution of religious praxis that integrates theology, ethics, and social activism.

Southeast Asia possesses a multilayered spiritual history in which religion frequently functions as a social force shaping communal values. Within this context, Thailand has emerged as a country that successfully utilizes religion as the foundation of ecological action (Laila et al., 2024). The dominant Theravāda Buddhist tradition provides an ethical framework through teachings such as *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and non-violence, thereby generating a strong moral foundation for the development of environmental theology. These practices are understood as forms of social Dharma: devotion to life, including nature, which is regarded as part of an interconnected web of existence. In this way, Thai ecotheology is not merely symbolic, but functions as a foundation for local ecological policy.

One of the Thai Sangha's greatest contributions lies in the development of a monastic-based ecological activism model possessing strong social legitimacy. For example, the ritual of tree ordination has evolved beyond a cultural practice into a form of moral-legal protection for forests. When a tree is "ordained" as part

of the Sangha, local communities feel morally obligated to respect and protect it. Such a model is highly relevant for Southeast Asian regions facing ecological pressures such as deforestation, land conversion, and climate change while simultaneously maintaining strong religious traditions. In this regard, the Thai Sangha has successfully integrated spirituality with conservation practices through effective religious symbolism.

The success of Thai ecotheology opens opportunities for replication in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia—countries that also adhere predominantly to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. In these regions, monastic structures and the social legitimacy of the Sangha occupy strategic positions within village communities. If models such as tree ordination, green monasteries, or community forest management can be implemented in these countries, ecological movements would no longer remain solely within the domains of environmental activists or governmental institutions, but would become integrated into religious systems themselves. Through such integration, ecological lifestyle transformations would acquire spiritual foundations far deeper and more enduring than those produced merely by formal regulations.

Indonesia also possesses significant potential to adopt certain aspects of Thailand's ecotheological model, despite theological differences resulting from its Muslim-majority population. Several universal values within Buddhist ecotheology—such as compassion, collective responsibility, and harmony—can be translated into Islamic concepts such as *khalifah fil ardh* (human beings as stewards of the earth), *amanah* (trust), and *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation). Consequently, the Thai model need not be imitated literally, but may instead function as inspiration for constructing interfaith ecotheological networks contextualized within local traditions. This creates opportunities for the development of interfaith ecotheology in Southeast Asia.

It is also important to recognize that Thailand's influence on regional ecotheological models derives not only from theological principles, but also from institutional patterns. The Thai Sangha has established intensive cooperation with local governments, village communities, and environmental NGOs. This collaborative pattern can serve as a prototype for neighboring countries seeking to develop multi-actor systems in ecological conservation. In Indonesia, for instance, the potential for collaboration among Islamic boarding schools, *zakat* institutions, regional governments, and NGOs already exists; the primary challenge lies in structuring such cooperation within an operational ecotheological framework similar to Thailand's. Thailand's experience demonstrates that spirituality becomes truly effective only when supported by clear institutional structures and sustainable funding.

Moreover, Thailand's potential as a regional center for ecotheological learning has increasingly gained recognition among universities and international institutions. Several green monasteries and ecological Sangha communities have become research sites for academics from Japan, Europe, and North America. This indicates that Southeast Asian ecotheological models are not merely locally

relevant, but also contribute meaningfully to global discourse concerning spiritual ecology. If further developed, the Thai Sangha could become a regional center for spirituality-based ecological education involving not only monks, but also activists and researchers from various countries.

Nevertheless, the adoption of Thailand's ecotheological model by other countries must consider their respective socio-cultural contexts. The legal frameworks and systems of religious authority in Laos or Indonesia, for example, differ significantly from those of Thailand. Ritual models or institutional structures therefore cannot be replicated directly without cultural adaptation. Consequently, the construction of Southeast Asian ecotheological networks should be grounded in shared principles rather than shared rituals. The primary objective should be the cultivation of common values such as sustainability, moral responsibility, and harmonious human–nature relationships. These principles can then be translated into diverse local traditions.

Within the regional framework, the Thai Sangha may function as a pathfinder for the construction of a broader ecotheological paradigm. For example, ASEAN could incorporate “Spiritual Ecology” into its non-political cross-border cooperation agenda, similar to cultural diplomacy initiatives. Ecotheology could become a neutral diplomatic platform, considering that environmental issues concern collective survival. In this way, spirituality would no longer remain solely a personal matter, but would instead become a foundation for regional solidarity in confronting climate crises. The Thai model may therefore serve as the starting point for the development of an ASEAN Ecotheological Framework.

Furthermore, Southeast Asian societies possess deep historical attachments to land and nature, making regional ecotheology highly capable of cultivating long-term ecological consciousness. Agrarian cultures, village systems, and local cosmological traditions contain significant epistemological potential for constructing spirituality-based ecological worldviews. The Thai Sangha's success in translating Buddhist values into environmental movements demonstrates how religion can shape community lifestyles without generating social resistance. This model can be adapted by neighboring countries through the integration of religion and local culture as the basis of human ecology.

The future development of Southeast Asian ecotheology ultimately depends upon two major factors: the ability to build connectivity among spiritual communities and the willingness of states to provide autonomous space for religious actors within ecological movements. Thailand has demonstrated that when religion is granted both moral and practical authority in environmental issues, social transformation can emerge from grassroots communities and eventually influence policy systems. This model possesses substantial potential for selective adaptation in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Therefore, the Thai Sangha should be regarded not merely as a pioneer of local ecotheology, but also as a significant actor in the emergence of a Southeast Asian ecotheological paradigm grounded in the spiritual wisdom of regional communities.

CONCLUSION

The ecological crisis in Southeast Asia requires the emergence of mitigation models that are not solely based on technocratic approaches, but are also capable of integrating moral, spiritual, and ecological dimensions simultaneously. The findings of this study demonstrate that the Thai Sangha has developed a theologically and practically strong ecotheological model through the traditions of Theravāda Buddhism. Practices such as tree ordination, green monasteries, community forest management, and collaboration among the Sangha, government institutions, NGOs, and local communities illustrate that religion can function as a transformative force in mitigating ecological crises. In this context, the Sangha serves not only as a spiritual authority, but also as an ecological actor that shapes environmental awareness, ecological education, and advocacy grounded in local wisdom. This study also contributes to the development of Southeast Asian ecotheological scholarship by offering an integrative perspective that connects theology, religious institutions, and ecological mitigation practices within a regional framework.

The implications of this research indicate that Thailand's ecotheological model possesses considerable potential to be developed as a foundation for cross-national ecological cooperation in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the model still faces limitations because it has not yet been fully integrated into regional policies or transnational ecological cooperation frameworks. Therefore, stronger institutional reinforcement and the construction of a more systematic regional ecotheological theory are required in order for the Thai model to be adaptively replicated in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Consequently, ecotheology should no longer be understood merely as a moral-religious alternative, but rather as a strategic paradigm for integrating spirituality, society, and ecological mitigation policies throughout Southeast Asia.

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