



Mountains of waste flanking the road to the overflowing landfill of Koh Tao, Thailand in 2013. Photo by Myat T. Aung
Wikimedia Commons <http://bit.ly/2pHutJ0>



Note on this Case Study:

Global anthropogenic—or human caused—climate change has deeply impacted the ways that religions are practiced around the world. At the same time, religions have also played major roles in framing the issue among their believers. Some Buddhists work tirelessly to change their members habits and mitigate human impact on the climate. Others ignore the crisis, or do not believe in Buddhist environmentalism. Read this case study with this in mind: the Buddhists described here show a range of reactions to climate change, but all of them are Buddhist.

As always, when thinking about religion and climate change, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

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 some Buddhists also can contradict the stereotype of a “green” tradition. In fact, as is the case for countries globally, 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 This huge waste, combined with the low rate of

¹ Malcolm David Eckel, “Is “Buddhist Environmentalism” a Contradiction in Terms?” in *How Much is Enough? Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment*, ed. Richard K. Payne (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 161.

² *Ibid.*, 163-4.

³ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).

⁴ Eckel, “Is “Buddhist Environmentalism” a Contradiction in Terms?” 165.

⁵ Leslie E. Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel. “Buddhist Environmentalism.” In *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions*, ed. Todd Lewis and Gary DeAngelis, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 325.

⁶ “How Thailand is Hurling Towards a Massive Waste Disposal Crisis,” *First Post* (India), Sept. 1, 2014.

<http://www.firstpost.com/world/thailand-hurling-towards-massive-waste-disposal-crisis-1690599.html>

⁷ “Plastic Bags Clogging Bangkok’s Sewers Complicate Efforts to Fight Floods,” *The Straits Times* (Singapore), Sept. 6, 2016.

<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/plastic-bags-clogging-bangkoks-sewers-complicate-efforts-to-fight-floods>

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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ They collected so many that 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.¹¹

Today, the temple, called Wat Pa Maha Kaew but more commonly known as Wat Lan Kuad, 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.¹² 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.”¹³ 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.

“Million Bottle Temple” by Mark Fischer, Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2qO2APt>



⁸ “Plastic Bags Clogging Bangkok's Sewers...” *The Straits Times*.

⁹ “Stemming the Tide: Land-based Strategies for a Plastic-free Ocean,” *Ocean Conservancy and the McKinsey Center for Business and Environment*, (2014): 3, accessed May 16, 2017.

<http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability-and-resource-productivity/our-insights/stemming-the-tide-land-based-strategies-for-a-plastic-free-ocean>

¹⁰ “The Beer Bottle Temple of Thailand,” *Salon* (San Francisco, CA), Feb. 20, 2015.

http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas_obscura/2015/02/20/the_beer_bottle_temple_in_thailand.html

¹¹ “Buddhist Temple Built out of One Million Beer Bottles,” *The Telegraph* (London), Feb. 18, 2009.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/howaboutthat/4687433/Buddhist-temple-built-out-of-one-million-beer-bottles.html>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Update

Over the years, the Million Bottle Temple complex has continued to expand on its grounds with new eco-friendly updates, including a large reclining Buddha decorated with recycled glass bottles and mosaics made from bottle caps. The continued dedication of the Wat Pa Maha Kaew monks to the design concept is evident and showcases their strong commitment to recycling, reducing waste pollution, and promoting a greener way of life. More broadly, Thailand continues to face several challenges in dealing with waste, with the influx of imported plastic garbage complicating the process, which often leads to mismanagement of Thailand's recycling industry. Amidst these challenges, a new Buddhist initiative has begun, much like the Million Bottle Temple in 1984. Currently, two local Thai companies, Qualy Design and Dots Design Studio, are now manufacturing and selling Buddhist amulets from recyclable materials. This extraordinary project aims to raise awareness about pollution and recycling in Thailand by connecting the environmental crisis with Thai culture. The amulets, made primarily of plastic bottles and fishing nets, carry the word "awareness" on the back to remind people to be mindful of their environmental impact. Blessed by monks, these amulets are offered in exchange for used plastic waste to be recycled or a monetary donation, with local charities receiving all proceeds. While the effort has sparked debate about using recycled materials for traditional Buddhist amulets, it highlights the importance of incorporating environmental initiatives within cultural practices and recognizing how religions change over time.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Smokey the Bear Sutra, a 1969 poem by American Buddhist and environmentalist Gary Snyder which imitates the style of some Buddhist scriptures:
<http://bit.ly/1cDvoez>

Secondary Sources:

- Photos and story of Wa Pa Maha Chedi temple: <http://reut.rs/2pTNvYy>
- PBS video on Thai Buddhist monks responding to other environmental problems in Thailand (2010): <http://to.pbs.org/2o6Ogyu>
- Visiting Wat Pa Maha Chedi, Thailand's Unique Million Bottle Temple | <https://bit.ly/40qD5BN>
- Thais make amulets from plastic waste to inspire more recycling | <https://reut.rs/3QmVL0L>
- Thailand Is Tired of the Noxious Fumes From Recycling Your Trash | <https://bloom.bg/49iyCyQ>

Discussion Questions

- In what ways can Buddhism be 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?

"Million Bottle Temple Detail" by Mark Fischer, Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2qszkge>

