

Caves in Thailand: A Historical and Cultural view

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Caves have been utilised by man in Thailand since prehistoric times and continue to play a significant role in cultural traditions and local economic development.

More than 100 are of archaeological significance, providing evidence of prehistoric occupation, burial and art sites dating since long before the arrival of the Thai people. Some provide evidence of early hunter-gatherer communities 11,000 years ago, others in the north and west contain wooden coffins, among the few artifacts of a culture which inhabited the remote mountains for a millennium before disappearing perhaps a thousand years ago. In central and southern Thailand several house Buddhist images created by the Mon, a civilisation whose very existence was until their discovery known virtually only from Chinese sources. Two hundred or so are currently used by the Buddhist community as places of worship, meditation or retreat; some have been so utilised for a thousand years or longer, providing through their religious art and sculpture an insight into the ebb and flow of civilisation and history and forging a strong affinity between the country's caves and its culture. In southern Thailand several important caves have been exploited for birds' nests for several hundred years.

In Central Thailand particularly few records survived the fall of the capital Ayutthaya to the Burmese army in 1767. During the invasion caves were reputedly used to cache artifacts and shelter local people and some have given up relics of this period. Although European contact preceded this defining event in Thai history, the first references to caves date from re-opening of the country in the 1820s, and many travellers during the following century added their often Eurocentric observations on the great temple caves particularly.

In recent years economic growth, improved transportation and increased leisure opportunities have greatly increased cave visitation and pressure on cave and karst resources from quarrying, forestry, dam projects and rampant commercial developments in sensitive areas. Nearly half the 65 or more national parks contain caves and more than 50 caves including many cave temples are visited by perhaps 2 million tourists a year, providing financially rewarding attractions to local communities. Although some 11% of the land surface is protected in some form, environmental debates have raged in a manner similar to those in Australia and elsewhere. Recognition of the need to conserve and manage these resources is well advanced despite limited funding.

