

Making Peace with Pests: From Conflict to Conviviality with Mosquitoes across Southeast Asia

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This project investigates the vexed sociopolitical relations between humans and mosquitoes. In Southeast Asia, mosquitoes are responsible for thousands of deaths each year, leading to their categorization as “pests” and various large-scale attempts to eradicate them. However, mosquitoes are essential to seasonal pollination and a nutrient in the regional food web. Thus, their successful extermination may lead to the collapse of entire ecosystems (in Southeast Asia and around the globe), a phenomenon that has inspired the term “insect apocalypse.”

With this project, I go beyond common understandings of mosquitoes and the subsequent war-like relations these portrayals engender to compare two different modes of making peace and creating conviviality with these insects across Southeast Asia. These modes include technological strategies in hypermodern Singapore, and vernacular and conservation practices and policies on the war-torn Myanmar-Thai border. The project will include 10 months of ethnographic research consisting of qualitative interviews with key actors and participant observation in contact zones of human-mosquito interaction. The investigation is not limited only to policies and discourses on conviviality with mosquitoes. It also includes an exploration of how these practices are employed in everyday life. In the face of continued global warming, collapsing biodiversity, and, in the wake of a global pandemic, this research responds to the urgent need to investigate the entanglements between epidemics, politics, and ecologies.