Using Art-Based Practice With Youth For Building The Community Of Environmental Justice Storytelling

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Abstract

This paper examines how diverse art-based practices facilitate youth in Mae Ngao village, northern Thailand, in engaging with environmental justice (EJ) storytelling through participatory research. In the context of the Bhumibol Reservoir Inflow Augmentation Project and its contested Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the village has experienced systemic silencing of its traditional knowledge, livelihood loss, and ecological concerns.
We document three forms of art-based practice: (1) community-based art exhibitions opposing the dam, (2) youth drawing competitions, and (3) personal art journaling during intergenerational field explorations. These activities differ in style, structure, and impact, yet collectively contribute to a resilient storytelling ecosystem. Rather than prioritizing artistic output, this study centers on the processes of learning, transforming, and building solidarity.
The findings highlight how art bridges relationships between youth and elders, as well as between individuals and communities, silence and voice, while offering varied emotional entry points for youth with different capacities. By tracing how young people transform marginalization into action, this paper argues that art-based storytelling is not only a mode of resistance but also a practice of cultural care and environmental stewardship grounded in place-based knowledge and intergenerational ties. This research contributes to broader discussions on youth agency, participatory art, and plural forms of environmental justice.

Keywords: art-based practice, storytelling, environmental justice, youth

Introduction and Purpose

One evening in Mae Ngao village, a Karen community nestled along the Mae Ngao and Yuam Rivers in northern Thailand, I sat with a group of teenagers quietly sketching for an upcoming exhibition on Action on Rivers Day. Earlier that day, we had joined village elders on a boat journey, listening to stories of sacred river spirits, traditional fishing techniques, and signs of ecological imbalance. The youth's drawings, depicting animals, dam walls, and forested mountains, transformed their reflections into acts of resistance. This intergenerational moment was not an isolated event; it reflected a broader movement already underway: a community-led struggle for environmental justice grounded in culture, memory, and place.
Mae Ngao, located near the Salween River and approximately 30 kilometers from the Myanmar border, is home to both Karen and Northern Muang peoples. Like many Indigenous highland communities in Thailand, Mae Ngao faces disproportionate impacts from state-led development initiatives. Chief among these is the Bhumibol Reservoir Inflow Augmentation Project, a large-scale water diversion plan aiming to reroute the Yuam River to the Bhumibol Dam. Despite vocal community opposition, a deeply flawed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), and ongoing legal petitions, the project has continued, threatening to displace entire ecosystems, disrupt local livelihoods, and dishonor spiritual and cultural relationships to the land and river.

The villagers have not remained passive. They have organized public hearings, filed lawsuits, and produced grassroots research using the Thai Baan methodology. Alongside these

formal strategies, youth have taken up art-based storytelling as an equally powerful form of resistance. Through drawings, murals, and personal journals, they not only document threats but also critique, reinterpret, and reimagine their relationship to place and power. While mainstream environmental justice discourse often emphasizes legal and policy interventions, Mae Ngao youth remind us that cultural practice, especially art, can be a political act rooted in the everyday.

This paper asks: How can art-based practices support youth in Mae Ngao to engage in environmental justice storytelling that resists erasure and builds collective power? It is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the effects of art-based storytelling in interpreting environmental justice in the Bhumibol Project? (2) How do Karen Mae Ngao villagers use art to reflect their values and ecological knowledge? These questions also inform the paper's broader concern: how creative practices can amplify marginalized voices and generate place-based counter-narratives that challenge state-imposed development.

As a researcher trained in art education and psychology, and someone who has lived and worked closely with Karen communities, I approach this work as a collaborator and listener rather than an external expert. My methodology combines participatory action research (PAR), ethnography, and arts-based inquiry, all grounded in relational ethics and community accountability. Theoretical framing draws from bell hooks' (1995) vision of art as engaged pedagogy, Freire's (1970) notion of dialogue as collective learning, and Boal's (1979) idea of artistic practice as rehearsal for transformation. In conversation with Santos's (2014) call for an ecology of knowledges and Tuck and Yang's (2014) framing of youth resistance as desire-based, this paper explores how art functions not as an accessory to activism but as a method of world-making. In Mae Ngao, youth resistance is quiet but no less powerful, anchored not in spectacle but in place, kinship, and care. This study focuses on three interrelated practices: community exhibitions, drawing competitions, and art journaling, each offering a distinct mode of environmental justice storytelling through which youth reclaim voice, memory, and future.

Context: The Environmental Justice Landscape in Mae Ngao

Mae Ngao village is situated in the mountainous forests of Mae Hong Son Province, near the Thai-Myanmar border. Although geographically remote, the area is rich in biodiversity, ecological significance, and cultural heritage. The village is home to a multi-ethnic population, primarily Karen, whose livelihoods, spiritual practices, and community rhythms are deeply entwined with the Mae Ngao and Yuam Rivers. These rivers are not merely physical resources. They are sacred and social beings, holding ancestral knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and seasonal understandings that guide daily life. In Mae Ngao, land is not something to own; it is something to share. It is something to care for.

This intimate relationship with land and water is now under serious threat. The Bhumibol Reservoir Inflow Augmentation Project, a component of Thailand's national water management plan, proposes diverting water from upstream tributaries, including the Mae Ngao and Yuam Rivers, to increase inflow into the Bhumibol Dam. Officially framed as a response to drought, hydropower demand, and irrigation needs, the project overlooks the irreversible impacts it poses to Indigenous ecologies and local cosmologies. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), widely criticized for its opacity and tokenistic community engagement, leaves no space for local ways of knowing. As Laungaramsri (2000) has argued, the Thai state often renders upland communities "backward," paving the way for displacement under the guise of progress.

Still, the people of Mae Ngao are not passive recipients of state power. Their resistance takes many forms, including ritual, storytelling, protest, and participatory research. Increasingly, youth are playing a visible role in this movement through art. In 2023, during the

exhibition for Action on River Day, young villagers presented drawings and paintings that depicted buffalo drowning, rivers in tears, and community members mourning the ecological loss. These visual testimonies disrupted dominant narratives and voiced urgent calls for recognition, rooted in both grief and determination.

Later, a Children's Day drawing competition welcomed a broader set of participants. While positioned as a celebratory event, the contest surfaced tensions between aesthetic polish and political expression. Youth trained in school-art styles often received higher praise, while more critical or emotionally charged works were sidelined. However, these early acts of art-making represented crucial first steps in enabling young people to articulate their environmental truths in public, on their own terms.

Outside of exhibition spaces, youth have engaged in intergenerational learning through field walks and storytelling sessions with village elders. These informal yet intentional moments involved learning elder songs, stories, and ecological knowledge of river systems, medicinal plants, and signs of seasonal change. Through drawing and journaling, youth not only recorded these insights but also began restoring generational bonds frayed by development, displacement, and migration. These quiet acts of care are as political as they are pedagogical.

During the Action on River Day event, youth artworks were displayed alongside research coordinated with the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) at Chiang Mai University. Large hand-painted banners lined the space, declaring: "No Dam. Yuam Diversion Project Should Be Eliminated," and "Validate the EIA without Community Participation. No Comprehension, No Accuracy." Youth and elders stood side by side, offering explanations and reflections to NGO visitors and grassroots organizers. This was not a cultural performance; it was a declaration of presence, sovereignty, and refusal.

These efforts reflect the Thai Baan tradition of co-produced knowledge, in which communities act as researchers of their own lives and landscapes (Sitthikriengkrai et al., 2024). Youth, working alongside elders, have conducted interviews, mapped riverside resources, and documented environmental changes. These small yet intentional acts of visual and narrative documentation serve as powerful gestures of reclamation. As Nixon (2011) reminds us, state development often creates "sacrifice zones"—places marked for destruction in the name of national benefit. Mae Ngao refuses to be one of them. Through art, research, and solidarity, the community asserts not only its right to remain but its right to be recognized, respected, and heard. This paper situates itself within that collective refusal, focusing on youth-led creative practices that not only resist extraction but also reimagine what justice can look like, rooted in place, memory, and care.

Methodology: Collaborative Ethnographic and Art-Based Approach

This study emerged through sustained engagement with the villagers of Mae Ngao as they responded to the ongoing threats posed by the Bhumibol Reservoir Inflow Augmentation Project. The methodological framework combines participatory action research (PAR), arts-based educational research (ABER), and ethnography, each chosen to center community agency, reject extractive knowledge production, and affirm local epistemologies. In this hybrid approach, research was not a one-way process of inquiry but a relational practice of listening, reflecting, and co-creating meaning across time and space.

In alignment with Leavy (2009), art in this study was not treated as a decorative outcome, but rather as a method of inquiry —an expressive mode for navigating experience, memory, and political struggle. For Mae Ngao youth, drawing and storytelling became ways of processing and making sense of their lives amid ecological and cultural disruption. As Knowles and Cole (2008) argue, art in qualitative research enables intersections between emotion, embodiment, and lived experience, intersections that proved vital in this fieldwork.

Between 2022 and 2025, I returned for multiple visits, co-shaping activities with local youth, elders, and researchers. These included art workshops, intergenerational field walks, youth-led exhibitions, and informal drawing and reflection sessions. Rather than extracting information, I approached these as relational encounters grounded in mutual trust.

My positionality, as a non-Karen researcher with prior experience in art education, required constant reflexivity. While I brought relevant experience and long-standing relationships with Karen communities, I remained conscious of the power dynamics inherent in research. I did not impose interpretation, but instead witnessed and supported. Activities were designed collaboratively with open-ended prompts that invited youth to engage through sketching, journaling, or observation. Following Tuck and Yang's (2014) ethics of storytelling, refusal was respected as a meaningful form of participation. Informed consent was an iterative and relational process, often discussed in family or group settings. Some artworks and writings were intentionally withheld to honor emotional boundaries and privacy.

Data analysis was conducted in accordance with grounded and dialogic principles. I did not apply rigid coding but looked for recurring emotional tones, symbolic motifs, and patterns of intergenerational meaning-making. Drawings of rivers as lifelines, of people weeping, of buffalo swimming through floods, or of harmonious coexistence with the forest were not interpreted as fixed signs but as what Smith (2012) calls "living texts", relational, situated, and deeply political. Ethnographic tools such as detailed fieldnotes captured gestures, silences, spatial dynamics, and sensory impressions that enriched my understanding of youth engagement. As Boal (1979) describes, these moments of art-making became "rehearsals for resistance", a space not for producing polished outputs but for imagining otherwise. This collaborative and decolonial methodology rejects the detached gaze of traditional research, instead offering space for co-thinking, emotional resonance, and justice-rooted storytelling. What follows are three interwoven art-based practices, including community exhibitions, drawing contests, and journaling, that illuminate the landscape of youth-led environmental resistance in Mae Ngao.

Three Modes of Art Practice

Art-based storytelling in Mae Ngao did not unfold through a single method or event. It evolved through a series of layered processes, some visible and public, others quiet and intimate. Each mode offered youth a different pathway into environmental justice discourse, aligned with their capacities, relationships, and emotions. What emerged was not a unified narrative, but a polyphonic expression of care, concern, resistance, and hope.

4.1 Community Exhibition: Visibility and Collective Voice

The community exhibition, held during Action on River Day 2023 in Mae Ngao Village, emerged as an extension of youth participation in a river study led by local elders. During that study, young villagers journeyed along the Mae Ngao River, learning about sacred ecological sites, traditional fishing practices, and the fragile balance between land, water, and livelihood. The exhibition became a space for transforming these learnings into visual testimony. Organized by village leaders in collaboration with a local environmental network, the event was held in the open-air pavilion adjacent to the temple. Youth were not only the featured artists. They also served as co-curators, designing signage, arranging displays, and welcoming guests, including representatives from NGOs and government officials.

The artworks on display revealed a powerful blend of grief, critique, and cultural pride. One painting by a 16-year-old girl showed a booted figure stepping on villagers' backs, an image inspired by elders' warnings that the dam project would deepen community suffering. Another illustration depicted the death of buffalo herds and river-based livelihoods, flanked by faceless officials shaking hands in political complicity. Other works contrasted "before-and-

after" landscapes: thriving forests and clear rivers transformed into scenes of pollution, flooding, and mourning. However, some drawings also celebrated what is still alive, biodiversity, seasonal rhythms, and ancestral knowledge, anchoring the stakes of what could be lost. Visitors moved slowly through the space, asking questions and reflecting with youth who acted as informal docents, offering insight into the stories behind each image. As Kester (2004) might describe, the event became a "conversational encounter" rather than a spectacle. Tensions, however, were palpable. Some parents feared that visibility might provoke retaliation. When officials associated with the project arrived, the youth noted how they pointed at maps and ignored local voices, behavior that deepened mistrust. Still, the young artists remained firm. As Bishop (2012) cautions, participatory art can sometimes mask power inequalities; however, in Mae Ngao, the youth used art not to please, but to speak. Their exhibition was not a performance; it was a practice of refusal, a demand for recognition. It became what Harney and Moten (2013) call a "fugitive public space": a temporary commons where villagers reasserted their stories on their own terms. Here, art was more than expression; it was a memory, an assembly, a resistance, and a call to be seen.

4.2 Drawing Competition: Playful Protest and Safe Participation

The village school hosted a drawing competition as part of Children's Day celebrations under the theme "Life on Mae Ngao and Environmental Justice." With crayons, colored pencils, and large sheets of paper provided by teachers, the event invited students to reflect on nature, community, and change through visual storytelling. The tone was festive and informal, less overtly political than other protest events, but still rich with meaning. Some children drew rivers, forests, houses, and boats, while others imagined an earth where people and animals coexist peacefully. Unlike speeches or demonstrations, the contest offered a gentle, accessible entry into environmental justice discourse for youth who may have felt unready or unsafe speaking out directly.

Nevertheless, beneath this surface of cheerful participation lay more complex dynamics. The judging process revealed an implicit bias toward technical skill: awards favored images with polished composition, realism, and "neat coloring." Images with emotional content and symbolic depth were often overlooked. One piece showed a wounded river spirit with bandaged arms and face emerging from the trees, rendered in bold lines and uneven shading. It went unrecognized by judges but left a lasting impression on facilitators and observers. This echoed concerns raised by Eisner (2002), who critiques formal art education for privileging surface aesthetics over expressive depth, and by bell hooks (1995), who warns that aesthetic hierarchies can marginalize the voices of those excluded from dominant cultural norms.

In this context, youth resistance took subtler, sometimes hidden forms. Some drawings incorporated surreal or unsettling elements, such as faceless government figures standing behind scales of justice, astronauts floating in space alongside endangered animals, or oversized eyes peering from the riverbanks. These images, while whimsical on the surface, carried implicit critiques of environmental neglect and political distance. They functioned as "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990), veiled but intentional challenges to dominant narratives, slipping beneath the radar of formal recognition. As Tuck and Yang (2014) argue, youth storytelling is often reduced to apolitical or therapeutic forms; yet these drawings quietly complicate that framing, offering layered critiques under the guise of play.

The drawing contest offered an inclusive and low-barrier space for youth participation in environmental justice; however, not all expressions were equally acknowledged. It became a site of both opportunity and constraint, where creative resistance emerged not through confrontation, but through symbols, shadows, and quiet subversion. In these flickering images, playfulness and protest coexisted, inviting viewers to look closer and listen differently.

4.3 Art Journaling: Emotional Processing and Intergenerational Learning

Among the most intimate and sustained forms of art-based storytelling in Mae Ngao was the practice of guided art journaling, developed through a series of intergenerational field activities. Youth participants, mainly between the ages of 11 and 15, joined elders on slow walks along the Mae Ngao River and through nearby forest trails. These were not structured lessons but meandering, memory-rich conversations, where elders would pause to point out a vanished plant, recall a long-lost buffalo trail, or gesture to a submerged site once used for rituals. The walks created space for shared observation and gentle reflection, grounding knowledge in place and relationship.

Equipped with sketchbooks, colored pencils, and water-based paints, the youth responded to soft, open-ended prompts: "What do you notice?" "What do you feel?" "What do you remember or imagine here?" After each walk, participants would sit alone or in pairs, sketching impressions or emotions stirred by the journey; tattoos on the arms of elders, children swimming in the river, fish leaping upstream. This process invited slow, sensory attention. It also created a private, affective space for youth to process what they had seen and heard. Unlike contests or exhibitions, journaling had no audience. Sharing was optional, and many youths chose to keep their journals entirely private.

This private mode of storytelling aligns with Cathy Malchiodi's (2007) insights into the therapeutic capacity of art, especially in contexts shaped by uncertainty or trauma. The journals held more than images. They became containers for grief, hope, and memory. They also resisted the pressure to perform or provide an explanation. Drawing on María Lugones' (2003) concept of loving perception, journaling in Mae Ngao became a practice of care, not only for the land but for the elders and youth who co-constructed these moments. Rather than passively receiving knowledge, youth responded through image, form, and feeling, creating dialogic texts that revealed how learning is shaped by relational presence. These visual narratives were not just documents; they were small acts of world-making.

Some youth later chose to share selected pages in exhibitions or a growing "village archive." Others refused entirely, emphasizing the right to keep their stories unexposed. This tension between private reflection and public narrative was crucial. As Eve Tuck reminds us, refusal can be a form of resistance—an assertion of dignity and control in a context often marked by surveillance and extraction. Journaling, then, became both a personal sanctuary and a political gesture. As Sarah Pink (2009) argues in her work on sensory ethnography, meaning often emerges not through verbal explanation, but through slowness, texture, and embodied presence. The soft scratch of a pencil, the hush that follows an elder's story, the smell of riverbank earth, these were the atmospheres in which environmental justice was not declared, but quietly felt and slowly imagined. In Mae Ngao, art journaling did not seek recognition. It held space for becoming.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores three interconnected themes that emerged across the different modes of art-based storytelling in Mae Ngao: (1) emotional ecology, (2) intergenerational bridges, and (3) the tension between visibility and safety. Each theme reveals how youth use art to process complexity, form relationships, and claim voice within and beyond dominant environmental justice frameworks. These findings highlight not only what youth create but also how they live through artistic practices as part of a broader resistance to environmental and cultural erasure.

5.1 Emotional Ecology: Feeling Through the River

Across the drawing sessions, journaling activities, and community exhibitions in Mae Ngao, what emerged most vividly was not overt protest, but an emotional ecology, a constellation of feelings that revealed how youth experience what Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence." Rather than visible confrontation, young participants expressed grief, longing, confusion, tenderness, and quiet rage through their creative work. Once while journaling, a youth said: “I feel calm when listening to the elder’s song about people and nature but I do not know how to draw that.” This emotional-intellectual tension, feeling something deeply while struggling to represent it, was echoed across many visual and written pieces. As Ahmed (2004) notes, emotions are not confined to individuals; they move through bodies, spaces, and histories. In Mae Ngao, these feelings were expressed through sketches, conversations, silences, and gestures, serving as both a form of expression and a means of understanding.

Art-making became a form of emotional literacy that went beyond verbal or legalistic environmental justice narratives. Youth used color, metaphor, and fragmented imagery to convey their attachments to place and to those who came before them. In one exhibition piece, the Mae Ngao River appeared as a weeping woman with fish swimming through her hair. A journal sketch depicted burning trees and rows of closed mouths, haunting symbols of voicelessness and ecological trauma. These expressions were not Abstract or metaphorical in the conventional sense; they were grounded in lived realities. The proposed dam was not just infrastructure; it represented rupture. As one elder murmured while viewing a painting, “That child drew what I feel but never say.” This moment exemplifies what Lugones (2003) describes as "world-traveling", the ability to enter another’s emotional world with humility and care.

What emerged was not a singular response, but a multiplicity of affective positions. Some youth expressed bold defiance; others conveyed sorrow or chose quiet withdrawal. Importantly, these responses were not categorized as right or wrong, political or apolitical. The value lay in their authenticity and diversity. Art offered a space where emotional nuance could flourish, where resistance did not have to be loud, and vulnerability was not a sign of weakness, but rather a source of wisdom. In this way, Mae Ngao’s youth articulated a form of justice that was not only about rights and recognition but about feeling, remembering, and holding space for emotional truths in a threatened world.

5.2 Intergenerational Bridges: Drawing With, Not About

A second key finding was the role of art in building intergenerational bridges between youth and elders, as well as between memories and futures, and between oral tradition and visual narrative. Art-making did not replace traditional storytelling; it layered onto it, offering new ways for youth to engage with ancestral knowledge and care practices. During field journaling walks, elders shared stories of the river spirit’s moods, medicinal plants, and the location of a now-vanished ritual site. Youth responded not as passive recorders but as interpretive co-creators. These moments were not about translation. They were acts of relational witnessing. Elders were not “informants,” but co-storytellers. Youth, in turn, became cultural stewards in their own right. This challenges the developmentalist framing of youth as “not-yet-knowers” or “future citizens” and instead centers them as active agents in place-based cultural transmission.

Art also enabled nonverbal reciprocity. Artwork was used as a means of mutual recognition between elders and youth, as well as between humans and entities that are more-than-human. In a participant's drawing, a turtle was holding a microphone and a flag with "no dam" as the symbol for voicing the views of others in Mae Ngao village. Importantly, these bridges were not always smooth. Some youth resisted elder authority, choosing to represent loss rather than reverence. This underscores that intergenerational dialogue, like all

relationships, involves negotiation and compromise. However, art provided a shared space in which such tensions could unfold in a generative way. These findings align with de Sousa Santos' (2014) call for an ecology of knowledge, where multiple epistemologies, not just scientific or policy discourses, are honored in the construction of justice. In Mae Ngao, storytelling was not just about preservation; it was about continuity through transformation, with art serving as the bridge between past and present.

5.3 Visibility vs. Safety: Who Gets to Be Seen

The third major theme to emerge from this research is the tension between visibility and safety, particularly for marginalized youth navigating cultural politics and public expression in contested spaces. Each of the three art-based storytelling practices explored in Mae Ngao village; community exhibitions, school-based drawing competitions, and personal art journaling carried different expectations and thresholds of visibility. With each came different risks, forms of recognition, and degrees of agency in choosing how and whether to be seen.

In the community exhibition, visibility became a form of collective presence. Youth stood beside their work, welcomed visitors, and used art to assert their connection to the land and their disapproval of the dam project. Yet even in this most public of formats, visibility was carefully negotiated. Some pieces were left unsigned, while others were displayed with minimal titles or without interpretation. This strategic ambiguity reflects what James C. Scott (1990) calls "hidden transcripts", forms of expression that convey critique while maintaining protective boundaries. For youth in Mae Ngao, participating did not always mean full disclosure. Instead, art became a medium through which they could speak truth carefully, balancing resistance with caution.

In contrast, the school-based drawing competition provided a different kind of visibility, one framed as non-political and sanctioned by institutional norms. While the contest appeared to offer a low-risk platform for expression, it imposed a different kind of constraint: aesthetic judgment. Artworks were evaluated based on conventional markers such as neatness, symmetry, and realism. Raw, emotionally charged pieces often went unrecognized, revealing how even seemingly neutral platforms can enforce normative filters. This dynamic illustrates what bell hooks (1995) critiques as aesthetic hierarchy, the privileging of specific visual languages over others, often tied to middle-class or institutional expectations. The contest encouraged participation, but it quietly shaped whose stories could be seen and validated.

The most private form of practice, art journaling, offered youth the most control over visibility. Unlike exhibitions or contests, there were no external audiences or evaluative pressures. Participants chose whether to share their pages, and many opted not to do so. Some revealed only fragments later in exhibitions or within peer groups, while others kept their journals entirely private. This right to opacity was central. In an era that often demands that youth "speak out" for justice, the ability to remain unseen became a crucial act of agency. As Claire Bishop (2012) notes, participatory art is not inherently liberating; it must be critically examined for how and when visibility is structured. Tuck (2009) similarly argues that refusal is not silence; it is a valid and protective mode of resistance, particularly when exposure risks retraumatization or appropriation.

Across all three modalities, one insight became clear: visibility must be chosen, not assumed. For the youth in Mae Ngao, art-making was meaningful not because it always resulted in public acknowledgment, but because it offered a spectrum of expressive choices—from murals and exhibitions to quiet journals and hidden metaphors. Justice work in this context does not begin with amplification; it starts with trust. To engage with youth storytelling ethically is to recognize that participation does not require performance, and that stories whispered in sketchbooks may carry just as much truth as those told aloud. In a landscape

shaped by erasure, the power to be seen or to remain unseen must rest with the storyteller.

Conclusion

This paper examines how youth in Mae Ngao village engage in environmental justice (EJ) storytelling through collaboratively developed art-based practices, including community exhibitions, drawing competitions, and personal art journaling, in response to the ecological and cultural threats posed by the Bhumibol Reservoir Inflow Augmentation Project. Rather than viewing art solely as a form of advocacy, this study foregrounds art as a relational and affective process that connects youth with elders, expresses grief, negotiates visibility, and asserts agency. These creative acts challenge dominant development narratives and technocratic tools, such as Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), which often exclude local, emotional, and spiritual knowledge. In doing so, Mae Ngao youth emerge not as passive participants, but as cultural authors of resistance, care, and continuity. Their stories—often quiet, fragmented, or withheld collectively form what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) calls an "ecology of knowledges," in which scientific, emotional, and ancestral ways of knowing coexist. The implications of this research extend beyond Mae Ngao, raising critical questions for policy, education, and research: How can institutions validate non-verbal and collective knowledge? How might schools integrate emotional and relational storytelling as civic practice? What does it mean for researchers to shift from extractive methods to ethical co-creation? Future directions include youth-led storytelling archives and integrating art-based environmental justice (EJ) into school curricula. As Audra Simpson (2007) reminds us, refusal is not silence; it is a form of protection. As bell hooks (1995) affirms, love and community are not sentimental, but acts of care. In Mae Ngao, youth art is not just protest; it is a commitment to remembering, protecting, and reimagining justice as a living relationship.

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