
Thailand: A diversity-based community forest management system

Among at least 400 modern "community forest" systems in the hilly upper Northern region of Thailand is that of Mae Khong Saai village in Chiang Dao district of Chiang Mai province. The system features 57 hectares of agricultural fields in which at least 10 different types of paddy rice are grown in stepped fields in the valley bottoms. Some 10 varieties of dryland rice are also cultivated in hill fields, which rotate on a cycle of 3-5 years.

Some 643 hectares of community use forest are carefully distinguished from 980 hectares of protected forest, between them encompassing six different native forest types. Some 58 herbal medicines on which villagers depend are locally cultivated, some in a protected pharmaceutical garden in the middle of the forest. Altogether, forest food and medicine yield the equivalent of US\$700 per year for each of the village's 22 households. As well as providing wood for local use, the forests also help preserve the nature of the streams that lace the area, which provide water for agriculture and drinking, as well as the 17 carefully conserved species of fish which supplement the local food supply.

All aspects of the system --agriculture, community-use forest, protected forest, fisheries-- are interdependent. The whole pattern, meanwhile, relies for its survival on local villagers' protection. For example, the use of fire is carefully controlled by locals so that devastating blazes don't strike the local forest, as they often do the surrounding region's monoculture tree plantations.

Regular monitoring, together with a newly-formalized system of rules and fines covering forest, stream and swidden use, helps maintain the local biotic mosaic. Political vigilance is also crucial. In 1969, locals teamed up with concerned government officials to stave off a threat by commercial loggers to devastate the area. Today, Mae Khong Saai villagers are fighting a 1993 government decree ordering them out of the Wildlife Sanctuary which was established in 1978 on the land they inhabit and protect.

Mae Khong Saai's insistence on local stewardship is obviously good for the area's biodiversity. A recent rapid wildlife survey in and around the village resulted in sightings of many species --including a flock of Oriental Pied Hornbills (*Anthracoceros albirostris*)-- that indicate that the area is one of the most biologically diverse in Thailand. Animals including bear, deer, gibbon, boar and various wild cats, as well as over 200 species of birds, take advantage of the tapestry of local ecosystems.

Thoroughly integrated with lowland economies, politics and cultures, Mae Khong Saai couldn't be further from the romantic cliché of a completely isolated, self-sufficient community. As well as marketing forest products, many community members periodically take jobs far outside the community, some in distant cities. In their defense of local livelihoods and the biodiversity they rely on, moreover, Mae Khong Saai's residents depend partly on alliances they have fashioned not only with similar communities across Thailand's northern mountains but also with urban-based NGO movements. Arguably, the community owes even its current identity and way of life on the periphery partly to the history of uneasy relations between the Karen people who inhabit it and the modern, nationalistic, racist Thai state which has developed over the past century. Whatever successes its

forest stewardship system achieves will owe much to the way it is able to converse and negotiate with lowland and international powers in renewing its strategies for local control.

Article based on information from: Environmental Improvement Department, Northern Development Foundation, Project for Ecological Recovery, Northern Watershed Development Project, Northern Farmers Network, and villagers from three Northern Thai communities, Raayngaan Phol Kaan Wijay Rueang Khwaam Laaklai Thaang Chiiwaphaap lae Rabop Niwet nai Khat Paa Chum Chon Phaak Nuea Tawn Bon, Chiang Mai, 1997. Summarized by Larry Lohmann with thanks to Montri Chanthawong for providing this book, which he helped compile.