Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

A Basic Practical GIS Training Course for Wetlands Management
Mahidol University, Thailand
19 – 23 December, 2005

A Participant's Feedback Report - David J.H. Blake, Technical Advisor, MWBP Songkhram Demonstration Site, Thailand

From 19 – 23 December 2005, during a pleasantly cool weather spell across central Thailand, a training course was held on the basics of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for MWBP staff and partners of MWBP Thailand. The venue for the training course was the Wetland Management Research and Training Center, in the Faculty of Environment and Resource Studies of Mahidol University, Salaya Campus on the western fringes of Bangkok. The course was hosted and organised by academic staff from the Faculty of Environment and Resource Studies at Mahidol University, namely Associate Professor Dr Sansanee Choowaew, Assistant Professor Piyakarn Teartsap, Assistant Professor Prapeut Geudseub, and Ganjana Nakapagon. The latter two faculty members acted as the main lecturers for the course, ably assisted by post-graduate students.

The 19 participants came from a variety of project partner institutions based in Bangkok (e.g. Dept of Water Resources and Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning) and in the Songkhram basin provinces of Sakhon Nakhon (e.g. Inland Fisheries Research and Development Center) and Nakhon Phanom (e.g. Office of Natural Resources and Environment). There were also MWBP staff members from the National Office (two persons) and Songkhram Demonstration Site Office (four persons), who would benefit from knowledge of GIS applications.

As the title suggests, the training course was designed to be both practical and basic, aimed primarily at those (like myself), with no previous experience of GIS applications. Although some of the participants had some earlier experience of using GIS programmes at their workplaces, they mostly expressed the view that they would be glad for a chance to "return to basics" and revise what they had already learned.

Practicality, the course was very much "hands-on", in the sense that from Day One, the participants were let loose on PCs installed with ArcView GIS (Version 3.2), and the course minimised the theory while emphasising the practical side. The course was also highly relevant to local needs, with the data and examples given being specifically tailored to the case of the Lower Songkhram River Basin (LSRB) in Nakhon Phanom. This was a major "plus" of the course, as it focused everyone's attention on the LSRB's natural resources and geography during the course entirety. Hence, no matter what one learned about GIS applications and usage, one was sure to come away from the training course with a much better

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understanding of the human and physical geography of the area, through the continual exposure to maps, satellite images and spatial data related to the LSRB.

The course started with a general introduction on the subject of "Wetlands", by Dr Sanasanee Choowaew, highlighting their attributes, functions, values, problems and related national policies. This was followed by an introduction to GIS programmes in general and the specific features of ArcView by Dr Prapeut Guedseub. Dr Prapeut took us logically through the basics of entering data; classifying and displaying themes; symbolising themes; measuring distance and area; managing scale; querying data; etc. over the next three days of concentrated learning. As the week progressed, the participants gradually became more confident and proficient in the use of ArcView.

The last day, Friday, 23 December, was split between a morning session taken by Ajarn Ganchana on the topic of creating and editing new themes, plus a welcome revision session of the knowledge gained earlier. The final afternoon was devoted to practical group work, where four or five participants were assigned to a group, and given a chance to apply the skills gained earlier in the week. The four groups were set the task to create a Powerpoint Presentation on theme/s of their own choosing, related to natural resource management in the LSRB and using remote data analysis drawn from the GIS programme. Each group's presentation was both a practical demonstration of the value of the training course in showing actual application of GIS, combined with inter-disciplinary teamwork by the participants drawn from different agencies.

For example, my own workgroup analysed the spatial distribution of "bamboo forest" landuse category in relation to distance from main watercourses (i.e. Nam Songkhram and major tributaries). This was partly as a way to demonstrate that bamboo forest's (generally typified by *paa bung paa thaam* flooded forest) distribution is closely related to water courses, but bears no relation to the location of state-classifed "conservation" or "economic" forest areas, and therefore suffers from inevitable "invisibility" in official statistics as being both a habitat of significant conservation significance and of importance to the local economy and livelihoods through the biodiversity harvested.

To conclude, all participants were presented with a course certificate by Dr Sanasanee, who noted in her closing speech the growing application and potential of GIS in wetlands management, planning and policy, by aiding decision-makers. In another brief speech, Khun Tawatchai Rattanasorn, MWBP Thailand National Coordinator thanked the organisers at Mahidol University's Wetland Management Research and Training Centre for their efforts in providing such a relevant and worthwhile course, and hoped that there would be more cooperation in future between the institutions involved.