



Thai Baan Research

In 2003-2004, IUCN – The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the South East Asia River Network (SEARIN), in partnership with the Nakhon Phanom Environmental Conservation Cooperation (NECC), helped villagers from four Lower Songkhram River Basin villages conduct Thai Baan research. Thai Baan participatory resource research involves community-based documentation of local resources and their importance to village livelihoods. Knowledge about resource use and ecology, including trends and historical resource quality was consolidated on six issues: local ecosystems, fish, fishing gear, local vegetation, agriculture and gardens, and cattle and buffaloes. Thai Baan research efforts are expanding and will be further expanded under the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Project (MWBP). The Thai Baan experience is being 'scaled up' to other countries.

A catch monitoring project was completed during the preparatory phase. It was carried out in 2003 in four villages. This project, in retrospect, was not very empowering for local villagers, nor did it build local capacity – villagers had less ownership of the knowledge because they had to wait for results, and the research goals were more about numbers than livelihoods or villagers' relation to the resource. The villagers did not express interest in continuing this sort of research in the future. Thai Baan research promised to involve the villagers on a more fundamental level, where they had influence over the process and outcome of the research which would be more useful in addressing their particular local needs and situation.

In 2003, initial contact was made between IUCN and partners, and Thai Baan organizers with SEARIN, to discuss starting up Thai Baan research in the Sri Songkhram district.

In June 2003, MWBP partners organized a series of exchange visits in the four selected villages. During the exchange visits, villagers met and presented information about village conservation techniques and their concerns about natural resource use changes and availability.

Following the exchange visits, IUCN and SEARIN facilitators spoke with villagers about Thai Baan participatory resource research and asked if they were interested in being involved this relatively new and demanding method of research. A final meeting about Thai Baan research was held and included representatives from Pak Mun and Rasi Salai (previous SEARIN Thai Baan research sites) who discussed their experience with Thai Baan research. After the exchange visits and discussions with facilitators, all four villages decided to go forward with the research (six teams of ten in each village totalling 240 villagers).

In July 2003, a training workshop was held for the IUCN volunteers. Organizers from SEARIN worked closely with them on how to facilitate the research – including responsibilities and limitations – such as how to facilitate rather than guide the research.

In August 2003, researchers from all four villages met for the first workshop. The goal of the meeting was for villagers to identify the topics they wanted address in the research. It was agreed they would only research a topic if there were 30 individuals in a group.

At the training workshop, village researchers expanded the issue-areas to include subtopics and more specific research goals. Subtopics are similar for each of the issue-areas and include classification of the resource, livelihood importance, past trends versus current use and availability, marketing mechanisms, and cultural and social importance of the resource.

At the beginning of December 2003, project researchers and representatives from Rasi Salai and Pak Mun attended a progress meeting in Sri Songkhram. Researchers and facilitators presented progress reports on each issue-area. Village researchers presented their initial findings to the larger group.

Lasting for several months, the second phase followed up on each issue-area in greater detail. Volunteers continued to facilitate group meetings and carry out interviews, but village researchers delved deeper into the issues and sub-topics. Another important objective of this phase was to cross-check the data to make sure the same level of information was





collected in all villages and the same terms were used. The ecology group played an important role by linking ecosystems with the issues identified by other groups as being important.

Thai Baan research encourages related activities that address resource availability and livelihoods unconnected to the research goals or groups. These activities include holding environmental festivals with education components or promoting value-added products made from local resources.

In the early months of 2004, villagers and IUCN facilitators hosted a Wetlands Festival that showcased and promoted the rich biodiversity of the Songkhram Basin. Villagers hoped to show outsiders and the younger generation how important fishing is to their lives.

In addition to informal environmental education through activities like the Wetlands Festival, villagers and Thai Baan researchers wanted to promote formal environmental education in the area's 17 primary schools and two high schools. The schools were interested in teaching students about the local ecology (particularly the inundated forest), and wanted to use information from the Thai Baan research to make lesson plans. Environmental education benefits students because it raises awareness about the important linkages between ecology and local livelihoods. The exchange of knowledge is empowering for village researchers because students learn about the resources vital to their livelihoods.

The connections between Thai Baan research and environmental education are promising. Other suggestions for future environmental education include integrating students with future research and expanding environmental education to more schools and to universities like the Rajaphat Institute of Sakorn Nakorn.

A progress meeting was held after the second phase and as was the case in the first meeting, researchers from all four villages, IUCN and SEARIN facilitators and representatives from Rasi Salai and Pak Mun, attended the meeting. Village researchers presented their findings, discussed problems and concerns, reevaluated the research goals and looked at the next steps in the research.

During this phase, the volunteers verified that the compiled results made sense to the village researchers, and read the draft report with them so that they could make changes in content and wording. Village researchers, also provided information on some new topics, or fleshed-out ones that had been addressed previously (e.g. information on Giant Catfish or land use in the local ecosystems). Lastly, villagers and project facilitators discussed how the research should be wrapped-up and how they should proceed after the completing the final report.

A further meeting was held at the end of October 2004. The meeting included village researchers from the four villages, representatives from Rasi Salai and Pak Mun, IUCN and SEARIN facilitators, and observers from other villages where Thai Baan research was starting up. Researchers presented their findings, and facilitators released the final project document.

With an additional grant from WANI Communications, a 15-minute video on Thai Baan research was prepared in partnership with Infocus Asia. The video was shown at several regional meetings including the SE Asia Water Forum and the IUCN Regional Conservation Forum. An 8-minute version was prepared for broadcast on Star TV and Infocus followed up on having it broadcast on BBC World and Discovery channels.

Thai Baan Research has generated considerable interest from regional governments and NGOs to extend it to all of the demonstration sites. It is now being undertaken in Stung Treng, Cambodia led by a local NGO partner Culture & Environmental Protection Agency (CEPA).

The monitoring, assessment and management of a complex wetland resource like the Mekong Basin requires regular local monitoring, but to be effective, it requires a network of local monitors able to exchange experiences and engage in the decision-making process.

