



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme



Thai/Lao Lesson Exchange Visit

Between 7 and 11 November 2005, the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) Thailand Songkhram Demonstration Site hosted learning/knowledge exchange with a large group of visitors from the Attapeu MWBP Demonstration Site. Altogether, 27 persons joined the exchange visit, including a small contingent from the Lao National Programme Office in Vientiane and local village representatives from Attapeu province. For most of the participants it was their first trip to the Songkhram Demonstration Site and for nearly all the Lao villagers it was their first time outside of Lao PDR. Hence, it was a significant trip for everyone involved, both guests and hosts alike, for exchanging experiences between these two quite different wetland sites, joined by a common thread of being situated on major Mekong tributaries where fishing and use of wetland products are important livelihood activities for many families.

The exchange visit was held in order to fulfill the following main objectives:

- To give opportunities for target villagers to exchange lessons and experiences from each site on use of indigenous knowledge in systematically recording and managing the wetland related resources.
- To facilitate discussion on experience sharing between district and provincial technical counterparts and the Thai Baan research team.
- To motivate the participants from Attapeu to apply the lessons gained from the trip in implementing village development plans.
- To evaluate and monitor some of the lessons and achievements of Thai Baan research to date, through applying participatory methods.



Mr Soukchay Sinlapha, Deputy Head of Provincial Steering Committee in Attapeu, addresses Mr Nakhon Khong-nguan, the Sri Songkhram District Chief, during the initial introductory meeting in the District Administration Office

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The Attapeu participants crossed over the Mekong into Thailand from Tha Kek town in Khammouan Province on 7 November 2005 and after a rapid morning tour of Nakhon Phanom town and That Phanom stupa, were taken to Sri Songkhram District for an orientation session in the Demonstration Site's new office. The following morning the participants were officially welcomed to Sri Songkhram by the District Chief, Khun Nakhon Khongnuan. He gave a glowing report of the value of Thai Baan Research to assessing local livelihoods and monitoring biodiversity in the *paa bung paa thaam* (flooded forest). He admitted that he personally had read the Thai Baan book twice over and as somebody relatively new to the region it had helped him understand the local area, people, culture and especially, the local terminology for landscape features. Khun Rattaphon Pitakthepsombut, Project Co-Manager, then gave a general introduction to the Lower Songkhram Basin and Demonstration Site project progress to date, setting the scene for the exchange visit.

After this introduction, the participants were taken to nearby Ban Tha Bor village, where the Nakhon Phanom Provincial Natural Resources and Environment Office were assisting the villagers in replanting an area of degraded community forest with the native tree species, *dton hae*. The Attapeu group, after first being welcomed by the Ban Tha Bor Village Headman and Thai Baan researchers, picked up bagged seedlings, mattocks and watering cans and got down to the business of tree planting which helped build up appetites for lunch in the forest temple.



Villagers in Ban Tha Bor had germinated and nursed the *dton hae* seedlings that were planted on a tract of community forest land bordering the floodplain



Mrs Banyen, a villager from Attapeu plants out a young seedling in the newly prepared soil, hoping that it will survive the coming dry season

Once fed and watered, everyone headed for the river, taking a boat trip down the Huay Sing stream, where in the past *pla beug* (Giant Mekong Catfish) regularly came up to feed each rainy season over local salt deposits. Villagers noted that since building a small dam across the stream, the *pla beug* had stopped returning to the area, while fish catches had declined greatly and areas formerly used by poor families for dry season rice cultivation (*naa saeng*) were now permanently flooded. This is a classic local water management issue and now Thai Baan researchers are exploring the possibility of removing the earth dam and restoring the reservoir area to flooded forest habitat. The Lao participants were interested to see the size and scale of some local fishing gears in use along the Songkhram river, such as *gad* which blocks the downstream passage of migrating fish off the floodplain, and said that such gears were not used in Attapeu, as the villagers still mostly fished for subsistence needs, not commercially, as is common in the Songkhram river.

Back in Ban Tha Bor, the Lao participants were split into three groups and tasked with going into the community to conduct a participatory monitoring and evaluation exercise to discuss the level of involvement and awareness of Thai Baan research by villagers. The Lao groups conducted semi-structured interviews with villagers and community leaders they met, with questions mostly centered around the impacts and benefits derived from conducting Thai Baan research. For example, a group of six staff and villagers from Attapeu interviewed the Tambon Administration Organisation (TAO) Chairman of Tha Bor Songkhram Sub-District, the Headman of Ban Tha Bor and the two Headmen from Ban Yang Ngoi. The village leaders stressed that the Thai Baan Research process had been influential in raising the awareness of villagers about the threats to the flooded forest and aquatic resources, and the villagers were now more keen to implement local conservation and wetland management activities, such as forest replanting or expanding fish conservation zones. While they spoke, novices from the Ban Tha Bor temple were gathering large bundles of bamboo to place in the pool in front of the temple and act as dry season fish refuges, giving meaning to the leader's words.



The Lao participants are guided down the Huay Sing Stream to its confluence with the Nam Songkhram. This Tributary is blocked by both a small dam and numerous fishing gears which act as barriers to migrating fish and are controversial local management issues for villagers



The Chairman of the Tha Bor Songkhram TAO discusses local natural resource management issues and approaches with a group of Attapeu villagers and district government staff

The next day the participants moved to Ban Pak Yam, about 30kms from Sri Songkhram market, and started the day by feeding back the observations of the previous day, by using “photo stories” to illustrate particular issues and angles they had learned during discussions with villagers. They then listened to a presentation from Chainarong Srettachau, advisor to the Thai Baan Research Network, about the history, process and stages of Thai Baan research and representatives of the Thai Baan researchers talked about their experiences. Other project partners who contributed to the proceedings and gave their personal insights into the value of the research from an outside perspective, included Ajarn Sobsan Petchkam, a lecturer at Sakhon Nakhon Rajabhat University, and Ajarn Samanchai Suwan-amphai, a local teacher and active conservationist. Later, the visitors and hosts were split into focus groups for more in-depth discussions on particular areas of interest. As evening approached, participants walked round Ban Pak Yam to see some of the local fish processing activities being practiced in the village, particularly *pla daek* (fermented fish) and *nam pla* (fish sauce). The day was rounded off with a traditional *bai-see soo-khwan* (wrist tying friendship

ceremony) and communal dinner, where the potent local *lao-lao* (rice whisky) could be compared with its Attapeu counterpart.

On 10 November 2005, the participants left Ban Pak Yam and drove to the Nakhon Phanom Provincial Natural Resources and Environment Office, for a meeting with more provincial level partners, from both the government and non-government sectors. The functions and roles of each institution and organisation were explained to the Lao visitors, before opening up the floor to questions and discussion. It was stressed that each project partner contributed something unique and the strength of the Thai Baan research network's success to date was the wide and complimentary collaboration of a wide partner base from a range of sectors. These include civil society organisations and people's networks as well as some core government agencies and NGO's, which helps legitimise the process and results amongst diverse actors. Finally, the discussion turned to the lessons learned and the potential application of the Thai Baan research network in Attapeu Province in wetland-reliant communities. Generally there was a positive outlook for adopting and adapting a Thai Baan type approach (to be known as Sao Baan Research) in at least several of the villages with Headmen in attendance, with village-level discussions taking place on their return.

In conclusion, this exchange trip and study tour was regarded as a success by all participants from both Demonstration Sites, who were able to review and recap many lessons related to application of the Thai Baan research model in the Lower Songkhram River Basin. At the same time, it gave a broader perspective of the situation pertaining in each Demonstration Site and forged friendships and linkages between the two countries at a multi-stakeholder level.



Villagers from Attapeu and Songkhram, together with national, provincial and district-level government staff from Attapeu and MWBP Research Assistants discuss some of the impacts and outputs of the Tai Baan research in focus groups in Ban Pak Yam on 9 November, 2005

