



## Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

### **World Wetlands Day, 2 February 2006 Media Visit to MWBP Songkhram Project Site, Thailand**

#### **Day One: 1 February 2006**

The day began early with ten Bangkok journalists and the MWBP team leaving on a 6am flight to Nakhon Phanom. From there the group continued on to Si Songkhram to drop off bags at their hotel and then continued onto Ban Pak Yam (the village where the Thai Baan research of the lower Songkhram river basin is based). The villagers and MWBP had set up very colourful and informative displays about the local biodiversity around the village Wat complex where World Wetlands day took place.



It was the largest gathering yet for Thailand's World Wetlands Day with about 200 people attending ranging from students and academics, to media (local and national), to heads of government agencies in Nakhon Phanom and Sakhon Nakhon, to Thai Baan research network members from other basins.

Some of the displays set up to demonstrate Thai Baan research and the biodiversity of the Lower Songkhram River Basin:



Before heading off on a boat trip, Khun Suriya Kotamee (chairman of the Thai Baan research for the Nam Songkhram Basin) gave a talk about their work and what would be seen along the river including dry season rice cultivation, flooded forest, fish traps, and a weir.



The group then walked down to the long tail boats from Ban Pak Yam. The river was very low due to the dry season and none of the ‘flooded forests’ are submerged at this time of year.



The boats headed off down the river filled to the brim with the participants gliding precariously through the water. Along the way various fish traps were pointed out, some of which are used now and others which are only used in the wet season.



Khun Suriya Kotamee guided the group through the various stops along the Songkhram River. He is a strong activist for preserving what is left of the flooded forests (*Paa Bung Paa Thaamd*) and a charismatic leader of the Thai Baan research group.



A traditional lunch took place in the now dry flooded forest. Mats were laid out amongst the trees and the village's women prepared lunch. The lunch included all local specialties such as fried fish, papaya salad, and laab with ants.



The long tail boats then headed back to the village for some displays of local products. This included a talk about the very important fish processing that occurs in Ban Pak Yam so as to make fermented fish paste and sauce.

The fermenting process:



Women with the finished local products:



Fish drying in the village:



Later in the afternoon, journalists had discussions with Khun Suriya Kotamee, Khun Rattaphon Pitaktapsombut (the MWBP Project Co- Manager), and Khun Tawatchai Rattanasorn (MWBP National Coordinator) to learn more about the Songkhram project.



Everyone stayed on until the evening when again the villagers prepared dinner, which was laid out on low circular tables on woven mats back at the Wat. There was traditional music and singing as well as a talk on the 'history of Nam Songkhram basin communities' by Paw Sinsamout Pakphrom. As the former village headman, he has witnessed over 70 years of change in the village and the surrounding area. A short film about the lower Songkhram river basin and the Thai Baan research followed his talk.

Some traditional singing:



## Day Two: 2 February 2006

At nine o'clock, on World Wetlands Day Kuhn Chalothorn Pahkod (Deputy Governor of Nakhon Phanom Province), Khun Nakon Kongnuan (District Officer of Songkhram), Dr. Nawarat Krairapanond (National Programme Manager for Thailand), Peter-John Meynell (UNDP Programme Team Leader for MWBP), and Khun Tawatchai Rattanasorn (MWBP National Programme Coordinator for Thailand) presided over the opening ceremony which included the restocking of the village reservoir with small fish which had been bred elsewhere. Many people joined in the symbolical release of the fish.

Releasing the fish:



Even more people were present than the previous day, including almost all school children from the area, who will hopefully learn about the rich environmental resources that the lower Songkhram holds and which need to be protected in order to sustain future use. All the school children spent time visiting the exhibits and in the afternoon partook in a painting competition of their views of river life.

All the school children spent time visiting the exhibits and learning more about the importance of preserving the biodiversity of the Songkhram river basin.



School children looking at pictures of fish traps drawn by a local artist.



The local artist helping the children work on their pictures of the Songkhram and river life for a painting competition in the afternoon.



After the opening ceremony Khun Peter-John Meynell and Khun Tawatchai Rattanasorn gave a talk introducing the work of MWBP in the Lower Songkhram River Basin. This was followed by a presentation of the Thai Baan research on fish species of the Lower Songkhram River Basin given by the Thai Baan researchers of the Thai Baan Research Network (Nam Songkhram, Rasi Salai, Pak Mun, Salween, Chiang Khong, Kaeng Sua Ten, and Stung Treng).

Khun Peter-John Meynell and KhunTawatchai Rattanasorn introducing the work of MWBP in the lower Songkhram River basin.



The Thai Baan Research panel:



Lunch was preceded by the group all trying and then voting on their favorite foods made using local fish and aquatic life as well as plants from the flooded forest.

In the afternoon a variety of speakers expressed their views on the Thai Bann research and the use of indigenous knowledge. Khun Rattaphon Pitakethepsombut (Co-Manager of the MWBP Thailand demonstration site) gave a seminar on MWBP's work on how to sustainably develop the Nam Songkhram Basin. There were also discussions about policies for wetland management and the role of civil society as well as the community rights and participation in local natural resource management. Dr. Somsak (former Director of RECOFTC) also gave a talk about the value of wetlands and how important it is for the local population to participate in learning how to use them sustainably.

Dr Somsak:



Dr. Nawarat Krairapanond (National Programme manager for Thailand) speaking with a journalist from the Bangkok post.



Later in the afternoon, a small group of journalists were driven out to a controversial site where a private company has purchased communal wetlands and is now continuing to expand without compensating. They grow mostly non-native crops of corn and tomatoes for their near by processing factory. The journalists took lots of photos and made a note of the location with GPS so they may return by helicopter in order to learn more about the company's potentially illegal encroachment onto the wetlands.

In the evening there was more entertainment, mostly by young village students playing instruments and dancing. After dinner there was a traditional ceremony, conducted by the villagers, wishing all their guests good luck and tying strings around our wrists to help keep the good spirits with us.

MWBP staff sharing dinner together:



World Wetlands Day was a great success this year in Thailand, with a record level of attendance. Various parties from local government officials, as well as media to school children attended, all learning more about the importance of wetlands to rural livelihoods. Everyone saw how in order to ensure sustainable livelihoods and reduce poverty in the long run it is necessary to manage the remaining wetland resources wisely and that this can best be done by strengthening the capacity of local people to manage their own resource base. The Thai Baan research clearly demonstrated how local villagers are becoming engaged in local management and planning through undertaking their own research, analysis and monitoring activities. Hopefully, the media will also be able to raise awareness both locally and nationally about the issues facing wetlands (from over harvesting, to forest clearing, to the planting of alien species, to the acquisition of communal land by private companies) and how MWBP and Thai Baan research is working to help strengthen the position of local people in order to help better represent themselves in the decision making process and therefore take charge over their wetlands and their future.