

## Executive Summary

The *Chaobaan* Research on the Yom River, Mae Yom forest, and the society and culture of the Sa-earb people has been conducted by local villagers (*Chaobaan*) in four villages in Tambon Sa-earb, Song District, Phrae Province for one year and ten months, from January 2004 to November 2005. These villagers live in the Mae Yom forest and on the banks of the Yom River, in an area that has been declared the Mae Yom National Park. This area spans from the Kaeng Sue Ten rapids through the Kaeng Kham rapids in Ban Toongtongsri village, Chiang Muan District, Payao Province.

The seven topics that the research has covered are (1) the ecological system, (2) vegetables, mushrooms and forest produce, (3) herbs, (4) wildlife and insects, (5) Aquatic fauna, (6) wood resource in the Mae Yom forest, and (7) society and culture. The research has also explored how the beliefs, rituals and local knowledge of these communities have aided them in their preservation efforts. Research on all of these topics has helped to shed light on the complex and diverse ecosystems of the Yom River and Mae Yom forest as well as the economic, social and cultural characteristics of the local villagers.



The *Chaobaan* Research conducted in this area employs the same methodologies used in the *Thai Baan* Research already implemented in the Mun River Basin. This methodology includes meeting with the researchers, carrying out field surveys, interviewing key informants, and conducting participatory observation. As with the *Thai Baan* Research, villagers are the key researchers and their traditional knowledge is used to interpret various pertinent issues. Environmental NGOs provide minimum assistance, mainly by helping participants take notes and prepare documentation.

The research on the ecological system of the upper Yom river basin has shown that it is a highly complex ecosystem that can be divided into two major subsystems: the Terrestrial and Aquatic. The Terrestrial Subsystem contains *Pah Lao* (secondary forests), *Pah Perng*, *Pah Pae* (deciduous dipterocarp forests) and strips of land on both banks of the river, while the Aquatic Subsystem is comprised of whirlpools, beaches, cataracts, *Long*, *Lang* (fishing ground) and tributaries. Local villagers are dependent on the wide variety of fauna and flora that live in these diverse ecosystems for their livelihoods.

The research on vegetables, mushrooms and bamboo shoots in the Mea Yom forest has turned up 91 different types of vegetables (49 wild species and 42 homegrown), 26 types of mushroom, and 7 types of bamboo shoot. The growth of this



vegetation is made possible by the diverse ecological subsystems, which vary from season to season. The produce of this vegetation is collected by villagers for both their own consumption and for sale. The income generated from this vegetation can amount to several hundred thousand baht per year.

The research on local herbs has found that the villagers make use of at least 190 herbs including 54 perennial trees, 40 shrubs, 57 groves, 38 climbers, and 1 type of mushroom. These herbs help to provide for the health and economic security of the villagers. Also, some herbs are used for making traditionally distilled liquor. Knowledge about medicinal herbs is traditionally passed down from generation to generation and through some ancient scriptures. This has allowed them to rely largely on local resources and knowledge for treatment of many ailments.

The research on the wildlife in the area has been measured in terms of how local beliefs about these animals have helped to protect the forest rather than a quantitative analysis of the species.

One such traditional belief concerns the many salt licks in the area. Both earth and water salt licks (*Pong*) are a source of minerals for the wildlife in this region and many animals descend upon the salt licks to gain strength. While feeding on the licks these animals are extremely vulnerable to hunters. The traditional



beliefs of the villagers state that these salt licks are protected by spirits. The villagers, therefore, refrain from shooting animals while they gather at the salt licks for fear that they will be harmed by these spirits.

The villagers also believe that certain animals cannot be hunted. The peacock is among these animals. Harming or slaughtering a peacock is strongly forbidden and failing to observe this custom is tantamount to a very serious breach (*Khud*) of local norms. It is believed that anyone breaking with this sacred custom will be met with curses on themselves, their families and their livelihood. Therefore, local villagers do not harm or kill any peacock in the Mea Yom forest, one of the last two habitats for this species in Thailand.

Through these two examples the research has shown that local customs and beliefs have contributed to the protection to the biodiversity in the region.

The research on aquatic fauna has documented 83 fish species, 4 mollusks, 4 crabs, 2 shrimps, 2 frogs and 3 small frogs (*Khiaad*). The research has focused on the aquatic fauna that has been caught regularly by the villagers, not on endangered species or migrant species. Among the 83 fish species found, 77 are local species and the rest are migrant fish.



Based on the study, we have found 53 fish species, 17 scale-less fish and 36 scaled fish that are caught regularly by the villagers. These fish species inhabit the diverse ecological subsystems of the Yom River including in the whirlpool, beach, *Long, Lang* and tributaries. These ecological subsystems are all essential for the survival of these fish species and ultimately to the livelihoods of the villagers.

The results of the research on the history of use of natural resources in the Mea Yom forest can be divided into 4 historical periods.

**1. Local, traditional sustainable forest use (before 1957):**

During this period the villagers relied heavily on the forest for their survival. Local people collected forest produce for food and medicine and timber was harvested for use in the construction of houses, rice barns and household utensils.

Agriculturally, local villagers grew rice, vegetables and other plants, including chili, peanuts, sesame, cotton, and tobacco, near the banks of the Yom River. The land in this area is ideal for agriculture because it is both fertile, due to the constant nourishment of the land by minerals from the forest and the river, and because it is close to a source of water.



During this era the local villagers were fully aware of the importance of the Mea Yom forest for their survival. They understood that they relied on the resources of the forest for their food, medicine, tools, and shelter. For this reason all activities in the forest were guided by the local belief that all natural resources are sacred and protected by spirits. Every year they would perform rituals to ask the protecting spirits for permission for future use of the resources in the forest and for forgiveness for the resources that they had already used. They believed that the spirits would provide protection for their residences and the rice paddies, mountains, rivers and weirs. These beliefs have played an intricate role in the sustainable natural resource management in the forest.

## **2. The Concession Years (after 1957):**

In 1937 the government first began granting logging concessions for the forests of Thailand, including Mea Yom forest. After the first wave of destruction, the East Asiatic Co. came back in 1952 to log the Mea Yom forest again. The activities of this corporation were very destructive to the lives of the local people in Tambon Sa-earb. For example, logs that were floated downstream destroyed many of the villagers' dykes. The worst part of the situation was that the villagers were not able hold anyone liable for the damages forced upon them by the government-supported logging. The situation got even worse after 1957 when a concession was given to Chart Piboon Co. and Phrae Tham Mai Co. who then trained and employed local villagers.



While this may seem like it would be beneficial to the local economy, it would have serious negative consequences in the post-concession period.

### **3. The Post-Concession Period:**

During this period the villagers turned from their traditional sustainable livelihoods based on subsistence agriculture and the collection of food from the forest to wage labor as employees of the logging companies. As working-age men left to earn wages in the logging industry the land was left to be tilled by women and the elderly causing a significant reduction in output, which in turn caused a greater dependency on the wages from logging. As villagers became skilled in the use of modern logging and wood making tools they left the giant corporations to form their own logging business. By the end of the period most people in Tambon Sa-earb were reliant on the destructive and unsustainable logging for their livelihoods.

### **4. The Great Transformation (1991 – present)**

In 1991 the villagers formed their first local conservation group. Through this group, concerned villagers developed community rules to stem the growing tide of destructive logging by local villagers. These rules were observed by all of the locals under threat of penalties for any violation. The community discovered that besides helping to curb destructive logging by local groups, the formation of this group had another, unintended



but positive consequence. The villagers noticed that internal conflicts among the villagers started to recede as the local people began to work together to save the forest.

Local villagers certainly weren't the only ones that were using the local natural resources of the Mae Yom Forest in an unsustainable manner. There were many conflicts between the local community and other outside interest groups. The local conservation groups had to employ other methods to address these conflicts. These methods included staging public campaigns and using their connections with community leaders to lobby against the destructive and unsustainable use of the natural resources. As the villagers became more organized, serious, and skillful in their conservation work, conflicts with the other interest groups also began to decline.

In 1993, the villagers resolved to completely refrain from cutting down any trees in the Mea Yom forest. At a symbolic ceremony, in the presence of politicians and high-ranking officers, including the Director General of the Royal Forest Department, the villagers surrendered all of their logging equipment to the Army Commander of Region 3 in an expression of their pledge to stop logging and to help protect the forest.

Since that time, local villagers have been working to protect the Mea Yom forest through the Forest Lover Group. This group



has conducted reforestation projects and environmental campaigns, and has performed tree ordinations and ceremonies as a way to prolong the life of the river. Moreover, they are actively campaigning against the proposed Kaeng Sue Ten Dam, which would inundate much of the forest under a reservoir. The local people are now fully committed to protecting the Mea Yom forest and the community's rights to the natural resources therein. To this day they are stringently abiding by their self-imposed rules of forest protection.

The research on the socio-cultural characteristics of the Sa-earb people has shown that all of the people of this region feel a strong sense of community and brotherhood towards each other. This is mainly due to the fact that all of the people in this region are descendents from the same ethnic group, who are believed to have migrated from Ban Toong Wua Daeng, Muang Sar (currently Sar District in Nan Province) around 200 years ago.

The villagers still retain the traditions, customs, and culture of their forbearers through the practice of traditional rituals and ceremonies to pay homage to the protecting spirits. Also, they still strictly observe local traditional customs and show genuine affection towards each other. Villagers often spend a significant portion of the day greeting and helping their fellow brothers and sisters. This strong sense of tradition, community, and brotherhood has allowed these close nit communities to flourish until this very day.

