

Thai Baan Research at the Salween Villagers' Research by the Thai-Karen Communities

Executive Summary

The Thai Baan Research at the Salween, the way of the river and forest has been carried out by ethnic *Pakakayaw*, the ethnic Thai Karen, from 50 villages in the Salween basin along the border of Burma and Thailand in the district of Mae Sariang and Sobmoei, Mae Hong Son province, Thailand. The research covers the area from Pa Tang to Sobmoei (the Moei confluence) and includes data concerning fish species, traditional fishing gears, agriculture, indigenous faunas and socio-cultural of the Thai-Karen. This is an attempt to explore the diverse ecological system and biodiversity of the Salween basin, the way of life, economy, society and culture of communities dwelling in the ecological systems.

Capitalizing on the successful Thai Baan research methodology, Thai Baan Research of the Salween relies on direct involvements and knowledge of grassroots villagers for explanation on various relevant issues with support from environmental NGOs as research assistants.



The Research exploits a variety of research methods including focus group discussion, participatory observation, field research, and interview of key informants. The research has been conducted from February 2003 - September 2005, altogether 2 years and 7 months. The Karen language was chosen as the main medium for the study.

The research on the Salween River along the border sheds light on more than 18 ecological systems including different rapids, fish habitats, beaches, and over 15 sub-ecosystems in its tributaries which boast the very rich diversity in terms of fish species and the sources of food for the villagers.

Based on the fish study in the Salween River and its tributaries, 70 fish species have been found and the villagers use as many as 19 different traditional fishing gears. The gears are chosen for use to suit the complex ecological systems and seasonal change. Some are appropriate for the use of women as they can use them better than their counterparts do.

Some fishing methods reflect relationships between the local people, nature, and their faith in nature such as *Tuek Kae*. It is believed that if the *Tuek Kae* is permanently installed to trap fish and not removed from the river to let it flow freely again, the catch will be forever depleted.



As to the study on traditional agriculture of the communities, we have found the local communities applying different farming methods appropriate to different bioregions. Three main methods can be cited here including;

1. Riverbanks Gardening: The water level in the Salween River starts to decline after Monsoon season making the white sand beaches emerge. Full of nutrients flushed there by the river, the sand beaches are fertile for the growing of more than 30 varieties of vegetables including peanuts, watermelon, tobacco, etc., for their own consumption and sale.

2. Swidden/Rotational Farming: Swidden farming is key to food production among communities along the Salween. Every family tills the land and leaves it for 5-8 years before returning to till the same plot of land. The researchers have found 52 traditional varieties of rice and more than 130 varieties of other food crops.

3. Rice Growing: Communities in the forests along tributaries of the Salween River grow rice on low-lying land on the banks of the tributaries. Based on traditional methods, the water is efficiently irrigated to feed the terrace farming system, as if they are “borrowing” water from the tributaries, and then let it flow back into the creeks again. Every year, villagers organize ceremonies to pay respect to the spirits that protect the small



dykes and to show their gratitude to the Mother Nature that makes their land fertile.

All year round, a series of ceremonies is performed by the swidden and rice growing farmers to ask for permission to use the land, river and forest to grow food to feed their families. The rituals reflect their intrinsic respects toward every living being and nature, the value of which has been deeply ingrained in every dweller in the Salween forest.

Since parts of the research site are under the National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary, the issue of wildlife has also been covered to gather local knowledge and traditional belief for forest and wildlife protection.

Salt lick full of minerals is where a variety of wildlife gathers to eat. Believing that these animals are protected, the villagers will not shoot them while they are gathered at the salt lick. They have been told by their forbearers that “Everything is owned. We shall consume just to make us to live by. We will not destroy as we want to leave it for the next generations.” Also, in each community, a set of rules is set up against hunting of certain animals with penalties enforced if it is violated. Several villages situated by the creeks declare the fish sanctuary and community forest to enable them to manage the resources on a sustainable basis.



The Salween forest is also home to a variety of faunas that the local villagers use as foods and herbs based on their traditional knowledge. During the research, we have found at least 77 varieties of herbs, 39 edible plants and 23 herbal edible plants in the Salween forest, which provide the very basis for the communities.

Communities dwelling in Salween forests are related by blood and other kinds of kinship. Mutually helping each other, they perform ceremonies together and share very strong affinity between the people and the communities in the river basin. It was found that communities on both sides of the river relate to each other beyond the constraints of national border. Even though several communities are not recognized by any state, but heeding to their ancestors' word for "drink water, protect water, live in forest, protect forest", they live together in harmony with nature. The thread of their culture is as long as the length of the free-flowing Salween River.

