

# The village-researchers of Tai Baan

## Improving wetland management through joint learning

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In river-based communities of North East Thailand, *Tai Baan* or villager-centered participatory research has proved to be an effective tool. Local people draw on their own knowledge of local natural resources to document bio-cultural diversity, thereby challenging the conventional strategies of state-led water management schemes. The *Tai Baan* research is helping fishers, farmers and other wetland resource users to identify ways of improving the use of the fragile wetlands on which their livelihoods and culture depend.

The 19-meter high Pak Mun Dam in Northeast Thailand was built as a hydropower project between from 1990-94, near the confluence of the Mun River and Mekong River. The controversial dam destroyed what had been one of the most important river fishery sites in the region, through blocking fish migrations and drowning out rapids. Even before the dam was built for hydro power generation, local villagers and NGOs predicted it would have far reaching negative environmental and economic impacts.

### Expert environmental studies

These concerns were brushed aside by state officials and experts hired to conduct environmental studies. Finally, it took the accumulated evidence of seven years of social and environmental degradation, plus prolonged protests both locally and in the capital, before the Thai government eventually agreed to allow the river to run freely for a year. The water gates were opened, and a regional university was hired to conduct an official impact assessment and future options study.

In spite of these experiences, various government agencies continue to make plans to build dams, water gates and various water management schemes across the Songkhram Basin. Such schemes would risk altering the flow and flood regimes of the wetlands,

putting at risk the livelihoods of many thousands of households who depend on the natural fisheries and aquatic biodiversity of the lower river floodplain.

### Demonstration site

In 2002, the seasonal and permanent wetland habitats in the Lower Songkhram River Basin were identified as wetlands of international significance by Thailand's Office of Natural Resources and Environment Policy and Planning. The area was also selected as the Thailand demonstration site for the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP), a joint programme of the four governments of the Lower Mekong Basin - Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. Within the context of this programme local communities were empowered to participate in the assessment and monitoring of wetland resources.

One of the aims of the MWBP demonstration site was to obtain data about aquatic resources and local understanding of wetlands-based livelihoods. It was also concerned with ensuring more community participation in river basin management. The process was supported by the earlier SEARIN experiences gained with *Tai Baan* research, with communities on the Mun River.

### Tai Baan experiences

In the Songkhram River area the *Tai Baan* villager-centered research was first applied in 2001, *Tai Baan* meaning 'villagers' in Lao language. Wary of externally generated official studies, villagers in the area enlisted the support of the Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARIN), a regional NGO, to help prepare their own parallel study. Using the *Tai Baan* approach, they demonstrated that once the river was able to flow again the riverine ecosystem was resilient enough to partially recover. This experience also contributed to validating *Tai Baan* as a valuable research instrument.

For many villagers the *Tai Baan* research approach was at first difficult to accept. They were accustomed to a culture of top-down planning. Therefore the idea of participating in studies whose outcomes could be used, for example, to influence government policy, was a significant challenge. In addition, they would be taking part in a research which offered no immediate material advantage. In fact, it would cost them time and required fishers to share specialised knowledge about fishing gears with outsiders, something they were initially cautious about, as some of these gears are considered illegal by the state.

Moreover, local people are often unaccustomed to talking about their





everyday livelihood activities in a research context. They know the local Lao names of fish, other aquatic organisms and plants, but rarely think that this knowledge could be useful to outsiders.

Despite these obstacles some 240 villagers decided to join what came to be known as the Lower Songkhram River Basin Tai Baan Research Network, and took part in the programme as participating researchers and co-learners.

### Research steps

To succeed Tai Baan research requires time, patience and flexibility on the part of both village researchers and facilitators. A first important step is generating interest in the approach and the way it can be used to manage and sustain natural and cultural diversity. Because it involves participatory processes of co-learning, those taking part must feel confident that they are the owners of the information they collect.

Then steps are taken to train the research assistants to support villager research activities. Together with village researchers they identify local needs and interests, and formulate specific research objectives. Tai Baan researchers from the four communities met in a workshop and agreed that there were six issues that needed to be addressed: fish, fishing gear, flooded forest vegetation, agricultural systems including riverbank agriculture, raising of large livestock, and local ecosys-

tems.

The village researchers split into sub-groups and refined the specific research topics within each issue, like for example livelihood importance, past trends versus current use and availability, marketing mechanisms, and cultural and social importance of the identified resources. The Tai Baan researchers started to collect and exchange necessary background information.

### Closely involved

In the Lower Songkhram River Basin the data was assembled on the seasonal variations in the communities' wetlands resource-based economy, and its complex ecological setting. From June 2003 onwards, the MWBP facilitators organised informal village meetings, arranged exchange visits between communities, and consulted key stakeholders in the locality. During these visits, villagers were able to study examples of different approaches to conservation, including fish conservation pools and community-managed forests.

By becoming closely involved in village activities and building up relationships of trust, friendship and a sense of common purpose, the outside facilitators and researchers not only played an important role in helping initiate the Tai Baan process, they also helped sustain it. They were frequently in the villages, ate and drank with the families, helped with household tasks and participated in religious, cultural and social events.

### Identification and study

Villagers would meet regularly in their own villages to study and discuss the different topics. From time to time results would be exchanged with other villages during meetings arranged for this purpose. The amount of data collected grew quickly and was consolidated, summarised and presented during the First Progress Report Workshop. This workshop was attended by community researchers, local and provincial government officials, NGO stakeholders, MWBP staff as well as civil society representatives.

Presenting their results to outsiders and dealing with questions and comments increased the confidence, capacity and determination of the villager researchers. It ensured that they were profiled as the owners of the Tai Baan research results. It also provided them with an opportunity to learn from the experience of other villagers, made it possible to evaluate their findings, and incorporate suggestions in their research plans.

### Sri Songkhram fish festival

The actual research phase of the programme lasted about 18 months. During that time villager researchers patiently went on gathering data relating to the priorities they themselves had set, and communicated about it in their own native dialect. At the same time they were encouraged to take part in other environment-related events. Villagers took part, for example, in various activities organised by the MWBP demonstration site, including the annual World Wetland's Day, as well as the Sri Songkhram Fish Festival, a two-day celebration of all aspects connected with fish and fisheries.

The Tai Baan researchers took advantage of these events to present their results to the general public. Using posters, displays and stage presentations they dramatised the links between local ecosystems and village livelihoods. This brought villagers into contact with new ideas and practices including ways of adding value to wetlands products, by improved processing and cooperative marketing.

During the second and third phases of the *Tai Baan* research further information was collected and gaps filled. Each phase ended with its own workshop and reports, while outside agencies continued to be invited to share findings. In the final progress report researchers presented their detailed findings on all the issues covered by the research.

## Strengthening local regulations

Their experience with the MWBP project made villagers more secure about the way in which Tai Baan can help them to understand and improve the management of their local natural resource base. The information that went into the final report became the basis for discussing local natural resource management and conservation, both within the village and at higher levels. Already some villages have begun to strengthen the rules and regulations relating to the wetland areas within their communities.

In Ban Tha Bor village, for example, villagers are planning to expand their community forest area and have entered into negotiations with a local agribusiness company for the return of a disputed area of common land.

While the Lower Songkhram Basin Tai Baan Research Network concentrates on expanding research activities to four new villages, the original village research groups contemplate their next focal points. Fishers would like to learn more about local freshwater mollusc diversity, for example, and they want to show how irrigation weirs have affected the flow and ecology of the Nam Yam River to the detriment of the size and diversity of their catch. They are also keen to build up evidence to support their case for adopting locally-appropriate water management methods with minimal ecological impacts.

## Local language publications

In April 2005 a book - *The Ecology and History of the paa bung paa thaam* in the Lower Songkhram River Basin - was published in Thai with an executive

summary in English. It presented a summary of villagers' research findings and delved into the special significance of the seasonally-inundated forest for local livelihoods.

All the villagers who had taken part in the programme were credited and received a copy of the book. To increase awareness of the effectiveness of the Tai Baan approach the book was also distributed to local schools and educational institutes as well as stakeholders in both government and the private sector. A second book has recently been published on the fish biodiversity of the Lower Songkhram Basin, based on the indigenous knowledge collected by Tai Baan researchers, with detailed photos by the research assistants.

## Tai Baan replication

The State and other institutions at the sub-district, district and provincial levels have also become interested in Tai Baan research and in finding ways to adapt it to their needs. The Nakhon Phanom Provincial Natural Resources and Environment Office, which has been involved in the MWBP Thailand Demonstration Site as a partner organisation from its earliest days, is considering promoting the approach in other parts of the province.

Areas where Tai Baan research is currently being introduced include some of the most critically threatened natural riverine sites in Northern Thailand, including the Upper Mekong in Chiang Rai Province, the Salween River in Mae Hong Son Province opposite Burma, and the Yom River in Phrae Province. As Thailand's process of decentralisation proceeds it is hoped

that sub-district administrations will begin to include a Tai Baan component in their local development projects.

## Beyond Thailand

Despite differences in social and political organisation, the four riparian governments of the Lower Mekong Basin - Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam - face similar problems as far as the conservation of fragile wetland ecosystems are concerned. Researchers and research assistants involved in the Tai Baan programme have gone on to help spread the approach to communities along the mainstream of the Mekong River in Stung Treng Province, Northeast Cambodia. This is also a MWBP Demonstration Site.

Similar efforts are also being made in Attapeu in Southern Lao DPR, and in the Plain of Reeds in the Northern Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The Tai Baan research approach shows that local communities in the Lower Mekong Basin can contribute significantly to conserving fragile wetlands.

The active involvement of villagers at all stages of the research process provides a concrete way of ensuring that adequate attention is given to livelihood concerns, as well as traditions and practices that define local culture and conservation practices. As new sites of Tai Baan research are established, the knowledge networks amongst local wetland resource users are strengthened. They provide important alternative voices for improving the use and ecological management of the fragile wetlands, that guarantee the livelihoods of thousands of households who depend on the natural fisheries and aquatic biodiversity.



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