

The *Tai Baan* village-researchers of the Lower Mekong Basin

Improving wetland management through participatory learning strategies

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In several river-based communities of Northeast Thailand, *Tai Baan* or villager-centred participatory research has proven to be an effective tool in monitoring natural resources and conceptualising livelihood linkages. Local people draw on their extensive knowledge of local natural resources to document bio-cultural diversity, thereby offering alternatives to the conventional approaches to natural resources management, in particular water management strategies. 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 Pak Mun Dam in Northeast Thailand was built as a 136 megawatt capacity hydropower project between from 1990-94, near the confluence of the Mun and Mekong Rivers. The controversial dam decimated what had been one of the most productive river fishery sites in the region, blocking fish migrations and drowning out rapids, while producing far less power than anticipated. Even before the dam was built, local villagers and NGOs predicted it would have far-reaching negative environmental and socio-economic impacts.

Expert environmental studies

Their concerns were brushed aside by state officials and experts hired to conduct environmental studies. It took the accumulated evidence of seven years of cultural, social and environmental degradation, plus prolonged protests by villagers both locally and in the capital, before the Thai government eventually agreed to experimentally 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.

Wary of externally generated official studies, villagers in the Pak Mun area enlisted the support of the Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARIN), a regional NGO, to help prepare their own parallel study. It was named 'Tai Baan Research' (Tai Baan means 'village people' in the local Lao dialect) and was initiated in 2001. Using this locally appropriate, villager-centred approach, the villagers documented local fish biodiversity and demonstrated that once the river was able to flow freely again the riverine ecosystem was resilient enough to par-

tially recover. The results and experience gained also contributed to validating Tai Baan as a valuable research instrument.

In spite of the lessons gained from Pak Mun, government agencies concerned with water management continue to make plans to build various top-down water management schemes (often termed 'mega-projects') across Northeast Thailand. Such schemes would risk altering the flow and flood regimes of the river and associated wetlands, putting at risk the livelihoods of many thousands of households who depend on the natural fisheries and aquatic biodiversity of the lower river floodplains.

Demonstration site

In 1999, 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 later selected as the Thailand Demonstration Site for the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP)¹, as an important wetland site to pilot conservation-based activities focusing on capacity building of local institutions. Within the context of this programme, local communities are being assisted and empowered to participate in the assessment and monitoring of wetland resources.

One of the aims of the MWBP Lower Songkhram Basin Demonstration Site is to obtain relevant data about past and present aquatic resources use as a means to better understanding wetlands-based livelihoods. It is also concerned with ensuring higher grassroots



Paw Sanit, a fisher and Tai Baan Researcher, holds up a pba kae (Bagarius yarrelli) catfish, caught in a net harvesting downstream migrating fish.

Photo: David Blake

participation in decision-making for improved 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

For many villagers the Tai Baan Research approach was at first difficult to accept as they were more accustomed to a culture of top-down planning and scant local participation. Therefore, the idea of participating in local studies whose outcome could be used to potentially influence government policy was a challenging concept. In addition, they would be taking part in a study which offered no immediate material advantage. In fact, it would cost them time and required resource users to share specialised knowledge about such things as fish species and 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 to relative strangers in a research context. They instinctively know the local names of habitat types, fish, other aquatic organ-





Photo: David Blake

A group of Tai Baan Researchers and MWBP staff from Thailand and Cambodia gather together whilst collecting riverine vegetation samples next to the Mekong River in Stung Treng Province, Cambodia during an exchange visit between Demonstration Sites.

isms and numerous beneficial plants consumed daily, but rarely think that this knowledge could be of interest to outsiders.

Despite the initial scepticism, 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 external facilitators, who are known as 'Research Assistants'. A first important step is generating interest in the approach and the way it can be used to understand 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 were taken to train the research assistants to support villager research activities. Together with village researchers they identified local needs and interests, and formulated specific research objectives. Tai Baan researchers from the four communities met in a workshop and agreed that there were six priority issues that needed to be addressed: fish species and ecology, fishing gear, flooded forest vegetation, agricultural systems including riverbank agriculture, raising of large livestock, and local habitats/ecosystems.

The village researchers split into sub-groups and refined the specific research topics within each issue, for example livelihood importance, past trends versus current use and availabili-

ty, economic importance, and cultural and social significance of the identified resources. The Tai Baan researchers started to collect and exchange necessary background information.

Closely involved

In four Lower Songkhram River Basin communities, a large body of data was assembled on the seasonal variations in the villagers' wetlands resource-based economy, and its complex ecological setting. From June 2003 onwards, the MWBP Research Assistants 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 Research Assistants not only played an important role in helping develop the Tai Baan process, they also helped sustain it together with the Researchers. 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 research 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 periodic Progress Workshops. These

workshops were attended by Tai Baan researchers, local and provincial government officials, NGO stakeholders, MWBP staff from across the region, 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 adaptive research plans.

Sri Songkhram fish festival

The actual research phase of the programme lasted about 18 months. During that time the Tai Baan researchers patiently went on gathering data relating to the priorities they themselves had set, and exchanged results between villages in their own native dialect. At the same time, the Tai Baan Research Network formed in the four villages was encouraged to take part in other environment-related events. Villagers took part, for example, in various activities organised by the MWBP Demonstration Site, including annual World Wetlands Day events, as well as the Sri Songkhram Fish Festival, a two-day celebration of the ethnically diverse local culture and traditions, with an emphasis on fish and fisheries.

The Tai Baan Research Network took advantage of these events to present their results to the general public. Using posters, displays and stage presentations, they graphically highlighted the links between local ecosystems, in particular the unique seasonally inundated riverine forest or *paa bung paa thaam*, and village livelihoods. This brought villagers into contact with new ideas and practices, including ways of adding value to wetlands products, such as 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 and comment on 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 Tai Baan Research Network made villagers more secure about the way in which the research findings could help them to

understand and improve the management of their local natural resource base. The information that went into the final Tai Baan Research 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, Researchers 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 and are questioning the value of expanding mono-crop eucalyptus plantations locally.

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 research topics. 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 authorities concerned with 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 the Tai Baan 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

As a result of the project, various State 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 with the MWBP Thailand Demonstration Site as a partner organisation from the start, 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 Administration Organisations will begin to include a Tai Baan component when considering local development projects.

Beyond Thailand

Despite differences in social and political organisation, the four riparian gov-

ernments 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 braided mainstream of the Mekong River in Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia, also a MWBP Demonstration Site. Similar efforts are also being made to include a similar component in Attapeu Province in Southern Lao DPR, and in the Plain of Reeds in the Northern Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The Tai Baan Research approach has demonstrated that local communities in the Lower Mekong Basin can contribute significantly to understanding and conserving fragile wetland habitats. 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 and exchanges are facilitated, knowledge networks amongst local wetland resource users are strengthened. They provide important alternative voices for improving the utilisation and ecological management of the threatened Mekong Basin wetlands, which underpin the livelihoods of countless households that depend on the continued health of the natural fisheries and wetland resource base.

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1, 2 MWBP is a joint programme of the four riparian governments of the Lower Mekong Basin - Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam - managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC), in collaboration with and other key stakeholders. With core funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the programme aims to address the most critical issues for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources of the Mekong wetlands.



*Paw Gee, a Tai Baan Researcher from Ban Tha Bor village, explains to project visitors about the ecology and habitat of pba beug or the giant Mekong catfish (*Pangasianodon gigas*) on a map of the riverine ecosystem he drew himself.*

