

@THAILAND

## KING'S MAGIC TOUCH

*His Majesty's development project gave a new lease on life to a forest which had few trees, no water and no people*

Story and photos by CHEEWIN SATTHA



Security guard Paiboon Matha stands near an information chart at the Huai Hong Khrai Royal Development Study Centre in Chiang Mai. The rehabilitation project, initiated by His Majesty the King, has turned parched land into lush forest.

Paiboon points to plants at the centre. He has been trained to introduce the centre to visitors.



Moree Supol with her forest products.

in  
Doi  
Saket  
district a new lease on life.

More than 25 years ago, the 8,500 rai of mountainous area was reduced to parched land due to over-logging. Much of the area's forest cover was destroyed, making the land lose its catchment capacity.

Deforestation in the Huai Hong Khrai basin was made to help the tobacco industry, which required firewood for tobacco processing. Local communities also felled trees for their own use.

Degradation had set in by the time the loggers deserted the area, and almost all the trees were gone. Only 35 species of trees remained then.

The weather was dry with rainfall measuring less than 1,200 millimetres a year. There were less than 100 trees per rai left standing and the soil lost its capacity to hold water. Consequently, locals found the area unfit for habitation and moved out.

Forest fires became frequent every dry season. Each year forest fires levelled about 200 rai of land in the area.

Things gradually changed for the better after His Majesty visited the area 25 years ago and came up with a rehabilitation project with simple goals - put moisture into the land and plant new trees. The area became known as the Huai Hong Khrai Royal Development Study Centre.

The centre's officials began their work by diverting water to Huai Hong Khrai from a nearby source named the Huai Mae Lai stream. Irrigation canals were dug downhill in fish-bone patterns to ensure water reached the whole area. Check dams were built to slow the flow of water in order to keep the soil moist. A large reservoir was built on the lower reaches where local people could catch fish and use water for their farm animals and cultivation.

Reforestation was carefully planned. Tree planting was first undertaken on top of the mountain in order to force the trees to drop their seeds downhill, automatically resulting in more trees.

The new forest was aimed at providing fruit, timber and firewood.

Rehabilitated forests also raise humidity in the air, increase rainwater and decrease the average temperature and vapourisation. The average temperature is 25 degrees Celsius and rainwater now measures 1,314 millimetres a year. Rainfall in the Huai Hong Khrai area is higher than the average rainfall of Chiang Mai province and is increasing.

Today, Huai Hong Khrai needs less water from the nearby Huai Mae Lai stream. More importantly, no forest fires have been reported in the Huai Hong Khrai area in the last 15 years.

People have returned to the Huai Hong Khrai basin because they can farm and collect forest products for their own consumption and sale. The locals have now been trained to both use and conserve the rehabilitated forests.

Today the Huai Hong Khrai Royal Development Study Centre attaches great importance to training people in sustainable development that focuses on the conservation of catchment areas.

Paiboon Matha, 40, whose family received a land plot in the river basin under the Huai Hong Khrai development project, said his family made a living from cultivation and his wife was a member of a local housewives' group producing sewing work to earn extra income.

He also works as a security guard at the development study centre and introduces visitors to development and training programmes at the centre.

Mr Paiboon said his family, with two young children, was now living a comfortable life thanks to the Huai Hong Khrai royal project.

He plans to continue working for the centre until his retirement.

"I am lucky to have the chance to work for the King's project. Although it is far from modern communities and I am only a guard here, I am very proud of my work," Mr Paiboon said.

Moree Supol, 42, said she could collect forest products, including honey and farm products, for sale at a market by the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai highway in front of the development study centre. She said forest products were popular among visitors and they changed according to the seasons.

She said the villagers feel close to the King even though he lives far away in Bangkok.

"We fly yellow flags all over the place to express our loyalty to the King," she said.

Yellow is the King's birthday colour.

Today the centre serves as an educational institute and a vocational pillar for the 18 surrounding villages of Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Chiang Rai provinces.

Apart from sustainable agriculture, villagers are also being taught how to set up and run cooperatives in order to achieve self-sufficiency.

---

© Copyright The Post Publishing Public Co., Ltd. 2006

Privacy Policy

Comments to: [Webmaster](#)

Advertising enquiries to: [Internet Marketing](#)

Printed display ad enquiries to: [Display Ads](#)

Full contact details: [Contact us](#)