

# Recapturing the Biodiversity of Communities through 'People's Stories'

- Environmental Education Activities in Thailand and Laos -



A project brief by  
Mekong Watch

July 2018

## Introduction: Background to the Project

Mekong Watch envisions a Mekong Region in which “its people enjoy the region's natural environments and sustain lifestyles that are rooted in the integrity of their environments, without becoming victims to the harmful impacts of destructive development.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the reality is the opposite. The region's environments are rapidly deteriorating. More locations on both Mekong mainstream and tributaries are blocked by hydropower dams. More forests are replaced by industrial plantations. More land is turning into economic zones and sites to extract natural resources. Destructive development is making it more difficult for people in Mekong to lead a sustainable life.

We have been trying to challenge this disturbing trend on two fronts. One, we analyze destructive development and argue that it does not comply with safeguard standards which are built upon global and the region's development experiences. We have proposed to reconsider or reorient a number of development projects to ensure that they will not harm the Mekong's environments and its people. We have also advocated for the improvement of protective measures and procedures when they are weak and outdated.

Two, we also try to gain a better understanding over how deeply people's lives are rooted in the Mekong's environments. Without such an understanding, it is hard to recognize how development may affect or benefit people. Most importantly, people's lives in the region are linked with their environments not simply in economic and other tangible terms but in a much more in-depth manner. People live in Mekong with a sense of comfort, confidence, and pride. This is a result of their acting upon and being acted upon by its environments through socio-economic, cultural, spiritual, and other activities over many years. This aspect of life-environment interconnection is less visible and is often underestimated or ignored. It is, however, also susceptible to destructive development and cannot be easily replaced or compensated for.

A precursor to this Project started in 2014. We visited local communities in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand and asked villagers to tell us about their experiences with the Mekong's environments. We viewed their stories as an entry point to understanding how their lives are linked with natural environments. Through some stories, villagers explained to us how their community had come to develop or why particular spots in the community were named as they were. In some stories, plants, animals, and even minerals behaved like humans and communicated with us on equal footing. Yet through other stories, villagers tried to pass on the wisdom of how to live harmoniously with the Mekong's environment to their children and grandchildren.

Since late 2016, we have used people's stories to provide environmental education to children in rural Laos and Thailand. We have hosted workshops in schools and local communities to guide children, and sometimes adults, to collect stories from elderly people, learn from the stories, and turn them into reading materials. We have also publicized people's stories and explanations on how useful they might be in booklets and video programs.

This document presents the Project's outline and output in snapshot fashion. We provide short case reports from Thailand and Laos to illustrate how environmental education workshops took place on the ground. Analyses on representative stories are also given. These analyses, however, should be viewed only as samples and not as authoritative or 'correct.' We believe one of the values of people's stories is to stimulate listeners/readers' thinking and imagination, and are open to diverse interpretations. Like environment and society, diversity makes it possible for people's stories to sustain their lives.

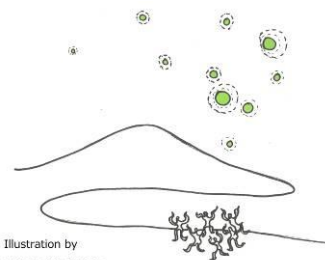


Illustration by  
Amarit Muadthong

<sup>1</sup> Mekong Watch. Vision. <http://www.mekongwatch.org/english/about/index.html#SEC2>

## Example 1:

### Story Collected in Thailand

Story: King of Rice

By Mr. Wanna Thongnoy (Lao Isan), Kudcum District, Yasothorn Province

Mothers in Northeastern Thailand, after slightly masticating cooked glutinous rice in the mouth, wrap it in a banana leaf and then warm it by the hearth to ferment it before feeding it to their babies. Thus, cooked rice is always the first food eaten by the people of Northeastern Thailand. All the children are brought up eating rice as far back as they can remember. There are also stories of rice related to Buddhism. For example, it is said that Buddha was offered and ate a special rice dish called Matupayas, made with young rice and milk, as the last meal before his enlightenment.

Once upon a time, there were many different kinds of rice, such as yellow rice, red rice, black rice, and so on. The leaves and ears of the black rice, known as Khao Kam, were also quite black. These different kinds of rice also grew at different speeds. One day, all the rice people, fed up with being pounded and crushed by humans instead of being respected, discussed among themselves the idea of leaving the human world. The rice people went to invite Khao Kam to go with them, but Khao Kam refused, saying, "I am so ashamed of being jet black, as I am, and wish to gain merit by nourishing humans." The other rice people were so impressed by what Khao Kam had said, despite not being esteemed by humans, that they decided to call Khao Kam 'King of Rice' (Phaya Khao). Khao Kam grows tall when planted in higher paddy fields. The other kinds of rice stretched their stems and grew quickly to catch a glance of Khao Kam's imposing figure. Khao Kam also grows lots of hair all over its body, and when it is planted in low-lying paddy fields can protect other kinds of rice by damaging the eyes of insects with its sharp leaves. Humans who noticed this came to plant lots of Khao Kam.



### Analysis

This story expresses the bond between the people of Northeastern Thailand and rice. The storyteller emphasizes the importance of rice by saying that it is rice that is the first solid food people eat after they are born and by showing how rice appears in the legend of the Buddha's enlightenment. The story also connects up with the legend of black rice as the king of rice. In the story, humans neglect to appreciate rice, from which they gain benefits every day, to such an extent that they reach a crisis where rice becomes alienated from man. The story relates, however, that all the different kinds of rice have come to live with people up to this day thanks to the warmhearted black rice.

The central moral of the story appears to be a lesson to descendants that they should not forget to be thankful for agricultural produce, but the latent power of black rice is also conveyed along with this warning. In fact, it is reported that in Northeastern Thailand black rice is often planted in one part of a paddy field where white rice is being grown. The farmers know from experience that planting black rice has the effect of suppressing insect pest damage to the surrounding rice. It may be that one of the reasons for the birth of this story was to pass on this kind of wisdom.

## Activities utilizing “stories” in Thailand

In Thailand, we collected stories related to regional natural resource use in eight locations (in Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Rachasima, Khon Kaen, Loei, Roi Et, Yasothon, Maha-Sarakham, and Nakhon Phanom Provinces) in the basins of the four rivers of Northeastern Thailand. Of these, we selected the story of salt, which was published as the booklet “The Tale of the Salt - Secrets of the Earth in Northeast Thailand.” In addition, we also held environmental workshops for elementary school children and teachers.

Environmental workshop for elementary school children (November 2017):  
Implemented at Thasa-ard Elementary and Middle School, Sekha County, Bueng Kan Province for elementary school children.

At the workshop, we first consulted with the teachers at the school to deepen their understanding of the contents of the project. Following that, the facilitator played a game with the children as an icebreaker. The children were then taught an interview method that even children can put into practice.



Led by an instructor, the children went to the village where they live and conducted interviews with elderly people who know tales and about the life of the village many years ago.

After that, the children returned to the school, prepared maps of their village, summarized what they had heard from the elderly villagers and gave presentations of these in groups. Furthermore, the children chose the tale of the Songkram River and the story of salt from among the tales they heard from the elderly people and completed a picture story book.



### Teachers' environmental workshop (May 2018):

A workshop inviting elementary school teachers (from Bueng Kan, Sakon Nakhon, and Roi Et Provinces) was held at Thasa-ard Elementary and Middle School, Sekha County, Bueng Kan Province to disseminate the method and to receive feedback from teachers. The teachers participated in and experienced a workshop with the same content as that held for the children, carrying out the series of tasks from conducting interviews in the villages, to summarizing the stories and producing a picture story book.

## Achievement and Challenges



The children participated in the series of activities and games as a fun event. Completing the picture story book on local stories and having it placed in the school library also gave the children a strong sense of accomplishment. As teachers in Thailand are also encouraged to give classes on local content, being able to learn about a template for this kind of environmental education and a method for enhancing connectivity with the community was welcomed by the teachers.

Despite the workshop being held over the very short time of two days in May 2018, the participating teachers proposed a workshop idea for researching local forests and rivers, and it was possible to confirm that the method was one that could be applied to actual educational situations. An observer from the local administration also participated, indicating a high degree of interest in the workshop method. Further, as well as the environment, a teacher from Sakon Nakhon who is making efforts to conserve an ethnic minority language that is in danger of disappearing reported that by having children record local stories through interviews it had been possible to raise their interest in their own unique culture and language.

Schools, however, place priority on teaching the content of textbooks, and some participants voiced the opinion that teachers are especially busy in smaller schools, where they may be responsible for two or more subjects, and therefore the obstacles to holding workshops may be high due to the time required for preparations. A university faculty member who participated in the workshop as a commentator evaluated the activity as important, since education will change in the future in the direction of having children study by inquiring into things for themselves. On the other hand, however, how such activities can be evaluated is a remaining issue. Mekong Watch believes that in future it will be necessary to go beyond the framework of this series of activities in schools, and not only raise the level of interest in local environmental conservation but also devise ways in which the activities can lead to concrete environmental conservation efforts.



## Example 2:

### Story Collected in Laos

In Khong District, Champasak Province, in southern Laos, the Mekong River divides into a large number of branch currents that flow around islands scattered in the river. This area is known as Siphandon (Four Thousand Islands). One of the stories that are told in this area is the tale of Somphamit Waterfall and the Dolphin.

Once upon a time, a man and his wife set forth seeking new lands where food would be abundant. The man's name was Kha, and his wife's name was Sida. The couple built a bamboo raft and set out together with a chicken, a duck, a *kiyat* (small frog), a frog, an *ian* bird, and a peacock.

They descended the Mekong River on the raft, approaching close to Somphamit Waterfall. Kha and Sida asked each of the animals whether they should continue going ahead as they were, but the chicken cried, "*Jort! Jort! Jort!*" meaning, "Stop!" The frog cried, "*Leuk! Leuk! Leuk!*" meaning, "It's deep!" (...) Finally, the couple asked the peacock, who was the largest of the animals, and he cried, "*Baewon! Baewon! Baewon!*" meaning, "Go on!"

Kha and *Sida* took the advice of the peacock and proceeded further aboard the raft. Then, they went over Somphamit Waterfall and lost their lives. After that, the man was reborn as an Irrawaddy Dolphin, or *pa kha* in the Lao language, and his wife as a *sida* bird.

Even now, when dolphins chase fish, *sida* birds come down to eat the fish, and they can be seen living harmoniously together. At the same time, the dolphins and *sida* birds are both said to reside upstream from Somphamit Waterfall, and never try to approach the place where they previously lost their lives.



### Analysis

The ecology of the Irrawaddy Dolphin and the *sida* bird, both currently facing the risk of extinction, is vividly expressed in this story. The people of Hang Khone Village, where this tale is told, have made their living from farming, livestock, and fishing. At present, dolphin watching tours by boat are a large source of income.

By passing on and preserving the story and the natural environment described in it, the tale of the dolphin may have possibly contributed to the economic activity based on tourism. In reality, however, the environment surrounding the village has undergone great changes over the last few decades. The numbers of the dolphins that appear in the tale have declined sharply due to illegal fishing and other problems, and the *sida* bird is now said to be only rarely seen. Moreover, the existence of fish resources and the Irrawaddy Dolphin in this area are threatened by upstream river development. The tale contains the lesson that you might meet with a bitter experience if you listen to the voice of the biggest 'person,' the peacock in the tale. We believe that to maintain the lives of the dolphin, whose existence is inseparable from the Mekong River, and the sustainable livelihoods of the local people, it is vital that we attune our ears to these local stories and the voices of the people who live in these areas.

### Activities utilizing "stories" in Laos

In Laos, as well as collecting stories in central, southern, and northern parts of the country, the stories were used in environmental workshops for elementary and middle school children and workshops for citizens' groups. Screenings of a film recording the changes in the environment that appears in the stories were also held.



#### Environmental workshop using the stories (March 2017):

Implemented for the first grade class of an elementary school and at a temple in Vientiane Province in central Laos, and at an elementary school in Oudomxay Province, northern Laos. After reading the Kmhmu' ethnic group folk tale *The Owl and the Deer*<sup>2</sup> to the children, questions such as "What kinds of animals appear in the story?" "Can you see these animals in your village?" and "If there are fewer of these animals in your village than before, why do you think this has happened?" were asked to initiate a discussion on environmental problems in the village. Groups were then formed to interview village elders about stories that have been passed down in the village, after which each group summarized their story in words and pictures for presentation.

Workshop for Lao citizens' groups in the capital Vientiane (March 2018): Ten staff members of Lao citizens' groups engaged in educational activities and environmental conservation participated in the workshop on environmental education, and discussions were held on the effect, significance and so on of activities using stories. Interests of the activity participants were wide-ranging, including the passing on of ethnic minority groups' languages, the recording of oral traditions and the development of materials on development education.

## Achievement and Challenges

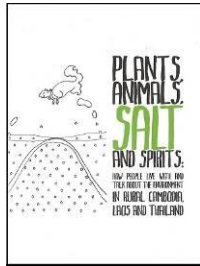
For elementary and middle school children in Laos, who have few opportunities in normal school education to seek out information and give presentations by themselves, or listen to local stories, the environmental workshop gave the children the chance to think about local educational problems and exchange views while taking a fresh look at the stories that have been passed down in their area. In this situation, the story of the Owl and the Deer, which the children found easy to relate to, was an effective cue for thinking about environmental problems. However, there were great differences in the abilities of the leaders to read the stories aloud to the children and facilitate the workshop. It was found that managing the workshop was difficult for ordinary Lao teachers and children's cultural center staff, who are not familiar with this kind of activity, to implement by themselves even if they have a guidebook. Moreover, due to time restrictions, it was impossible to link the local stories the children gathered through interviews to consideration of the local environment. On the other hand, the environmental workshop method of using local stories to spark discussion is not necessarily an activity for use only with children, but in the future may also hold potential for use when introducing NGO activities related to village environmental conservation and land use.

At the workshop for NGOs, since the content was either not related to the activities of the NGOs and other organizations, or was simply very obvious to local people, a re-awareness arose that the stories, many of which are not recorded, may be easily lost due to environmental and social changes, and preserving the local stories in writing or as videos was found to be meaningful as a part of the main work of the organization. At the same time, to link these activities with environmental conservation and local development, it was pointed out that it is necessary for the target community to have a real sense of the activity's purpose and process (an enlightened awareness on the part of the people to perceive the activity as being worthwhile) rather than simply having outsiders one-sidedly record the stories. The cases introduced by Mekong Watch during this project helped engender sympathy toward the notion that stories usually considered in Laos to be superstition do in fact have the potential to be effective means of natural resource conservation in the community.

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<sup>2</sup> English version: "PLANTS, ANIMALS, SALT and SPIRITS: How People Live with and Talk about the Environment in Rural Cambodia, Laos and Thailand", pp.52-55.

## Materials by Mekong Watch

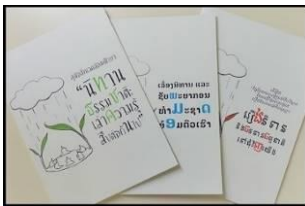


**Booklet** (English) 132 pages, published in 2015

“PLANTS, ANIMALS, SALT and SPIRITS: How People Live with and Talk about the Environment in Rural Cambodia, Laos and Thailand”

- Containing seventeen stories collected in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Full of photos and illustrations. Good for reading and learning about stories found in each community.

- [http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/Booklet\\_PeopleStory.pdf](http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/Booklet_PeopleStory.pdf)



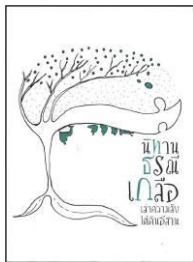
**Handbook** (Thai, Lao, Khmer) 36 pages, published in 2015

- Each handbook contains a Thai, a Lao, and a Cambodian story with accompanying questions to make students think about nature and environmental issues. Useful tool for teachers conducting environmental workshops targeting elementary school and junior high school students.

- Thai [http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PeopleStory\\_Thai.pdf](http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PeopleStory_Thai.pdf)

- Lao [http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PeopleStory\\_Lao.pdf](http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PeopleStory_Lao.pdf)

- Khmer [http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PeopleStory\\_Khmer.pdf](http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/PeopleStory_Khmer.pdf)



**Booklet** (Thai) 132 pages, published in 2017

“The Tale of the Salt - Secrets of the Earth in Northeast Thailand”

- Containing 19 stories collected in Thailand. Full of photos and illustrations. Good for reading and learning about stories found in each community.

- On sale



**Handbook** (Thai) 72 pages, published in 2018

“NATURE TALES – A Handbook of Environmental Education through People's Stories”

- Rationalizing environmental education through people's stories in the language of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), the handbook gives step by step guidance on how teachers and young students can collect stories in local communities and turn them into classroom materials and activities.

- [http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/Handbook\\_Thai\\_PeopleStory.pdf](http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/Handbook_Thai_PeopleStory.pdf)



### Videos

Introduction to environmental education through People's Stories (Thai)

- <https://youtu.be/EDZPwUpeipQ>

Storytelling of the story “The Owl and the Deer” (Lao)

- <https://youtu.be/XqFpvyFokbl>

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