Rural Training Center-Thailand

2008 Fall Farm Update 2

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Community-based environmental education for the self-sufficiency and sustainability of small rural family farms

From King's Theory to Farm Reality

Mr. Tang Suttisan and his wife Umporn, founders of the present RTC-TH demonstration farm.

About 1974, Mr. Tang Suttisan started his family farm. He had read the King's theory of self-sufficiency and used it to guide the development of the farm. His farm was one of the first in the area to have a fish pond. This was the beginning of his integrated farm combining traditional wet rice farming and raising fish.

The King suggested a 30:30:30:10 land use mix for a typical 15 rai family farm (6 acres, or 2.4 hectares). About 30% of the land should be used for ponds to secure the water supply for the farm and to raise fish for food and a possible cash generator. Because rice is a staple food for Thai families, 30% of the land should be used to grow rice to feed the family. If soil and water conditions were suitable, another 30%of the land could be used for cash crops (if market conditions permitted). The final 10% of the land should be used for facilities (buildings, pathways, etc.) and livestock. [**Note:** The guidelines suggested by the King are just that, guidelines. In his Theory, the King also noted that the guidelines should be modified to suit the particular conditions of a given farm and environmental setting.] The key points were to have a secure water supply to grow rice and an emphasis on soil quality to grow sufficient crops to support a family. Self-sufficient rural farm families were deemed the foundation for the national economy.

For the King, self-sufficiency for rural farm families is not total. It is a reasonable blend of self-sufficiency primarily in terms of food security and social well-being. The King does not advocate total economic isolation and independence from the system. Rather, rural farm families are encouraged to sell their surpluses via cooperatives to larger business enterprises as a means to increase their incomes and to share in the prosperity of the modern world.

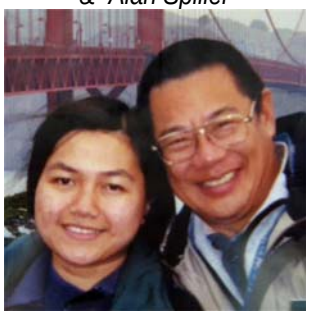
Today, the surviving Suttisan family members continue the original efforts to follow the King's theory with renewed vigor. Much of the new effort began about 1998. Here's an update of some of the ongoing efforts.

In This Issue

Umporn Suttisan, Adviser

Aoiprai Suttisan, Farm Manager

Sunisa (Suttisan) & Alan Spiller

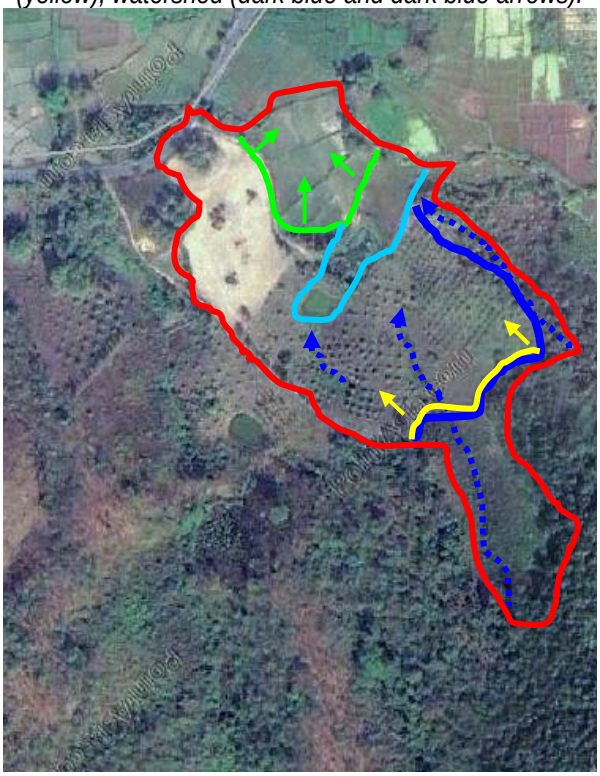


Saifon (Suttisan) & Gregory Lee

The original farm has been expanded to ~40 rai (15.8 acres) by adding some of the adjacent land acquired from others. There are now 3 fish ponds whereas the original farm had only 2. The recent rainwater harvesting effort increased the number of water storage tanks from 2 to 7.

Numerically, our farm seems to have about 20% of the land in rice paddies, 5% in fish ponds, about 60% in crops, and about 15% in watershed. The numbers differ significantly from the King's theory, but the operations of the farm are very close to the integration concept of the King's theory for self-sufficiency and sustainability.

Farm land use: Rice (green), ponds (light blue), crops (yellow), watershed (dark blue and dark blue arrows).



The primary resources for the farm are water and soil. New water holding ponds are planned for next year.

About 40% of the land is level and lies down slope from the ponds to get water by gravity flow. The rest of the land is on gentle to moderate sloping land which is presently rain fed with runoff from the protected government forest above the farm.

The overall plans for self-sufficiency and sustainability call for our farm to be a subsistence farm, not a commercial farm. By growing what we eat, and eating what we grow, we attain food security and modified self-sufficiency.

A big part of Thai rural family farm life is debt. Our efforts on the farm call for minimizing off-farm expenses by not buying off-farm agricultural chemicals. Instead, we rely on nutrient recycling of farm wastes and materials. Taking a no-tech / low tech approach to RTC-TH training is intended to keep our focus on "affordability" to rural families who are generally impoverished or certainly on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder. Consistent with this low-cost approach is using Teach backs to spread the training to empower people through education. This minimizes training costs and is combined with "sweat equity" where trainees use their

labor working on hands-on projects during training in lieu of paying a training fee.

The net result of a self-sufficient farm is to 1) feed the family, 2) manage farm resources (e.g. water and soil) to sustain the self-sufficient family farm. So long as the farms resources produce the food for the family, and can continue to do so year after year, the goal of the King's Theory is met.

Our 2008 Rice Harvest

Our rice paddies in early September

Most of the rice grown in our area is "sticky rice" for local family consumption. We are subsistence rice farmers. Rice is not a cash crop for most of the farms around us. Our goal is to grow enough rice to feed the family for a year. We get one wet rice crop a year. If possible, we try to have a reserve for emergencies and to assist others in hard times. Thus, our rice crop plans are wholly consistent with the King's Theory for self-sufficiency. This includes community involvement for social responsibility.

By mid-September, the panicles are maturing.

Mid-October the panicles are about ready for harvest.

Workers cutting and laying rice out to dry.

Any family suffering a short fall in their rice harvest relies on their social network to make up the difference by either borrowing or buying the rice they need. For many poor farm families, lacking cash to buy necessities forces them into borrowing and debt.

Into the home stretch: time 3:01 PM

Into the last paddy at 3:36 PM

The hired help works fast. The work is planned so they cut the last paddy closest to where dinner will be served. Look at the speed of this work crew. The last 3 paddies are all cut in less than 1 hour!

During that time, some family members were catching fresh fish and crabs while others built the fire and started cooking the dinner for the workers. A day of hard work ends with friendship, and a farm fresh dinner. There is happiness at harvest time.

Finished cutting the last paddy at 3:56 PM

Family members preparing dinner for the workers

Fresh fish and crabs from the farm's fish ponds

Well-earned farm fresh dinner at the end of work

Gathering Our Rice and Preparing for Threshing

The rice lay in the fields for a few days to dry. Rain fell, and we needed to thresh the rice when help was available.



In less than 1 minute, this woman pulls a tying strip from her belt and bundles a sheaf of cut rice,



In less than 4 minutes, this man loads 12 bundles of rice onto his carrier and starts toward the collecting point.

Most farmers will hire a threshing machine including the driver and assistant. You supply the added labor to finish the job. The belt-driven thresher uses a power take off from the tractor

[Ed. Note: We did our threshing at night. It was too dark for photos, so these photos of the threshing machine are from a neighbor's field.


The rice wasn't thoroughly dry when we threshed it, so the bags were emptied and rice put out to sun dry.

During lunch, a light rain fell, and we had to run to cover the rice.

When the sun reappeared, we spread the rice out to continue the drying process.

By the end of the afternoon, the rice is dry enough to store. It is scooped up and put into bags for storage.

We use a 5 gallon bucket as a standard measure and put 3 buckets of rice into a bag. This way we have a rough idea of how much rice will be milled as needed. Thin bamboo strips are used as an "organic" twist tie to close each bag of

So far this year we have 33 bags of new rice (and there are 2 big paddies of rice maturing in another month).

The dried rice will be stored with their hulls on. When needed, a bag of rice can be milled to remove the hulls.