



Rural Training Center-Thailand (RTC-TH)

# REEEPP WINTER 2007 REPORT

Jan 2007

c/o U. Suttisan, 84 Moo 2, Jompra, Thawangpha, Nan Province 55140

www.neighborhoodlink.com/org/rtcth E-mail: rtc2k5@gmail.com

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

## FLEXIBILITY: A KEY FOR SUCCESS

There is an old saying, “the only constant is change.” And in the case of the REEEPP 2007 winter volunteer trip, truer words were never spoken.

The original plan followed the basic pattern of the summer 2005 REEEPP effort: volunteers would be in school with the students for a week. The main difference was to shift the focus to spend all the time engaging the students in English speaking activities. The advanced team arrived a few weeks before the volunteers. Discussions with the teachers revealed major impacts to the schedule.

- **The school would be closed on Tuesday** by order of the Provincial Education Office for Teachers Day. Normally this is celebrated in each school with the students. This year, the activities for several schools would be combined in Thawangpha, the nearby town.
- **Various teachers called for mandatory training / meetings** during the latter part of the week. The reduced staffing meant classes for certain grades would be cancelled, thus depriving the students of the English speaking practice. Also, some of the staff involved were critical to the project closing ceremony preparations.

The RTC-TH decided to provide learning opportunities via computer lessons to help fill the gaps for the students in the cancelled classes. ☺



*Critical school schedule changed required creative thinking to find alternatives to keep REEEPP rolling.*



*It is all about dedication, sincere friendships, and concern for serving the best interests of the students.*



*Priority on the computer lesson to fill the gap.*



## REEEPP Winter 2007 Report

Community-Based Environmental Education For The Self-Sufficiency And Sustainability Of Small Rural Family Farms



*A spirit ceremony from the villagers for the volunteers to purge evil and bestow wishes for long life and good wishes*



*The welcoming dinner for the volunteers, host families, and Na Fa Elementary faculty and staff.*



*A celebration for the volunteers, host families, newly made friends, and the anticipated success for the current effort.*

## WELCOMING DINNER

In place of the closing banquet, a decision was made to hold a welcoming dinner for the volunteers, host families, and school teachers and staff. This would permit the faculty going to meetings at the end of the week to socialize with the host families and volunteers.

Northern Thai culture includes a strong belief in natural spirits in its cosmology. As a sign of respect and appreciation, the local villagers welcomed the volunteers with a “spirit ceremony” meant to dispel bad spirits from the area, and to bestow the blessings and good wishes for long life and good luck to the volunteers. As in most human societies, children are a precious resource. And the education of their children is an important concern for the villagers. From past experience, they know the value of the REEEPP volunteers teaching in Ban Na Fa Elementary School.

Students trained by Mr. Chalerm (5<sup>th</sup> grade) prepared the decorations for the event. They made the centerpiece for the spirit ceremony and the carved-fruit floral arrangement.

Through personal family relations, the dinner was catered at a deeply discounted price. This is a reflection of community involvement to express thanks to the RTC-TH volunteers. Also included was a DJ and karaoke assuring a fun time for all.

This reception brought old and new friends together to create a warm welcome to the New Year and continuation of the REEEPP effort. This was the second REEEPP for year, 85% of the volunteers☺





## REEEPP Winter 2007 Report

Community-Based Environmental Education For The Self-Sufficiency And Sustainability Of Small Rural Family Farms

### CHILDREN'S DAY

For the students, the start of the new REEEPP activities was Children's Day. This was a lucky coincidence for everyone. Carlos Solis, a former PCC Geography student, donated \$100 cash to REEEPP. "I want you to use this money to get some special treats for the children," he said to Greg Lee.

It was a very special Children's Day at Na Fa Elementary School. Children competed for the treats as prizes. Games included banana eating contests, singing English songs, playing bingo in English, games similar to "Simon Says", balloon blowing, and musical chairs. Excitement ran high. Even the Kindergarten students individually got up to sing English songs.

About mid-morning, the students lined up by grades and gifts and the volunteers gave snacks to them individually. Each student was asked to say "Thank you" in English. For many students, this was the best Children's Day they could remember. English learning at Na Fa was exciting and fun. REEEPP has made a big difference in Ban Na Fa.

Several students won extra prizes for having their National Wildlife Federation bracelet from the summer 2005 REEEPP volunteer program. ☺



Sue Nelson's \$25 donation was combined with RTC-TH funds to purchase books and school supplies.



Children's Day snacks and treats from Carlos Solis, a former student in Mr. Lee's Geography class in Los Angeles, CA.



Children's books donated by Veronica Rojas (Mr. Lee's former Geography student), Carol Kellog (Mr. Lee's faculty colleague in Los Angeles, CA), and the National Wildlife Federation added 281 English language books to the School Library.



REEEPP volunteers help distribute gifts and snacks to all of the Na Fa Elementary School students.





## REEEPP Winter 2007 Report

Community-Based Environmental Education For The Self-Sufficiency And Sustainability Of Small Rural Family Farms



*Na Fa students and REEEPP volunteers leave school for a morning hike in the hills south of Ban Na Fa.*



*It was a good opportunity to see the natural habitat of the area and to practice both English and Habitat lessons along the way.*



*Volunteers enhanced the English language aspect of the hike. Getting out of the box of the classroom is characteristic of RTC-TH community-based environmental education.*

## SCHOOL HIKE

Each year the teachers and students take a hike in the southern hills of the Nam Yang Valley near the school. This was a good opportunity for the teachers to use their new backpacks from the National Wildlife Federation.

The hike extended from the valley floor to the lower ridges of the foothills. Estimated elevation change was between 150-200 meters. The hike used dirt country roads and foot paths between farms. Rest stops were staged at various farmers' salandangs (raised platform structures) in farm fields.

Students packed water and snacks for the hike. Students walked in single file with teachers walking alongside their class groups. The REEEPP volunteers dispersed among the students along the line.

Working with smaller clusters of students was a good opportunity to point out various plants, insects, and trail features using English. Some students eagerly took notes using Thai and English.

Na Fa teachers and students found edible fruits along the trail and shared their knowledge with the volunteers. Both male and female students seem equally unafraid to pick up various insects. It seems their rural backgrounds keep them closer to nature than the urban students that are more familiar to most of the volunteers.

The hike was a loop and brought the group back to the school. They started out going east from the school and returned from the west. The hike pasted through farm fields, bamboo and deciduous forest and lasted half a day.☺





## CLASSROOM VOLUNTEERS

“We really want the students to speak more English in their daily lives,” said Mr. Wittaya. So this time REEEPP volunteers spent more time in the classroom getting students to speak English.

The volunteers donated some new items for the school. Tuyen La gave a volleyball for the girls and a football for the boys. Margarita Rodriguez donated large photo calendars and a “Silly Sentences” game. Erika Rodriguez and her son Andy donated “Chutes and Ladders” and a large rainforest jigsaw puzzle.

In the class, volunteers read stories out while asking students questions. “Hang man” was used to reinforce both the English alphabet, spelling, and speaking.

Spelling words using the letters of another word was another way to practice English spelling and build vocabulary. For example, the letters in the word “mean” can be used to spell man, men, am, an, a, A.M. me, Ma. “Once they learned you don’t have to use all the letters of the starting word to spell other words, the game took off,” reported Tuyen.

Overall, the volunteers reported big progress from their first contact in summer 2005. Most students were much braver to step forward and speak with the volunteers. This was a very big part of Saifon’s desire to launch REEEPP. Most rural school students study English but never get a chance to speak it, let alone speak with a foreigner. “I wanted to give young students a chance that I never had,” she said. ☺



*Volunteers rotated through the different grades / classrooms to spend more time getting students to speak English.*



*Na Fa teachers assisted and observed the volunteers while learning different teaching methods and materials.*



*Andy introduces “Chutes and Ladders” to make English learning more interactive and fun for the students.*

## REEEPP Winter 2007 Report

Community-Based Environmental Education For The Self-Sufficiency And Sustainability Of Small Rural Family Farms



*The RTC-TH extensive photo coverage of school activities provides a rich source for Practical Applied Lessons (PAL). The students and teachers can look at the photos and know it in Thai. We add English, and it speeds up the learning process.*



*Greg Lee creates new visual lessons for teachers and students to use long after the volunteers depart. This makes it easier to keep REEEPP alive in the absence of the foreign volunteers.*



*Na Fa faculty review new lessons, give feedback, and learn at the same time.*

## NEW VISUAL LESSONS

REEEPP volunteers have only a week in Ban Na Fa. The first volunteer visit was in summer 2005, about a 1 ½ years ago. It is hard to imagine how 1 week out of 78 weeks can make any difference. The key lies in the determination of the participants.

All of the Na Fa faculty and staff volunteered to participate in REEEPP. Without their “buy in”, success would be very difficult or next to impossible. Change is much more effective when it comes from the heart than when mandated from the outside.

The community-based education methods of holistic / systematic integration, Teach Backs, Practical Applied Lessons, and adaptive / flexible use of technology also play a part. “But it is critical that the Na Fa faculty believe in what we do,” says the Lees.

Others have come to realize that money is not the key factor. “No amount of money can buy the genuine good will in this project,” says Erika Rodriguez. Margarita, her mother, agrees. “You can see it and feel it among the teachers, volunteers, and students.” “This is the kind of ‘magic’ that takes place when Saifon returns to her home village, her former elementary school and teachers, to give back to her community,” says Greg Lee. “When something like this happens, others can see it comes from the heart. It is satisfying to see the volunteers sharing her vision and caring enough to give of their time, energy and resources to help us make REEEPP come true.” ☺



*Students eagerly try the new lessons. Their quest for English increased when they find they can really talk with others.*





## NA FA FULLY COMMITTED TO ENGLISH LEARNING

The Na Fa faculty and students are fully committed to learning English. Having the volunteers at school has raised their motivation tremendously.

Each school day begins with raising the flag, singing the national anthem, and reciting a Buddhist sutra. As a daily assignment, a student picks an English word, gives its Thai translation, uses it in an English sentence, and reads it out loud in English to everyone. Then all students repeat the word and the sentence in English.

When the REEEPP volunteers were there, the students passed in single file to their classes and greeted the volunteers in English.

Students painted colorful murals in the library and Science Room. The pictures include common objects and animals all complete with English labels.

Walk around the school and you see bilingual labels posted everywhere: door, stairs, wall, mirror, tap, soap, tank, tree, etc. No matter where they turn, students have a chance to build their English vocabulary. ☺



*Bilingual labels appear all around campus to help students build their English vocabulary linked to real object in their daily lives at school.*



*A student presents an English word of their choosing, gives the Thai translation for the word, and an English sentence using the word and leads the entire school in an oral recitation.*



*Students painted these murals and added the*



*After the morning assembly, students on their way to class, file past the REEEPP volunteers and greet them in English.*



## NA FA RECOGNIZES THE VOLUNTEERS

The volunteers received certificates of appreciation and gifts from the Na Fa Elementary School teachers and staff at a farewell dinner held at the Waterside Resort.

This was the end of the intense week-long REEEPP volunteer visit. In spite of the changes from the original schedule, in 4 days the volunteers managed to provide 126 hours of direct contact time with the students. This does not include the planning and coordination time or the time to develop new lessons.

One of Saifon's primary goals in creating REEEPP was to provide elementary school students with the chance to speak English with native speakers. This was not possible when she was a student. She progressed through the Thai education system and completed her BA at Chiang Mai University. "I had studied English from high school through college but never really used it outside of school until I met Greg Lee in 1999. He was the first foreigner that I actually used my English language training," commented Saifon. "I began to think what a difference it could make in the lives of young students if they can develop English language skills earlier than I did."

Her returning to her home village and elementary school was a conscious effort to remember her rural roots. Her teachers remember her and hold her in special regard.

Ask any teacher why they persist in their uphill struggle to prepare lessons and conduct lessons year after year when so few students seem to attain high academic achievement and the common thread is simple: We know not everyone will be a top student. But if we can reach just one student and make a difference, that makes it all worthwhile.

Since REEEPP came to Na Fa Elementary School, interest in English language study has risen. REEEPP also conforms well to the current Thai educational reforms. The success of REEEPP lies in the hearts of the volunteers, teachers, staff, and the students at Ban Na Fa Elementary School. ☺



*Some of the volunteers and teachers at the farewell dinner.*



*Saifon and Greg Lee*



*Tuyen La*



*Erika Rodriguez*



*Margarita Rodriguez*



*Robert Rodriguez*



*Andy Arboleda*

