



Rural Training Center-Thailand (RTC-TH)

Fall 2006: Farm Update

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An educational non-profit organization

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Community-based Environmental Education for the Self-Sufficiency and Sustainability of Small Rural Family Farms

Rain: Late and Too Much at Once

The summer rains came late. But when they finally arrived, it was too much of a good thing. When the RTC-TH team was departing Thailand in late August on their return to LA, they got reports that rain was falling in Ban Na Fa. In one night, all 3 fish ponds on the farm were full and overflowing. All summer, the water levels in the fish ponds were low. During the summer, the main fish pond was nearly full. The second pond, near the farm house was $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ full. The third pond was drained for cleaning and repairs. Water levels in ponds 1 and 2 were reduced as water was drawn off for the rice paddies that were planted in early July.



Summer water levels in the fish ponds (left, pond #3; center, main pond; right, pond #2)

The heavy rains in late August and early September caused a massive flood along the Nan River. It hit Thawangpha early in the morning, about 04:30 and other villages and towns along the Nan River. The main highway was under 1 m of water. Single story buildings in town were under water! [Note: The RTC-TH demonstration farm and Ban Na Fa were not flooded.] Ban Na Fa Elementary School reported they were busy preparing food to help feed the flood victims.

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Surveys of the flood damage indicated major crop losses in the Nan River valley. Landslides, rock slides, washed out bridges and culverts cut off mountain villages from aid. In addition to the rising costs due to fuel price increases, the short supply and high demand for food and supplies for repairs drove

up prices. Could this be preview of what is to come as global warming continues? Many computer simulations point to a trend of longer, warmer periods of drought and shorter, more intense periods of rain. The SW monsoon brings about 80% of the annual water supply this part of northern Thailand. This year was unusual, but if the computer models are correct, this could become the norm. ☹



Flood waters were 3-4 m deep.



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Farm Snapshots

A quick look at some photos around the farm shows some of the progress since summer 2005.

A Farm Full of Forage

The sowing of forage fields has paid off. This effort was multi-faceted: the immediate concerns were soil erosion reduction in anticipation of the summer monsoon rains and having sufficient livestock feed for the new cows to be purchased; the longer range issues were soil improvement, and overall livestock feed sustainability. In the future, tests will be done to assess the viability and sustainability of the forage mix to get through both wet and dry seasons. The goal is to reduce off-farm feed purchases to nearly zero.

Producing Piglets

Shortly after the rains and as the flood subsided, new piglets came into the world. The RTC-TH staff had been busy improving the pig sheds by building an improved nursery. A steel-framed enclosure lets the piglets nurse without danger of being accidentally rolled on by the mother. Slotted floor boards give better sanitation for the piglets as well as keeping them off the concrete floor.

Recent floods have destroyed many crops and livestock operations. The resulting shortages have driven prices higher. Many of the RTC-TH farm staff began to realize the importance of self-sufficiency and sustainability after the flood.

There are plans to apply for a government program to help install a bio-digester to eliminate the odors, produce methane for cooking fuel, and clean effluent for use in duck weed ponds, and compost for the farm. ☺



Late spring, early summer preparation to plant forage crops



Fields full of forage from the summer 2005 planting effort.



After the rains, more piglets arrived in the new pig nursery.



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Counting Cows

Once the forage fields were established, an estimate was made of the carrying capacity and new cows were purchased for the farm. The decision was made to purchase Brahman or Brahman hybrids for their disease resistance and meat productivity. We need to conduct studies about the digestive efficiency of these cows using a mixture of native and non-native forage crops. We plan recycle the manure to boost the organic content of the soils on the farm.

Fish Full of Dollars!

All the hard work of cleaning the fish ponds is starting to pay off. The spring / summer cleaning and restocking of the main fish pond are now yielding tilapia for sale. After the recent floods with road / bridge outages and disrupted supply sources, local wholesalers approached the RTC-TH farm to buy fish. The timing was right. The fish re-stocked in the summer were now large enough to sell. A local wholesaler has a standing order for 50 kg of fish every day. This gives the RTC-TH staff the chance to hone their skills and refine operating procedures to improve their proficiency and the efficiency of the farm.

Solar Surprise!!

In March 2005, we applied to a Thai government program for a small solar photovoltaic system. The application was approved in April 2005. This began our move toward energy self-sufficiency and sustainability. A few days ago, RTC-TH farm manager Oi got a phone call "can you meet us at your farm because we are on our way now to install the solar system?" It had been a 1 year and 8 month wait. She almost forgot about the solar system, thinking it probably wasn't going to come. ☺



Once forage fields were established, new cows were purchased.



Nit puts the catch in a net cage, sized and ready for sale. Sunisa tries her hand at fishing for smaller fish and shrimp.



Small demonstration solar PV system installed through a Thai government project.



Preparing for the Winter 2007 Trip

Prospective volunteers met on September 30, 2006 for the first Winter 2007 pre-trip orientation. The focus of the Jan 10-28, 2007 trip will REEEPP (the Rural Environmental Education Enhancement Pilot Program), now in its 3rd year. At the request of Na Fa Elementary School, the focus this year will be on English learning. "All of the teachers want to continue the Green School, Habitat, and NASA CERES S'COOL projects," said Mr. Wittaya. "But we also want the students to be able to use English in their daily lives." (See the 2nd Annual REEEPP Review in the PDF section of our website.)

Saifon and Gregory got some mini-volunteers and created a sample slide presentation "What I do each morning before school" to show how the Na Fa teachers can make simple "new" English lessons based on every day activities. "If you make lessons based around the activities students do as daily routine, they know about it in Thai, so they understand it. The lesson we did only put simple English to what they already know in Thai."

To round out the cross-cultural experience for the volunteers, the group visits Sukhothai, Phitsanulok, Ayutthaya, Bang Pa In, Bang Sai, Bangkok, Rayong, and Samut Prakan before returning to Los Angeles.

At press time, there were 5 volunteers registered, 9 waiting to make a final decision, and about 6 more considering it. We will be showcasing the Winter 2007 at Geography Awareness Week at California State University, Northridge, CA on Nov 15m 2006.

Winter 2007 trip information and application form are available in the PDF section of the RTC-TH website:

www.neighborhoodlink.com/org/rtcth



Students working in one of the Habitat gardens.



The focus for Winter 2007 is English for daily activities



Volunteers will get exposed to Thai history at Sukhothai and other sites on their way back to Bangkok.



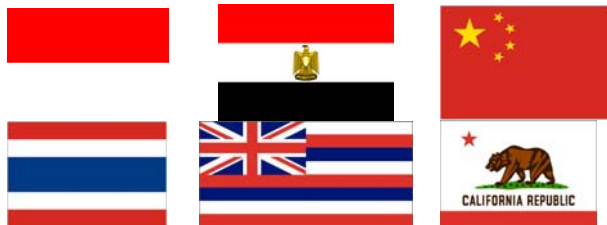
Traveling with the RTC-TH

Traveling with the RTC-TH is a unique opportunity. When Saifon and Gregory Lee organize a trip, it is informal education at its best. Gregory has led independent travel study groups to Indonesia, Hawaii (2 times), as well as trips for the Los Angeles Geographical Society (PR China 3 times; Thailand 2 times; and in southern California). In Gregory's words, "Travel is a special form of education." Using his nearly 3 decades of teaching experience, combined with a dozen years working in private geo-technical firms, he strives to provide learning opportunities for the travelers joining him.

The RTC-TH adds other dimensions to the "educational" experience by using home stays with local Thai villagers. This is cross-cultural experience up front and personal. The REEEPP effort also gives the volunteers a chance to make a difference now. The community-based environmental education model Gregory developed is also up front and personal. "A teacher is anyone who cares, who has knowledge and skill, and is willing to share them with others," says Gregory. "You don't have to have a degree or a teaching credential to make a difference in the world."

Past travelers with Gregory comment on the strong organization and thorough background preparation for his trips. Connie Beck, a summer 2005 volunteer, watched the Lees in action in Thailand and stated "you definitely get the idea that they have done this before."

For the Winter 2007 trip, additional cultural materials are being researched and prepared. "Education reform is in full swing," stated Saifon. Thai teachers don't get pay increases based on seniority. Teachers earn bonuses based on certain performance standards. The volunteers need get some background on the Thai education system and how it and the teachers fit into the society. "It's not quite like it is here in the US," commented Saifon. Other cultural materials in preparation a general information about Buddhism. "Thailand is about 94% Buddhist--Theravada Buddhist. That probably doesn't



Gregory Lee has led educational trips to Indonesia, Egypt, PR China, Thailand, and student groups to Hawaii and throughout southern California.



It is nearly impossible to visit Thailand and not recognize the significance of Buddhism.



Wat Phra Kaew (temple) scene.



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mean much to most Americans. Learning Asian history and culture is not a priority in American schools." The cultural landscape is dominated by temples. During this trip to Thailand, the volunteers will be visiting 2 ancient capitol cities. Without some knowledge of Buddhism, they would have a blind spot to a major portion Thai history," stated Gregory. "The key point is to travel with an open mind, to observe, and to learn. You don't have to convert or believe in Buddhism, but it enables you to better understand Thai history and culture."

Volunteers for Winter 2007 will get trip information on CD-ROM. It is better and less expensive to show color photographs on the CD than to print paper copies. "Cost was a major consideration. So we tried this with some of the post-trip materials from the summer 2005 volunteer trip, and it was well received," said Saifon.

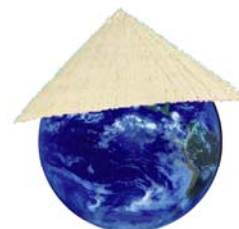
RTC-TH Volunteers Try Skype™

In an effort to reduce costs, key RTC-TH volunteers opted to use Skype™ for free PC to PC international long distance calls. An initial test was conducted in Fall 2006 between the RTC-TH volunteers in Nan Muang (the provincial capitol of Nan Province, Thailand) and the RTC-TH team in Los Angeles. They tested the voice as well as video capabilities. The test was successful. They plan to use Skype as the primary international telecom link with other RTC-TH volunteers. This will enable communications between RTC-TH volunteers anywhere they go in the world for free. Anyone can download this free software from www.skype.com. When calls are made PC to PC, there is no charge. Winter 2007 volunteers should consider getting Skype accounts and use this to keep in touch with folks back "home."

Skype permits you to "customize" the system by adding your photo or graphic icon for people to see when you are connected via Skype. Some RTC-TH volunteers decided to create their own icons. If you decide to use Skype, please send us an e-mail with your Skype "name" or from your Skype system, search for us on Skype by using the RTC-TH e-mail address (rtc2k5@gmail.com). ☺



Some official Skype™ logos.



Some customized RTC-TH volunteer icons used on Skype

Winter 2007 Thailand Volunteer Trip (Jan 10-28, 2007)

- Space is still available for this trip; \$2400, double occupancy; \$300 single supplement.
- Last Day to Enroll: 3 Dec 2006 when full payment is required.

FFI: Visit the RTC-TH website "Our PDF" section www.neighborhoodlink.com/org/rtcth and look for the following:

- Winter 2007 Trip Brochure
- Winter 2007 Trip Information Packet (includes application forms)
- Winter 2007 Trip: Detailed Itinerary

New Coordinator Phone Number starting 26 Oct 2006: (213) 399-6200 Erika Rodriguez

