



Voices

SEPTEMBER 2002

Somkit Kirikumsap is a lifetime resident and current village head of Phapueng, a Karen community nestled in the valleys of northern Thailand's mountainous Chiang Mai Province. As in neighbouring Karen communities in this upper watershed region, the people and land use systems of Phapueng have come under scrutiny in recent decades as production increases in lowland irrigated agriculture and associated economic growth have increased demands for water downstream. Apprehensions about the sustainability of water and other resources are on the rise, and as lowlanders search for the source of their troubles, the easy targets for blame have been ethnic mountain communities like Phapueng—commonly perceived as destroyers of forest and water resources.

It is a perception that is far from the truth. Living compatibly with the natural environment and maintaining the forest as a viable community resource are values deeply embedded in Karen culture. In addition to providing natural value, the forests set aside in Phapueng for protection supply villagers with many of the materials they need for daily living. These forests also hold great spiritual value for the people. Somkit's last name, Kirikumsap—which means 'mountain full of resources'—is just one example of the intimate connection between 'nature' and 'human nature' that prevails in Phapueng.

There are numerous other examples of connections between humans and the environment, reflected in the spiritual traditions that are intrinsic to Karen life. Somkit explained that villagers are highly protective of their 'umbilical forests'—so-called because selected

"If we don't respect our traditions, it's the same as disrespecting our elders. If we disrespect our elders, it's the same as disrespecting the forest. Trees give us shade and shelter, and will provide for the next generations of our people. Water will continue to flow out of the forest, as long as the elders continue to pass on the knowledge and traditions of our culture."

— SOMKIT KIRIKUMSAP

J Lewis



trees within this forest are encircled by the umbilical cords (wrapped in bamboo) of community members. Just as a human umbilical cord is the string of life for a newborn, the umbilical forests are considered integral to the community's survival. In another example, villagers perform ceremonies to ordain—as they would a Buddhist monk—trees of particular value within the community.

Beginning last year, Somkit and other villagers have collaborated with ASB researchers to monitor rainfall, soil erosion, temperature, aquatic invertebrates, stream flow and other environmental indicators with the objective of linking these science-based measures to local knowledge. For example, villagers know that if small crabs appear on the banks of the river, or if red ants build their nests high up in the bushes by the river's banks, rains soon will follow. Using basic, low-cost scientific indicators, villagers can verify, record and validate their own local knowledge—and preserve this knowledge for future generations. Phapueng members also hope that the monitoring of selected environmental indicators—like water quality and stream flow—can help resolve disputes and provide a tool for negotiation in a region where growing competition for resources has resulted in heightened economic, political and ethnic tensions.

ASB Voices is published by the Alternatives to Slash-and-Burn (ASB) Programme. The series aims to convey for a broad audience the insights and perspectives from people's real-life experiences and challenges in the humid tropics.

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