

# GREAT OAKS GROW FROM LITTLE ACORNS

TANPISIT LERDBAMRUNGCHAI  
THE NATION

"If one day we have no forestland left, what will we do?" asks 17-year-old Suriyo Suropan, chairman of the Children Love Forestland group in Nan province, as he sees more and more tree-covered land disappear.

This northern province's forested area had shrunk from 7 million rai, or 73 per cent of the province, in 1976 to just 3 million rai - 41 per cent - by 2002, according to the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry.

A more recent survey in 2011 found that Nan's forestland had reduced further to cover only 39.87 per cent of the province's area. Such a massive change negatively affected the lives of people dependent on water and forest products, while also increasing the severity of natural disasters every year.

Suriyo was determined to do something to conserve forest and, believing in the power of youth grouping together, he started the movement from his Ban Nong Phuk neighbourhood in Chiang Klang district's Tambon Preu.

## SHIFT IN FOCUS

At first, the Children Love Forestland group had only 10 members, but its membership has now grown to 80 - with virtually all children over seven to youths in their early 20s in the village joining the cause.

The grown-up alumni of the group, many of whom moved away to pursue education or career in big cities, remain in contact with current members and pass on the passion for forest-conservation activities to the younger ones.

"The goal will be achieved not only from the youths' movement, as community adults also have to support their activities continuously. We are lucky that our seniors, schoolteachers and local administrative organisations are supporting our cause," he said.

Applying the "elderly lead, children follow" concept, the group were taught by their elders about local wisdom that implies a lifestyle in harmony with the forest. This includes building check dams, creating firebreaks, using herbs from the forest and organising a tree-ordination rite. The latter is in line with Buddhism, covering a tree trunk with a monk's yellow robe, as if the tree were ordained and hence cannot be felled.



YOUTHS PLANT trees in Nan under the 'elderly lead, children follow' concept.

Suriyo's aunt Kreuwan Suropan, who was the Ban Nong Phuk community's one-stop agriculture group president, said the farmers there used to grow maize and tobacco, which entailed clearing forestland.

However, facing more severe storms, forest floods, drought and intense heat, they realised the importance of the forest and adopted a suggestion by Maejo University to grow squash and cucurbita pepo, which do not require as much space and can be sold at about the same price as maize and tobacco.

Village headman Wiwek Sonpud said the community set rules to conserve both the forest and the environment, and many families engaged in a learning experience in the forest, so that the adults' activities involving the forest gained more participation from the youths.

They also gathered 50 residents' signatures to register the forest area around the village as community forest, he added.

Royal Forestry Department expert Kittiporn Boonyakit said the registration of 3,726 rai of community forest was better than letting the government or the department itself control it, because the villagers would protect their forest with love and a genuine feeling of ownership.

He added that the Ban Nong Phuk community was strong and had passed the ideology for conservation on to the younger generations, until it won the outstanding community forest award for youth participation in 2011. Such an

outstanding achievement also attracted like-minded people.

## BRAVE, SMILING YOUTHS

The northern region's "Yaowachon Klayim" (brave and smiling youths) camp, with sponsorship from Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding and the Royal Forestry Department, was organised there to instil forest-conservation awareness

and pass on community knowledge of forest management.

Under this scheme, 80 youths aged 13 to 15 from Nan, Phrae, Tak, Sukhothai, Uttaradit, Lampang, Lamphun, Chiang Mai, Phayao and Chiang Rai learned about how to live in harmony with forest, take anti-global warming measures, herb-garden creation, as well as brainstorming for "the future of community forests".

Assistant president of Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding Bunthiwa Dansomsathit said this brainstorming would encourage the youths to think of their own community forests and extend the lessons gained from the camp to develop their community forests in the future.

She believes it will help promote awareness of the environment and energy conservation.

Sarvuth Setha, a 14-year-old from Ban Nong Pla Sawai School in Lamphun, said he would spread the information he had learned to schoolmates and parents, especially concerning the making of maize-stalk fertiliser because his family grows the crop and until now has burnt the stalks post-

harvest. "Now we will turn them into fertiliser and no longer burn the stalks as waste," he said.

Phoungphaka Ratchajak, a 17-year-old from Uttaradit Vocational College, said she viewed the future of community forests in two ways: either community people would together conserve the forest to last forever, or the community forest would disappear because many areas were still subject to deforestation.

If it went the latter way, it would surely lead to less and less forestland and increasingly severe natural disasters, she said.

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