

The Community Based Mangrove Forest Management : An Alternative Action for Mangroves Conservation in Thailand

In 1961, Thailand occupied 2,299,375 rai of mangrove forests. However, these forests were being destroyed at an increasing rate. As was the case, apart from inappropriate mangrove forest utilization policy and ineffective law enforcement, economic growth - oriented development led to an exploitation of mangrove forest. Up to 1996, only 1,047,390 rai of mangrove forest remained resulting from 418, 736.75 rai of shrimp farming, 55,002.50 rai of the expansion of community along the coast, and 806,670.75 rai of other causes. The remaining mangrove forests largely consist of patented ember-woods that are in bad condition. This is due to the fact that most patents have been conferred without legal observation. At present, 232 patents are registered totaling 846,584.62 rai, most of which are located along the Andaman coast.

Between 1979-1986 (7 years) the deforestation of mangrove recorded a peak of 567,950 rai. This was due to the "golden era" of black tiger prawn farming. Then the deforestation declined partly because the booming period of black tiger prawn farming ended and/or the government launched a more effective mangrove forestry policy. Following the severe loss of mangrove forests, the environment and ecosystem of the sea shore were badly disturbed thus bringing fishermen difficult times. Moreover, the widespread use of environmental unfriendly fishing equipment such as push nets, trawler nets, explosive objects, and other forms of biocide threatened the number of marine life.

Local fishermen in ten villages in Trang province realized the importance of mangrove forest thereby carried out sustainable forestry in the form of the so-called "Community Mangrove Forest" by cooperating with all relevant parties, public and private. The first Community Mangrove Forest was introduced in Ban Tungthong, Sikao district in 1989 with mangrove forest totaling 587 rai. This was made possible by the effort of community leaders and later with the support from the state. At present, there are 10 forests being managed by local fishermen in Trang province, totaling 6,227 rai in Sikao, Kantang, Palien and Yan Takao districts. This does not only result in improved natural environment and biodiversity, but also increases the number of marine life caught by fishermen and lowers the cost as distant fishery is no longer necessary. The strategic movement of Community Mangrove Forest promotes teamwork, strong community organization, democratic decision making, and sets forth appropriate and voluntary monitoring of forest use. This encourages the community to regard the resources as their own and thus to protect nation's assets without creating burden of government budget. In this manner, the management of mangrove forest fosters stability in the village, and ensures food security to the community and society as a whole.

Such management practically coincides with the constitution, provides new knowledge, and effectively urges other areas along Thailand's sea shore to follow suit. To a certain extent, the recent operation proved to be a community success. The government should strongly promote the importance of the community's rights to resources management by updating mangrove forest policy, immediately revise mangrove forest patent policy, and speed up the establishment of community forestry laws in order to enable the community to take part in sustainable forestry which the constitution is intended for. This essentially features another alternative to the survival of Thailand's forests.