

Award-winning Thai community continues the fight to save its wetland forest

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Srongpol Chantharueang remembers his parents telling him as a boy always to protect the local wetland forest when he grew up. They told him that the ecosystem would be important for his life and that of his community. "I didn't understand what they meant at the time," he told Mongabay via a video call in December 2020. "I didn't understand what the true value of the wetland forest was."

A village leader, Srongpol lives in Ban Boon Rueang, a town in Thailand's northern Chiang Rai province. Nestled between the Doi Yao mountain range and the lower reaches of the Ing River, a 260-kilometer (160-mile) tributary of the Mekong, Ban Boon Rueang is an unassuming town with an agrarian lifestyle that goes back generations. But in recent years, community members have been roused to take action to protect the surrounding nature that provides them with sustenance and secures spiritual connections to their ancestors.

The community averted tragedy in 2015 when the Thai central government declared the local wetland forest — a 483-hectare (1,200-acre) haven of biodiversity — a target for the development of a special economic zone (SEZ), as part of a nationwide strategy to expand infrastructure and attract foreign investment.

Thailand has experienced rapid economic development, accompanied by population growth, urbanization and natural resource depletion, over recent decades. Between 1961 and 1998, Thailand's forest cover decreased from 53% to 25% of the nation's total area, representing a loss of 14.4 million hectares (35.6 million acres) of forest. Wetlands have been overexploited, cleared for agriculture, or filled in for the development of residential and industrial estates.

Village inhabitants foresaw what the SEZ would mean for their treasured ecosystem: the wetland would be filled in with concrete and the trees cut down.

Their response was to mobilize to protect the land, which they have customarily managed for more than 200 years. The campaign successfully convinced authorities that the wetland forest was more beneficial economically and socially in its natural state. In 2018, the Chiang Rai provincial government withdrew the proposal to use the site as an SEZ — a great victory for Ban Boon Rueang and for Srongpol.

The community's quiet and methodical revolution recently gained international recognition: they were awarded the 2020 Equator Prize by the United Nations Development Programme.

"By asserting their rights to manage the wetland forest, the community members protect their rights, identity and their future," said Warangkana Rattanasat, Thailand country director of RECOFTC, a nonprofit international organization that worked alongside the community to protect and sustainably manage the forest. "Their success is an inspiration to other communities who are fighting similar injustices and threats."

However, while the villagers successfully fought off the development proposal, they continue to grapple with such threats as climate change and upstream dams, which harm the integrity of the ecosystem by preventing vital seasonal flooding of the wetland forest.



Srongpol Chantharueang chairs the Boon Rueang Wetland Forest Conservation Group, which partnered with international nonprofits, civil society organizations and local academic institutions to share evidence of the importance of the wetland forest for *biodiversity and the local community*. Image courtesy of RECOFTC.

An important ecosystem

Boon Rueang wetland forest is the largest in a network of 26 wetland forests that swathe the meandering lower Ing River, en route to its confluence with the Mekong River at the Thai-Lao border. It is credited with saving the village from the devastating floods that swept the region in 2010. Although neighboring villages were engulfed, Boon Rueang was comparatively unscathed owing to the capacity of the wetland to buffer the floodwaters.

To the village residents, the wetland forest is a lifeline, providing clean water, fish spawning and nursery grounds, and a riparian ecosystem on which the community depends. “It is like a village kitchen,” Srongpol said. “Its charm lies in its seasonality. Every season there is something different that we can gather to eat.” According to RECOFTC, the annual cost of replacing the lost livelihoods and ecosystem services provided by the wetland forest would be an estimated \$4 million.

Srongpol chairs the Boon Rueang Wetland Forest Conservation Group (BRWFCG), which serves as the community’s governing body for its wetland forest. When faced with the SEZ development, the BRWFCG spearheaded the community’s resistance, engaging a broad range of stakeholders to help gather information about the wetland forest’s importance.

Data compiled by the BRWFCG and its partners revealed that the riparian ecosystem supports at least 276 species, including 87 types of fish and several dozen edible plants. Recent camera trapping and DNA studies confirmed the presence of leopard cats (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) and near-threatened Eurasian otters (*Lutra lutra*). There are anecdotal reports of other species on the IUCN Red List, such as critically endangered Sunda pangolins (*Manis javanica*), vulnerable fishing cats (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), and near-threatened king cobras (*Ophiophagus hannah*).

According to the 2020 WWF Living Planet Report, nearly 70% of global wetlands have been lost since 1900 and they are still being destroyed three times faster than forests. In Thailand, pressure to convert land for agriculture, aquaculture and industry has resulted in the loss of many wetlands, which accounted for 7.5% of the nation's land area in 1999.

Lowland wetland forests, like Boon Rueang, are an increasingly rare lowland ecosystem in the region, which have tremendous carbon storage potential — double the capacity of a mixed deciduous forest, according to RECOFTC.

Despite the pivotal role of wetlands in countering climate change, supporting biodiversity and mitigating disaster risk, the 2018 Global Wetland Outlook, published by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, found that wetlands remain “dangerously undervalued” by policy- and decision-makers in national plans.

The community action of the Boon Rueang residents is a rare beacon of hope for wetlands. “By conserving the wetland forest, the community helps protect biodiversity in the region while also mitigating climate change,” said Warangkana of RECOFTC.



Boon Rueang Women's Group leads the community's forest restoration efforts through tree planting. Image courtesy of RECOFTC.

Rivers out of balance

Nonetheless, climate change remains a pervasive threat. The region has been rocked by severe El Niño-driven droughts over the last few years. When combined with the changing flow regimes on the mainstream Mekong River due to upstream dams beyond the villagers' jurisdiction, not even the most targeted community action can avert the consequences.

The flooding patterns that sustain the Ing River and its wetlands are determined by the natural flow cycle in the roughly 2,050-km (1,270-mi) stretch of the upper Mekong River, from where it rises in the Tibetan plateau to its confluence with the Ing River in Thailand.

During the wet season, which typically runs from August to November, the Mekong River transitions into a flood phase, which sends a surge of floodwater up the lower Ing River. This flood pulse nourishes waterways and lakes in the wetland forests and carries migratory fish from the Mekong into the Ing River, where they support the livelihoods and diets of local fishing communities.

Despite the importance of the upper Mekong's natural flow regime to downstream habitats and communities, Chinese firms have so far built 11 hydropower dams on the mainstream river within China's borders, with more completed or under construction in neighboring Laos.

Studies implicate the upstream dams in weakened flood patterns in downstream catchments over recent years. A 2020 report by researchers from Eyes on Earth, a U.S. environmental research group, suggests that Chinese dams regulating water flow during the wet season in 2019 exacerbated the effects of climate-driven El Niño droughts for communities downstream.

The upstream Mekong's weakened flood pulse sets off "a domino effect throughout the ecosystem," according to Teerapong Pomun, director of the Thai NGOs Living Rivers Association and the Mekong Community Institute, which work with communities along the Ing River to manage their wetland forests.

Dwindling water levels and the weakened Mekong flood pulse due to the combination of dams and El Niño-driven dry spells are a serious concern here. "Villagers report that the Mekong River no longer fluctuates according to seasonal flood patterns, meaning that the river levels are abnormally low and fish replenishment has decreased," said Warangkana of RECOFTC.

In Boon Rueang, Srongpol mentions how it was once necessary to move about the wetland forest by boat during the wet season. "For the past few years, it has been possible to walk on foot year-round," he said.

Thai civil society organizations have been campaigning against development schemes in the Mekong River for more than two decades. "We try to raise the issue among local people and petition decision-makers in China, but it is very hard to have our voices heard," Teerapong said.

The recent inauguration of the Mekong People's Forum, comprising civic groups from eight Thai provinces that border the Mekong, helps to address such issues at the policy level. "We need to unite our voices," Teerapong said. "The dams are not just a problem for people living along the mainstream Mekong; this is a problem for communities along the tributaries too."

Conservation and international protection

Through BRWFCG, the Boon Rueang community has an active voice in such regional advocacy platforms and continues its drive to sustain a healthy wetland forest. Its approach has inspired nearby villages to take similar action to stand up against the pervasive threat of land grabbing.

By following customary management approaches that focus on living in balance with nature, the community has mitigated some impacts. Sixty-three communities along the Ing River have established fish conservation zones, where fishing activity is restricted to protect vulnerable spawning habitats. These fish conservation zones are steeped in Buddhist traditions: the waters are blessed by a local monk and, thus, respected. Studies by Living Rivers Association have found that fish size and numbers increase in these zones. The BRWFCG is also cultivating a plant nursery and organic fertilizer system to restore the wetland forest and its soil quality.

Due to the community's efforts, the immediate threat from SEZ development has abated. However, there is still no guarantee that developers will not target the area again in the future. Over the years, the community has repeatedly fought off attempts to convert the wetland for other purposes, such as for factories and plantations.

"When the SEZ proposal was withdrawn, we asked the governor to guarantee that nobody would touch the land," said village leader Srongpol. "But the governor said when he retires there is no guarantee that the next administration will not want to develop on it."

The community does not formally own the wetland forest land. In 1967, a Public Land Certification granted the community legal rights to fish, graze buffalo and establish a community forest from which they can gather non-timber forest products. Agreements that govern such activities "are not enough to protect them legally," according to Teerapong.

For this reason, the community is working with partners to designate the wetland forest landscape of the lower Ing River, including the Boon Rueang wetland forest, for global protection as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention.

Although Thailand has 15 sites designated under the Ramsar Convention, totaling more than 400,000 hectares (990,000 acres) of wetlands, the habitats of the Ing River watershed are not among them.

Advocates say they hope that such protection under international law will safeguard the important wetland forest ecosystems from future development pressure.

The Ramsar bid has the endorsement of several villages and the Chiang Rai provincial leader. However, outreach and dialogue continue with communities throughout the river basin to ensure their inclusivity in the proposal. Teerapong estimates the proposal will be ready within the next two years.

For Srongpol Chantharueang, the simple sight of water buffalo grazing in the wetland sparks joy. They have been a constant in the wetland forest landscape since his boyhood. He knows his community cannot afford to get complacent. "To destroy the forest is very easy," he said. "To protect it and improve it for nature and the local people is much more challenging."



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