



SAVING THAILAND'S FORESTS

A HELPING HAND FROM BRITAIN'S DARWIN INITIATIVE

by Kirby Doak with photos from FORRU-CMU 2003

What a feeling! Me, an Australian Youth Ambassador, helping to save Thailand's forest. A hopeless lost cause? Maybe, but over the past twelve months of living and working in Northern Thailand, I have been converted from a sceptic to a believer. Today was another tree-planting event. We have just planted 5,000 trees of 20 different species in the hope of transforming 1.5 hectares of abandoned, degraded agricultural land back into lush forest. A few hundred metres away, a closed-canopy evergreen forest, planted in a similar way just three years ago, serves as an example to the scores of villagers and students who have worked alongside me. It shows that the saplings, which we have planted today, will really grow into a new forest ecosystem over the next few years. Although the tree-planting day left me with the satisfied feeling of having taken direct action to save the environment, I know there is more, much more, to forest restoration than just planting trees. So, I would like to invite you to share in some of my experiences working with a small team of environmental educators in the Biology Department of Chiang Mai University (CMU).

A cicada-like sound emanates from the printer as it regurgitates an updated schedule.

A guillotine squeals as it slices out nametags. Indistinct chatter can be heard as a small band of people move hurriedly but purposefully about the small office in CMU's Herbarium Building. These are the familiar sounds of a regular day's work for a small team of educators, dedicated to helping local people restore northern Thailand's forests to their former glory, and conserving their extraordinarily diverse flora and fauna. This daunting undertaking by CMU's Forest Restoration Research Unit (FORRU) and its partner organization, Horticulture Research International (HRI), is sponsored by the Darwin Initiative, the U.K. Government's support fund for global biodiversity. All three organizations share a common interest in restoring tropical forests and their associated rich biodiversity. In northern Thailand, the aim is to build lasting local capacity to restore forest ecosystems on degraded land for biodiversity conservation and environmental protection.

In recent decades, the world's mass-media have bombarded us with images and statistics of forest destruction and its disastrous consequences for our planet's flora

and fauna. Here in mountainous Northern Thailand, forests are still being ruthlessly exploited by determined profiteers, despite a ban on commercial logging since 1989.

Meeting the needs of a growing rural population of highland minority groups has also caused continued conversion of forest into agricultural land. The environmental devastation that has resulted from such widespread deforestation is plain for all to see. Flooding in the lowlands is now a regular occurrence during the monsoon season. Water shortages in the dry season and scorching fires prevent forest recovery, while exacerbating the existing problems faced by local communities. A common complaint by eco-tourists visiting northern Thailand is that there appear to be very few wild animals larger than squirrels to see. Even formerly common species such as barking deer and wild pigs are scarce due to habitat destruction and incessant hunting.



Above left: Monitoring growth rates of propagated native seedlings in order to choose the best performing species for future forest restoration planting events.

Above right: The writer lends a hand to tell a forest biodiversity tale to Lanna International School children in FORRU's Doi Suthep-Pui National Park nursery.

Below right: Two schoolgirls hold saplings from a tree nursery for transplantation.



Above left: One satisfied customer, despite the rain. A teacher at one of FORRU's workshops collects a few seedlings for her pupils to plant back at their school.

Above right: Young village children participating in hands-on planting activities near their school.

Below right: Learning how to germinate seeds and grow seedlings is an essential part of the forest restoration process. Khun Natenapit (right) shows NGO volunteers how it's done.

Formerly dominant tree species, such as teak, may now be found in large numbers only in commercial plantations. Because of their high economic value, they have been plundered from natural forests. Such losses of natural heritage not only endanger wildlife, it also erodes the very cultural identity of the people who call Thailand's northern mountains their home.

The mission of CMU's Darwin Education Team is to raise awareness that *this insidious problem is reversible*, and to provide local people with the skills and knowledge needed to restore their forests. The team takes its message directly to the people that live in and use the forests, as well as to the government officials who manage them, plus especially children, whose future depends on them.

In March 2002, when FORRU/HRI were successful in their bid for a Darwin Award, an education team of three facilitators and an office assistant were quickly recruited. Thanakorn Lattirasuvan, a Kasetsart master's graduate in forestry, can recite the Latin names of plants like a role call; his knowledge of native trees is almost uncanny. Kunakorn Boonsai is a veteran, with twelve years experience of delivering environmental messages to schools and their communities. Natenapit Jitlam, a Chiang Mai University Science Graduate and natural entertainer, can inject a dose of confidence into the most timid of listeners. The talents of these people (my colleagues for the past year) all complement each other, but they all share a persuasive ability; to 'tell it as

it is' in a language understood by their audience. The Darwin Education Team was trained by FORRU's research staff to understand and then disseminate the research results in ways that nonscientists can understand.

FORRU was founded by CMU's Biology Department and Doi Suthep-Pui National Park (under the Royal Forest Department) in 1994, to develop methods to restore forest to degraded sites, for wildlife conservation. FORRU recognized that simply protecting remaining forest was not enough. Forests had to be restored in the degraded areas where they formerly grew.

At that time, little was known about how to plant a forest for biodiversity conservation. Foresters concentrated plantations. Local people knew which tree species could successfully invade abandoned fields and provide foods for animals. But neither knew how to restore complex forest ecosystems in their entirety.

FORRU established a research nursery on a small plot of land generously provided by the Headquarters of Doi Suthep-Pui National Park, where basic ecological and horticultural research could be carried out on hundreds of the forest tree species indigenous to northern Thailand.

Effective methods to grow high quality planting stock were developed and treatments to maximize tree performance after planting were devised. The end results of this painstaking research are demonstration forest plots, up to six years old, which grow into a

closed plots canopy within three years after planting. A thick layer of leaf litter carpets the forest floor, and wild pigs, deer, and a host of forest birds are returning to what was barren, abandoned, agricultural land just five years ago.

With the new schedule regurgitated by the printer, nametags from the guillotine, posters, crayons, story books, a puppet show, sleeping bags, and gifts prepared in order to return forthcoming hospitality, the Darwin Education Team finish loading an ageing but sturdy 4WD vehicle. This time, it is rented with a driver for a week. It will take them along dirt roads that twist into the mountains of Northern Thailand.

Six weeks ago a village community met to discuss growing pressure from the authorities to leave their land or show they are good custodians of the environment. They also voiced concern over how diminishing supplies of forest resources, such as medicinal herbs, building materials, and reserve food supplies, threatened their livelihoods. After hearing about the Darwin Education Team via the project's extensive network, the village chief approached the team for help.

News of the team's free education and training services is rapidly spreading via the network and a quarterly newsletter, as well as word of mouth by former participants in the programme. After one year of operation, the education team is implementing educational activities for schools on a weekly basis.

Activities demonstrate concepts ranging from forest relationships to seed germination. Schools also request field trips to FORRU's research nursery, located in Doi Suthep National Park, as also to the demonstration plots and community tree nursery at Ban Mae Sa Mai, in the north of the national park. These trips help students understand the importance of forests and introduce them to FORRU's unique forest restoration techniques.

The Darwin Education Team hosts bimonthly workshops to meet the technical needs of various target groups, including hill tribe villagers, school teachers, and international foresters visiting from countries as various as China and Bhutan. Participants in the workshops enjoy VCD and PowerPoint presentations before taking part in hands-on activities, such as advanced tree propagation techniques, as also the monitoring of planted forest plots.

Additionally, the Darwin Education Team deals with requests for extension visits, offering specific advice to village communities that have started their own tree-planting projects. It also presents its work at public exhibitions and events and spreads the word through radio and television programmes.

As the sturdy 4WD, makes its way back to Chiang Mai, the team is comfortable but tired. After five nights of sleeping on the floors of village huts they feel a sense of accomplishment and reward, having held

events in three schools, participated in village discussions, and inspected two more potential reforestation sites. Seeds of both trees and knowledge have been sown and the team feels they have achieved something.

Two days ago they were walking in the 'community forest' of Mae Yang Min village before settling into an informal session around the warmth of a communal fire. The end result of the visit was that the village decided to plant a forest using FORRU's concepts. School teachers and pupils where the team ran activities will help with the planting and take care of the planted trees.

I was also in the 4WD for that week. I observed the forest walks with community members, activities with schoolchildren, and nightly discussions with the village leaders. Since then, I have participated in planting events and been part of the growing enthusiasm within the community. I am witness to The Darwin Education Team achieving results where others have failed. I believe their success lies with the simple fact that they have a scientifically-based solution and, as Thai nationals themselves, they know how to present the information in a language understood by their audience, who are the custodians of our forests.

Those of you who believe me or, as I was, are still sceptical, please come see for yourself. With this kind of continued support, I firmly believe in a brighter future for Thailand's forests.

Project Aims
Over the three-year project period (April 2002 to March 2005), the Darwin Education Team estimates it will reach 3000 - 5000 children in 120 school education events, and about 300 forestry officials, through 15 technical workshops, as well as numerous villagers and NGO staff through providing on-site advice during extension visits. The project puts out quarterly newsletters and has developed a computerized forest restoration network and website: www.forru.org. Educational aids, including a/v shows, an image catalogue, videos, posters, and so on, have been developed for environmental teachers. Also planned is a Forest Restoration Manual by the end of 2004. The project's target groups include NGO staff, villagers, government officers, university and school students, and anyone else interested in helping to restore Thailand's once magnificent forests. These services are provided free of charge.

For further information, please contact: FORRU Darwin Education Team, Biology Department, Chiang Mai University, 50200. Telephone:- (053) 943 346x1134-5.

E-mail: <forru@science.cmu.ac.th>. Further information is available at www.forru.org and at www.unep-wcmc.org/forest/restoration/docs/Thailand.pdf.

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See Centrefold Map, H7



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For more info: Tel. (053) 217 769 / Fax: (053) 215 606.

Mr.Theera (01) 951 9848. Centrefold Map, C3.

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