

Half a World Away

A Q&A with a Laotian environmentalist

Hongthong Sirivath is a Laotian man who majored in agricultural science and now works for a nonprofit environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) in Laos, a southeast Asian country that lies between Thailand and Vietnam. He spent two weeks this summer in Eugene consulting with the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW).

Some issues in Laos resemble our own: deforestation, land use planning issues, agricultural land being used for development. And of course, the remains of the expanded Vietnam War haunt the country, with landmines making daily life a challenge for the villagers Sirivath works with. *EW* sat down with Sirivath at the end of his time here, just before he went to visit Crater Lake and some Lao friends in Portland, to find out about his projects and the work he's doing in Laos.

For the many Oregonians who don't know much about Laos, tell me what it's like.

Laos is very hot and humid right now [37-38 degrees Celsius or 99 degrees Fahrenheit]. Most people live along the Mekong River, on the border of Thailand. The capitol is Vientiane. Most people speak Lao, but there are 48 minority groups with their own languages. We have about 6 million people.

Tell us about your project.

I've been working since 2000 for an American NGO, Village Focus International. I'm based in Laos as a project coordinator. It's a community-based natural resource management project in the Xe Sap natural area of the Salavan province. The place we're working is where people live on the bubble zone of a national protected area. It's got the most biodiversity in the country. It is difficult to access and difficult to exploit. The project is trying to strengthen local people in order to use and manage their natural resources in a sustainable way.

Most of the people in the project are a minority group, the Taoi, who have their own language. About 40 percent of them speak Lao, and of that, about 20 percent read and write. So we're trying to do four things: land use planning, conservation, an awareness raising campaign and legal reform in regard to the land as a natural resource.

How is it set up?

In the villages, we have three projects: Land and livelihood; food security; and health, education and leadership for success.

We discuss with the village authorities where the boundaries are and make them official. We help them figure out how to set boundaries using GPS and GIS to make a database for the government, classifying various land uses. We walk with them and ask them where to make the different areas — conservation zones for the forests at the tops of the mountains, bamboo management zones, livestock areas, the spiritual forest, fish conservation areas in the Mekong.

Then we help them develop agricultural activity. Most of the people are used to doing shifting cultivation, slash and burn, and we try to help them do things like rice paddies, which are permanent.

I thought rice farming was rather water intensive. What kind of rotation do the farmers use?

It's rice first, then things like cucumber, corn, eggplant and many plants they can eat daily. We try to build a dam and irrigate from small streams. In the rainy season, we channel the water. But there's lots of erosion on the slopes after destroying the forest with slash and burn, so to keep it going, we plant fruit trees after the rice is harvested, things like mangos.

What are the environmental challenges you and the villagers are facing?

Economic development and globalization. The people haven't needed money at all; they relied on natural resources. They have rice, bamboo shoots, mushrooms from the forest. Not many outsiders came in; not many traders came to them.

But now, we're building a big road to Vietnam. A lot of people come in along the road; then the villagers see televisions and motorbikes, so they harvest things like rattan and mushrooms to guarantee themselves money to buy things.

What about land use?

The government has a policy of getting outside investment, like pulp mill companies coming in and building factories. They also come in and plant soybeans, cassava, teak and acacia in order to make paper. They take resources, and they take communal lands for this purpose. For instance, a big company from India asked for 300,000 hectares of land that covers 100 communities.

How is your project fighting this kind of thing?

We are training the villagers to think they can have an impact. For instance, Taoi youth in high school volunteer and learn how to do a puppet show, storytelling, explain posters and ask how villagers can consider giving land to companies, how to deal with the negative impact. They help the people ask the government to give land back to them.

How do you balance the needs for agriculture and conservation with the needs for economic development?

That's what I came here to learn! I'm working with a cluster of villages to help them come together as a group, so in this case, we win. When the company comes to talk to the villagers about what land they can use, the villagers will have a plan.

The village leaders don't know their rights and responsibilities, so we're produc-

ing a legal guidebook.

But we cannot just give the guidebook, which will be finished by the end of the year. We have a model of a training course for teams that will go into the villages and train people in the community.

What animals and plants are in danger?

It's a very biodiversity-rich area. The deer — saola — is in trouble. And the pinchon — peacock — is already gone. A lot of things are gone. And the village cannot do anything; if the land is taken, the culture is broken.

What hope do you have for the future?

When people can survive, they will protect the forest. People in the rural areas are key people to protect the forest. Finally, the goal is that natural resources in Laos will be preserved and we'll be a natural resource country. Before it was 75 percent forest; now, it's 40 percent, and I hope to regenerate it to 50-60 percent.

EW

Note: A longer version of this story is available on our website (www.eugeneweekly.com).



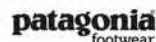
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