

Reclaiming the Golden Triangle

Under a successful two-pronged strategy targeting Thailand's thriving drug trade across the infamous Golden Triangle, sustainable agriculture is successfully supplanting poppy growing by providing alternative profit and a better lifestyle for farmers in the rugged region. **Richard Mogg** reports.

Thailand is taking radical action on several fronts to absolve itself of an international reputation as a centre for illegal drug production in the global trade.

The geographical focus of these new suppression programs is the Golden Triangle that demarcates the joint borders of the Kingdom of Thailand, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) and the Union of Myanmar (formerly Burma). From here, drug smuggling into Thailand has been prevalent across the Mekong River, passing mainly through the porous border districts of Chiang Rai, Chiang Khong, Chiang Saen and Mae Sai.

On the one hand, a unit of the Australian Federal Police is assisting Thai regulatory agencies (customs, army, navy and police) to engage in joint operations with Laos, the main aim being to stop drug smuggling across the Mekong that delineates much of the long border between the two countries.

On the other hand, Thailand's Doi Tung Development Project, an operating arm of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, which, under royal patronage, supports the hill tribes of the region, is successfully expanding the replacement of opium poppy growing in Thailand and Myanmar with sustainable agriculture.

As part of the crop substitution program, launched in 1989, Arabica coffee and

macadamia trees began to replace the cultivation of opium as an economic crop. From a total of 3642 rai of land, 2613 rai was planted with Arabica coffee shrubs and 1029 rai with macadamia trees (1 rai=1600m²). Macadamia trees, which take from five to eight years to flourish, are now leased to farmers at the rate of 1 baht per tree per year, with production buy-back guaranteed by Doi Tung. The coffee, blended in a range of varieties and packaged, along with the macadamia nuts and other trademarked quality products, is now fast gaining an appreciative market.

The program's progress has attracted international accolades and help. Ron Barnett, an entrepreneur and expert macadamia nut grower from northern New South Wales, Australia, volunteers much of his time to advising Doi Tung on successful cultivation of macadamia nuts and a variety of cash crops.

'In 1994 I was approached by the NSW Department of Agriculture by the district horticulturist, Mr Ross Loebel, and asked if I would be prepared to show my farm and talk to a group of people from Thailand, not knowing at that stage who they were or who they represent. They were impressed with what they saw and invited myself and Mr Loebel to Doi Tung to inspect and write a report on the viability of the macadamia orchards there, which were at



that time five years old and in not the best condition – in fact the macadamia project was lacking in all areas of plantation management,' he says.

'I now travel to Thailand four times a year, spending approximately five months at Doi Tung.'

As well as agricultural crop-substitution, Mae Fah Luang Foundation sponsors supporting profitable projects in handicrafts such as pottery and weaving, horticulture, food and tourism. Discussing his relations with the local people of many different ethnic minorities involved in Doi Tung projects, Mr Barnett explains 'we advise and encourage, identify their needs, but do not impose.'



A royal lead for social change

Launched in 1982 on the initiative of Her Royal Highness the Princess Mother, mother of Thailand's current monarch, King Bhumipol, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation and its Doi Tung Development Project are managed from cloud-girt headquarters located in Chiang Rai province's lofty Doi Tung mountain range. The project is divided into three phases, with planned project activities extending over a period of 30 years. Phase I: 1988–1993; Phase II: 1994–2002; and Phase III: 2003–2017.

Under the leadership of its chief executive officer, M.R. Disnadda Diskul ('M.R.', Mom Rajawongse, denotes royal heritage; but he is 'Khun Chai' to everyone

connected with his work), the project aims to provide sustainable development, a wage economy and settled community conditions for the hill-tribe people who have long inhabited the Doi Tung massif.

Established on 16 January 1987 to undertake the rehabilitation of degraded forest extending over an area of 93 515 rai (or 149.62 km²), the Doi Tung project area covers a total of 27 villages situated in Chiang Rai province, representing 2582 families; a total population of 10 359. The 27 villages of various ethnic minority groups that lie within the project area consist primarily of hill-tribe communities such as the Akha, Lahu, Tai Yai, Shan, as well as Chinese migrants who had accompanied the Kuomintang's 93rd Infantry

The Mekong River's Thai–Laos joint operations boat station.

Richard Mogg

Inset: Thai–Laos joint operations training in counter-narcotics arrest procedures.

Richard Mogg

escape to Thailand at the conclusion of the last Chinese civil war.

Back in 1982, slash-and-burn cultivation and scorched earth deforestation – mainly due to illegal logging – had stripped the steep terrain of its natural cover so that topsoil washed away and degradation of the terrain became widespread. This was largely the picture across much of Thailand.

In that same year, Her Royal Highness, affectionately known to many Thais as 'Mae Fah Luang' (Heavenly Royal Mother),

seized the opportunity to establish a project to help villagers regain their self-respect with waged agricultural and handicraft production. Mae Fah Luang personally supervised the replanting of the hillsides with trees, and the systematic growth of cash crops by the hill-tribe people who inhabit the region.

Since then, Doi Tung's training of ethnic minorities for job opportunities to beat the opium curse has been commended by the United Nations. In 1965, opium planted in Thailand had reached a level of 65 000 tons. Today, after efforts on developing livelihoods other than from poppy crops, less than one per cent of opium production in the Golden Triangle comes from Thailand.

Persisting illicit drug problems in the border areas of northern Thailand, however, involve production, trafficking and trade, as well as abuse. The problem is difficult to control as minority groups from neighbouring countries occupy several poppy-drug producing areas bordering Thailand. The Golden Triangle, which stretches across north-eastern Myanmar, north-western Laos and northern Thailand, is recognised to be a major opium production area, and a basis for heroin, methamphetamine and a powerful drug cocktail known as 'ice'. Canny drug smugglers have tactical advantages in the length of the borders, the mountainous terrain and the limited resources of governmental regulatory units.

According to Thai customs officers, cross-border drug routes are also found in the neighbouring border provinces of Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Phayao and Tak. The Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) and the Provincial Police Office, Region 5 (which covers Chiang Mai as well as Chiang Rai), collaborate today with their opposite numbers in Laos and Myanmar. Between January and May 2005, nine drug traffickers were arrested in joint operations with more than 800 000 tablets of methamphetamine, known colloquially in Thailand as 'ya bah' (crazy medicine). Tripartite international teamwork also resulted in the arrest of three traffickers with 350 grams of heroin.

The Thai authorities consider 'ya bah' to be a big problem because its value increases exponentially between Golden Triangle production and sale in Bangkok. Popular as a restorative to beat fatigue gained in long hours at the wheel, Thai truckers and other workers are willing to pay 200 baht (AU\$7) or more for a single tablet – a lot considering AU\$4 a day is roughly the minimum wage.

On the other hand, the Bangkok market for heroin and derivatives such as 'ice' is considered to be relatively insignificant.



Traditionally dressed Doi Tung women sort fruits from the region's increasingly successful macadamia plantations. Courtesy of the Doi Tung Foundation

Senior Thai customs officers in Mae Sai believe the main heroin markets to be Europe and America, and trafficking to be mostly via mainland China.

Re-planting has yielded great rewards

Doi Tung has increased the project area's forest cover from 45 to 80 per cent. In the last decade, 17.80 per cent of the project area has been successfully reforested. To mark Mae Fah Luang's 90th birthday in 1989, a total of 990 000 trees, consisting of mountain pine, teak trees and other native species well suited to high elevations, were planted into 9000 rai (1440 hectares) of land.

As a result, revenue from agriculture has doubled, although non-forestry land use has been reduced from 55 to 15 per cent as a result. Effectively, Doi Tung's sustainable forestry and agricultural operations have raised the area's annual per capita income from 3772 baht in 1988 to around 30 732 baht in 2003.

So successful is Doi Tung that it has spread across the border to Yong Kha, in the northern Shan state of Myanmar, and discussions are under way for Doi Tung to establish similar projects in Afghanistan and Costa Rica.

'In fact, we're prepared to go anywhere with a drug problem,' Ron Barnett assures.

He is sad, however, that development of the project he started at Yong Kha has been stopped for the time being. 'We planned to do much more with Doi Tung expertise,' he says. Apparently power-politics and an upset in the ruling military junta is preventing issue of the necessary documents for him to visit Myanmar. And, although launched in 2002 on the Doi Tung model, priority had been given to



Sustainable agriculture has improved livelihoods for the Doi Tung people. Courtesy of the Doi Tung Foundation

vegetable and fruit cultivation at Yong Kha, to relieve prevalent poverty and hunger in the Yong Kha district. 'Soya bean, rice and corn were priorities for people who were starving,' Mr Barnett says.

Meanwhile, in Doi Tung, an area of 4000 rai was planted during 1993 with fruit trees, vegetables, tea, bananas and bamboo trees to generate supplemental income and food for the villagers. Members of the community earn steady income from the sale of agricultural products and handicrafts, and environmentally friendly employment activities are conducted in tandem with reforestation initiatives.

To ensure that the project delivers products that meet local and international market demands, the Doi Tung undertake research and product development on an ongoing basis.

After these efforts within the Doi Tung project area, social problems, such as migration and prostitution, have been alleviated, and the cultivation of opium poppy, the production of opium and the trade in opium-based narcotics has completely ceased.

The strategy to eradicate the country's drug image is powerfully reflected by the recent opening of a project to define the problem and its history. Another project of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, the memorable Hall of Opium museum, and its associated three-star hotel, is at Chang Saen, the Thai border village that overlooks the nub of the Mekong River and the Golden Triangle. The Hall of Opium is now also developing an archive on drugs for public education.

As a result of its outstanding achievements in the alleviation of rural poverty and the eradication of the cultivation, production, trafficking and consumption of opium and opiates, the Doi Tung Development Project has become an internationally recognised model for sustainable development. The overall drive in current Phase III development is to consolidate that image and use it to raise even more funds for social development in northern Thailand and other locations afflicted by poverty-driven drug problems.

Unforeseen challenges from success

The dual success of Mae Fah Luang and Doi Tung has brought some unforeseen social and practical problems for management to solve. One current prime need is to strengthen management to cope with increasingly pressing corporate and social affairs.

Almost certainly, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation and the Doi Tung Project will soon part corporate company in order to operate separately, rather than as one management pair with competing interests and priorities. On the one hand, the focus is pragmatically social; but on the other, the demand is brilliantly commercial. Moreover, the era of Khun Chai, the current captain in command of the program, must draw to a close as his pivotal role becomes ever more demanding with the success of both charity and business. Khun Chai, and members of his small executive group, shuttle constantly by plane between Chiang Rai and Bangkok.

The flagship of the emerging 'Doi Tung' trademark, and a signal to the group's success, is an expanding series of up-market coffee shops in Bangkok and foreign tourism destinations throughout Thailand. Eye-catching product quality and packaging design is the group's hallmark.

'Now we are focusing on driving growth of our existing businesses, namely agriculture, handicrafts, tourism and food processing, by expanding the sales channels,' Khun Chai says. 'In three months time we will open five more coffee shops and three more handicraft boutiques.'

But, in northern Chiang Rai's mountains, some deepening sociological



The beautiful Mae Fah Luang Garden at Doi Tung. Mae Fah Luang Foundation



The Hall of Opium's poppy display. Richard Mogg



Doi Tung's textile workers weave high quality cloth. Richard Mogg

problems now need to be tackled with hands-on management skills that are not yet fully apparent in the group.

Khun Chai adds, 'the foundation hires professional business managers to help strengthen different enterprises that the foundation created in Doi Tung, so that these enterprises can compete in the national as well as the international markets'. But, he cautions, 'it is also important to ensure that the local people in Doi Tung are able to cope with the forces of globalisation. We all know that free trade agreements are coming from all directions and they must be prepared to deal with it. So, while we have all these professionals at executive levels, we are doing in-house training for local employees, to help them move up to middle management level at the same time.'

Although Mae Fah Luang is no longer with us, her vision serves as a guiding light for the direction for Doi Tung Phase III. A bronze statue entitled 'Continuity' is the centrepiece of the magnificent landscaped Mae Fah Luang Garden at Doi Tung. Depicting a group of children supporting



Processed macadamia nuts before packaging. Courtesy of the Doi Tung Foundation

each other in a human pyramid formation as one of them climbs towards the sky, the statue signifies the matriarch's dedication to improving the lives of the people of Thailand, and her enduring belief that continuous effort leads to success.

● Richard Mogg

More information:

About the Doi Tung Development Project:
www.doitung.org/doitung

About the Mae Fah Luang Foundation:
www.maefahluang.org/maefahluang