



An Overview of the Community

Ban Mae Lai Village

The Ban Mae Lai village is situated in a well managed watershed forest which has a circumference of about 20 KM and an area of approximately 30 sq. km. This forest is the primary livelihood resource for the village, which has developed a very complex symbiotic relationship with it. The village consists of 42 homes and approximately 90 inhabitants that are collectively known as the 'Ban Mae Lai'. Mae Lai, means 'mother Lai' – and refers to the name of the mother of Khun Phiyalai – the first headman.

Cultural History

An ethnic group known as 'Khun Muang', were originally farmers and hunter gatherers from Chiang Mai valley that were displaced by ethnic groups who moved in from the south, causing them to migrate up to the hills surrounding the valley floor. Through marriage, they absorbed the original inhabitants of mountain area – Kamu (Cambodian) and Lua (Shan) ethnic minorities, and over time established the 4 clusters of houses in a close group along the steep sides of the Mae Lai stream.

Village governance

Headman: Is a democratically elected intermediary between village and government that is up for re-election every five years. If his actions are satisfactory, he will likely serve his community for up to 20 years. Interestingly, there have been 7 headmen in the Mae Lai village since the system began in the late 1890's.

Village committee: A group of 3 – 4 villagers that support the work of the headman.

Livelihood

The villagers are primarily tea farmers that cultivate shade grown tea, meaning it is grown in conjunction with the forest. Recently the government introduced coffee farming to the area. This coffee is shade grown as well, meaning it too is cultivated in conjunction with the forest. They supplement their income by providing casual labour for government projects in the area, such as road construction and irrigation canal maintenance.

The villagers generally use the land around their households for subsistence farming to grow coffee, eggplant, banana, pomelo and papaya. Some households have dug ponds in which they raise catfish.

Chaa Mieng

Chaa Mieng is a tea leaf that is fermented to produce traditional sweet or sour pickled leaves used for chewing. Chaa Mieng is unique to Northern Thailand, however is also a slowly dying tradition despite it being an integral part of Ban Mae Lai culture for over 200 years. As a result, younger generations are consistently leaving the village to find employment in the cities, which poses challenges to the survival of local tradition, culture and the community itself.

Each family owns app. 10 rai of land for farming. The land does not have full title deed and is handed down through the family. Assuming the land is used for planting Chaa Mieng, the family can expect to earn around Baht 5'000 per year.

You can find an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic status of Ban Mae Lai in the Volunteer Orientation literature folder.

Ban Mae Lai Community Rules

The following list of rules and practices is by no means a comprehensive description of how the villagers manage their agro-forestry plots. Some of the rules and practices may represent actual government laws and regulations while others are practices established by the villagers themselves. For some rules and practices there does not seem to be a consensus as evidenced by some of the conflicting statements. Agro-forestry practices in Ban Mae Lai seem to be quite complex and require more in depth study.

Agro-Forestry Rules

- Plant only on your own land
- Not allowed to expand area of cultivation
- Not allowed to practice shifting cultivation
- Not allowed to cut grass outside of cultivation area
- Allowed to cut grass on their own land
- No cultivation of illegal substances
- Must have a document showing that you are the owner
- Allowed to bring seedlings out of the forest
- Allowed to decrease area of cultivation
- Can only plant crops from the royal project
- Not allowed to remove large plants
- Can cultivate anything you want
- High value woods can be cultivated, if registered
- High value woods can be harvested only from your own land.
- You will be fined if you harvest tea or coffee from others land
- Permission is required to harvest high value wood products
- You will be fined if you plant on other's land

Practices

- Do not use pesticides for tea or coffee
- Use leaves and grass as fertilizer
- Can cut grass everywhere but near the tea tree
- Do not use chemical fertilizer for tea
- Can use manure fertilizer or bio-fertilizers
- Cut the grass but do not cut trees and tree seedlings
- Use chemical fertilizer for coffee trees
- Cut the grass around the coffee trees.
- Some people grow vegetables
- Grow coffee from fallen seeds
- Harvest tea 4 times per year
- Coffee is harvest 3 times a year
- Cut only 2/3 of tea leaves
- Diseased trees must be cut and burned
- Abandoned tea trees are rehabilitated by cutting them back

Non-timber Forest Products Rules and Practices

Villagers in Ban Mae Lai collect products from the forest daily. Forest products make up a large part of their diet, provide herbal medicines as well as materials for handicrafts and construction. As this is a resource shared in common by the village, the community has developed over time a system of rules and practices for managing these resources. Some of these may have been done in response to outside pressures or to national laws. As with agro forestry, this list of NTFP rules and practices is not exhaustive and only scratches the surface of something more complex.

NTFP Rules

- Not allowed to sell bamboo shoots collected from the forest: You will be fined for collecting bamboo shoots from land other than your own.
- Allowed to sell bamboo shoots from your own land
- Not allowed to collect orchids
- Allowed to collect orchids from your land; only allowed to sell orchids if propagated at home
- Cannot cut large trees without permission
- It is not allowed to sell NTFPs but you can collect and consume them yourself
- You can collect firewood on your land but not in the community forest
- Only allowed to collect dead wood for firewood
- Cannot cut the pine trees but can collect the resin
- Not allowed to sell agar wood
- Seedlings collected from the forest can be planted in the village but cannot be removed from the village
- Mushrooms collected in the forest can be sold
- Outsiders are not allowed to collect wood or NTFPs
- You can collect NTFPs from others land if you have permission
- Cannot sell wood from your land without permission
- Herbal medicine cannot be sold. Only for personal consumption
- Unlimited harvest of bamboo on your land, but harvest from the forest is restricted.
- Not allowed to sell plants and seedlings from the forest
- Not allowed to sell seedlings of high value wood
- Allowed to harvest plants from plantation then propagate for sale.

Practices

- Cut bamboo down to the roots for it to sprout
- Cut only two shoots from each clump of bamboo
- Cut only the head of the mushroom - leave the roots

Management of the Community Forest

Community Forestry Practices

- Build fire breaks
- Cannot set fires in the forest
- Cannot cut the plants in the forest
- Cannot catch wildlife
- Cannot throw trash
- Cannot use electric shock to catch fish
- Only take what you can use
- Report people logging in the forest
- Cannot burn trash in the forest
- Can only collect the small seedlings
- Cannot practice swidden agriculture
- Protect the watershed for the reservoir below
- Help to fight forest fires
- Only use dead wood to make firewood
- Put out camp fires before leaving
- Do not smoke cigarettes in the forest
- Forestry Dept. Officials come and check every month
- Do not throw trash in the water
- Cannot cut the trees in the watershed
- Village leadership patrols the forest when they are reports of hunting or cutting wood