

### 3-4. Toward Community-Based Forest Management: Working with Local People to Preserve Watershed Forests in Northern Laos

#### Forest Preservation Project of an Advocacy NGO

For most people, the words “forest preservation” typically conjure up images of forest-planting activities. In addition, many projects designed to protect forests also focus on decreasing local residents’ dependence on forestry resources by increasing their income from non-forest related activities. However, whether an initiative is an afforestation or non-forest income-enhancement project, negative consequences will ensue if the initiatives are not carried out in a manner respecting the natural environment and the intimate connection local livelihoods have with it. When residents in areas surrounded by forests are cast out of these areas, the connection between people's livelihoods and natural resources can be severed, sometimes leading to more destructive resource use and can also further impoverish local residents.

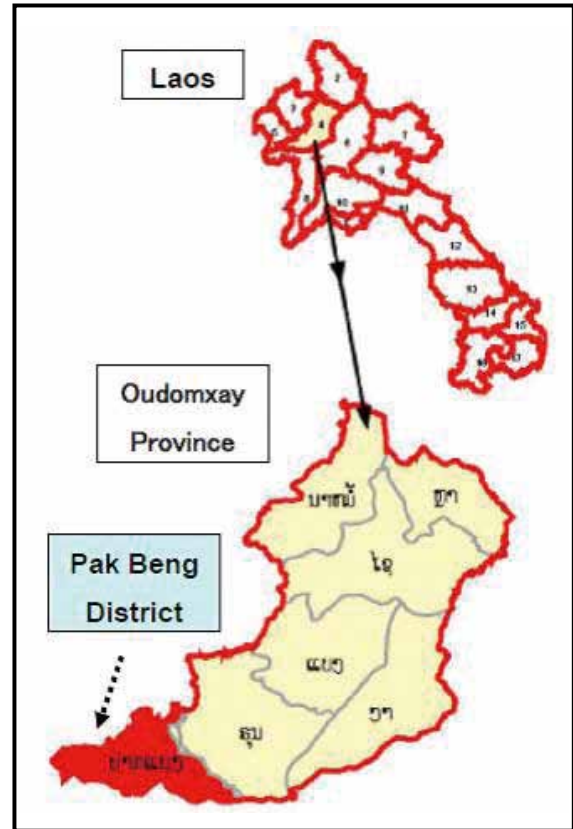


Figure 1: Location of the Project Site

Top-down land-use policy not aligned with the actual usage practices of residents in the Pak Beng District

of Oudomxay Province in northern Laos has led to illegal forest use and brought hardships to the lives of residents. This has driven Mekong Watch to conduct activities to bridge the communication gap between regional government officials and local residents, and to bridge the policy implementation gap between policy formulated at the central-government level and at the local level. In the process, Mekong Watch has strived to achieve forest preservation with local residents as the central actors.

#### Land Use by Upland Farmers

For many residents in the mountainous Pak Beng District, upland shifting rice cultivation provides the primary means of living. Shifting cultivation is typically conducted in seven to nine year cycles. After a fallow period, when a secondary forest has recovered to a suitable level, it is cleared, burned, and upland rice is planted. After the harvest, the field is left fallow for several years. After vegetation returns to a suitable level several years after the harvest, the field will be selected again for farmland.

Each year in Pak Beng District, the village chief, village elders and others gather. Based on experience, they determine the number of years since an area of land was cleared, examine its soil quality and the size of trees on it, and decide which parcels of forest are suitable for that year’s crops. Once the village’s shifting cultivation sites have been decided, the village chief and elders allocate land to households based on their labor capacity. In this way, the households farm land that they do

not own, with plot suitability and selection being based on the size of trees and soil quality. This land use system, based on land allocations agreed upon by the village, has historically worked to secure as stable harvests as possible, and has been flexible in responding to changes in population and land use<sup>1</sup>.

## **Problems Caused by Land and Forest Policy**

In current-day Laos, various land and forest policies that ignore people's actual land-use patterns are having a significant impact on the lives of upland farmers.

The Lao government has implemented land and forest policies seeking to restrict the practice of shifting cultivation. Originally concocted with the aims of promoting forest preservation and reducing poverty, these misguided policies to curb shifting cultivation have not been accompanied by increases in agricultural productivity or an increase in alternative employment opportunities. Consequently, the curbing of shifting-cultivation practices has become an end in itself and, conversely, is resulting in destructive forest use practices and impoverishing local residents.

Apart from this, the government has implemented policies to relocate mountain villages to lowland and roadside locations for the purpose of curbing shifting agriculture, to help eradicate drugs, control ethnic minorities, and improve access to markets and development services. The result has been increasing concentrations of the population along roads, shortages of farmland and destructive forest use.

## **Case Study of Pak Beng District: Promotion of Damaging Forest Management Policies**



Even in Pak Beng District, since 1996 the government has implemented land and forest zoning projects. The stated goals of these projects are preserving the natural environment, discouraging shifting cultivation, and promoting cash-crop farming among residents to increase the income of local people. Project activities take place such as the redrawing of village boundaries, allocating new farmland to people, and establishing forest-use zoning within villages.

In one village, much of the land used for shifting cultivation up until now was designated as a protected forest, leading villagers to suffer from a serious shortage of farmland. Within the village, people responded in a number of ways. Some rented land from neighboring villages, while others responded by moving to other villages. However, the rented land from neighboring villages did not suffice and most households have continued to conduct shifting cultivation in watershed forest areas. Under these government projects, the lines that have been drawn designating areas as forest or farmland make people's traditional agricultural practices "illegal".

In other villages, land shortages have driven residents to shorten the fallow period to around three years with some land being farmed in successive seasons. With fallow periods being too short, soil deterioration is progressing and harvests are decreasing.

Moreover, there are instances in which forests near streams or watershed forests that villagers

traditionally protected have been cleared. Making shifting cultivation in entire watershed forests “illegal” effectively erases the meaning people placed on conserving the smaller wooded areas within the watershed. So now, there are cases of villagers clearing land and engaging in shifting cultivation in areas near watershed forests that traditionally they would have revered.

### **Toward Community-Based Forest Management: Mekong Watch’s Challenge**

As evidenced in the case of Pak Beng District, land and forest policy implemented from the top down has confused the land use practices of local residents. That said, in light of the rapid expansion being witnessed in Laos that has included large-scale development, industrial plantations and cash-crop agriculture, a wholesale rejection of the government’s land and forest zoning efforts and a simple return to the local residents’ traditional style of land use would not solve the existing problems. To truly protect villagers’ rights from being infringed upon by outside corporations and development projects, villagers’ land and forest use rights need to be written into law.



Survey preparing for land and forest demarcation.



A workshop to discuss issues relating to land use in villages.

Since 2005, Mekong Watch has been working in conjunction with Laos National University’s Forestry Department to implement a watershed forest management project in Pak Beng District. With the following goals, the project has undertaken surveys and put forth policy recommendations: 1) Achieving watershed forest management that reconciles and maintains both forest preservation and the livelihoods of local residents; 2) creating a mechanism for residents to participate in decision-making related to land- and forest-use issues; and 3) ensuring that on-site problems are realistically and fairly addressed in central policy measures.

In 2007, as a part of this initiative the Houay Kasaen River Watershed Management Committee was established. It is made up of representatives from eight villages with farmland in the watershed forest area and District administrative officers. The committee convenes before villagers decide where they will conduct shifting cultivation and again after harvest. At meetings, plans are formulated for land use and forest preservation and discussions are held to resolve existing issues. In addition, under the committee, a review of land use categories was undertaken with the aim of legally making villagers the central players in land management and securing farmland required for shifting cultivation cycles, including fallow land. This is being done in villages where actual land use patterns have been ignored and blind implementation of land use policy has resulted in problems.

The establishment of this committee and the review of land use categories have created a forum for

administrative officials and local residents to work together to resolve land use and forest preservation issues. This is clearly a significant and notable achievement. However, much work remains, including heightening local resident understanding and appreciation of forest use rules and watershed management activities as well as reflecting the Pak Beng District experience in policy. To improve the autonomy and the sustainability of the project, follow-up activities are being undertaken, such as environment workshops involving local residents, particularly women. At the same time, activities to share the Pak Beng District experience with other areas and the central government are also taking place.

**References**

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1. For more information, see BP 2-9 *Shifting Cultivation and Upland Life in Northern Laos*.