

Towards community based river basin environmental development A case of the Tachin River in Central Thailand

Introduction

The Tachin River Basin is one out of twenty-five key watersheds in Thailand. This river basin covers four main provinces (Chinat, Suphanburi, Nakhon Pathom and Samut Sakhon) situated in the central part of Thailand. There are about 2.5 millions people living in this area. The river basin has had an abundance of natural resources and the river supplies water for domestic, industrial, and agricultural uses, supports fisheries, transportation and recreation as well as receiving wastewater discharges leading to severe pollution problems. Today, the most important activities in the Tachin River Basin are agriculture, industry, commerce, and tourism. In addition to such economic activities, the area has a long history and has developed a rich and unique culture. Therefore, local people have strong feeling for their river.

The water pollution problem

Water pollution is one of the major problems affecting many aspects of peoples' lives as well as the natural environment. The quality of water in the Tachin River has been monitored for decades by the pollution control Department. The data showed that the water was polluted from many reasons. The rapid population growth in the area, associated activities related with this such as wastewater discharges from communities, industry, and agriculture. The impacts of these pressures are variable depending on the location. The lower part, between Samut Sakhon and Nakhon Pathom is seriously polluted with organic waste contamination, mainly from domestic, industrial and pig farms. The middle part is considered to be moderately polluted and finally, the upper part of the river is seen to be less polluted, and even clean.

In recent years, with continued pressure on Thailand to produce goods for the export market, rapid industrialization, and intensive agricultural production have become significant. These have had an impact both on the environment as well as on the resources of the Tachin River Basin.

Thai Government: policy and response

In 2001, the government has clearly stated that the conditions and quality of resources must be restored to prevent degradation and depletion of natural resources for the benefits of people's livelihood and the national development must be well balanced and provide a basis for the sustainable economic and social development of the country.

In response to these problems, attempts are being made to restore the natural environment and resource base and to solve the pollution problems that occur in the Tachin River Basin. The Pollution Control Department proposed a comprehensive plan to rehabilitate the river within 10 years. (Atthakorn, 2000) The principle objectives are to reduce the amount of pollution, control the amount of the water discharged, and to rehabilitate the lives of people living along the river. This has received extensive backing from the government. However, the government projects could not cope with the pollution. Thai government often manages everything by top-

down method, overlooking the grass root level. Therefore, local people were not included in the plan at the beginning and I consider the projects of the government were not successful.

Community based response to the water pollution problem

In September 1998, a community group called Chom Rom Row Rak Maenam Tachin (We Love Tachin River Club) was established during an initial seminar with participants from the local area, a large contingent of whom were Buddhist monks. The seminar provided a forum in which participants could analyze the roles and responsibilities of the club in relation to the problems of the Tachin River. At this seminar, the broad aims of the new club were shaped as follows:

1. To act as an 'environmental watchdog'
2. To establish networks, or in the words of the Club to make friends between people, groups and agencies.

The initial idea of forming the Club belongs to the current president, Mr. Prasop Chanignam. This was as far back as 1991 when he was working as the Chief of the Education Department in Nakhon Pathom. In his work, he has access to data related to the quality of the Tachin River and he was deeply disturbed about that. He even analyzed how the water quality problem was being tackled and the approaches of the agencies that were responsible for the various aspects of the Tachin River Basin management. He then realized there was a multitude of agencies, each with their own agenda, which strongly discouraged any effective coordination between them. Added to this was the inherent poor attitude of the majority of civil servants to their works, resulting in very little being achieved.

At the first meeting, there were only 20 members but four years later, there were over 6,000 from various fields: farmers, schoolteachers, government workers, business people, even Buddhist monks.

Community group approaches to the problem

Mainly, the club is using two approaches.

- a) Combining culture with science

Since the club knew that, their strengths were the monks because the monks have a high status in the society and the temples are always the center of the community. Activities of the club were held at temples along the river. People come to feed the fish at the temple and the fish in front of the temple will be safe from being caught by locals. The club used the fish as the indicators of river water quality and the monks and other members with scientific method would monitor these. People were actively encouraged to develop a responsibility for their environment rather than taking the opposite approach of pursuing punishments for those who pollute the river, which has been the approach of the government. This way, the message was transmitted to people was principally through media such as pamphlets, public address systems and direct meetings with existing groups.

- b) Strength in networking

Through the environmental awareness campaign, networking or 'making friends' naturally developed and links were formed with other individuals, groups and organizations. Maintaining links with the community, principally through the grassroots membership, is the foundation of the club. However, it is also important to develop other links with business people, industry and factories as well as government agencies, schools and universities.

c) Examples of the club's action

As mentioned earlier, pig farms are a serious source of pollution to the river and canal systems. The club lobbied government to adjust their policy on pig farming promotion and the allocation of licenses for permission to establish pig farm as well as reducing the existing number of farms. As for the remaining farms, the club is lobbying for the government to issue loans specifically for installing farm water treatment systems.

Measures of success

Club membership has grown rather quickly and the new members have been mobilized effectively in order to act on particular issues and change things in positive environmental way. Club's activities and links have been set up which appear to be strong and are able to be used effectively in terms of lobbying.

The club raises its own money from fund raising activities but is also willing to accept donations from individuals who have similar environmental concerns. However, the club does not accept government money. What might be seen as unusual is that the club does not want to have too much money because it might lead to temptation and corruption among the members. The main restriction of the club may be the lack of core people who have the continued commitment.

Strategies for future community group action

In terms of future plans and strategies, the club has four major objectives:

1. To encourage further networking;
2. To lobby for the inclusion of environmental education into the curriculum of every school within the Tachin River Basin area;
3. To expand the work of the club to the other four provinces of the Tachin River Basin;
4. To solve the water quality problems of the Tachin River and canal system in around 10 years;

The latter point was emphasized by the president of the club at which he concluded that if this objective was reached then the 'We Love Tachin River Club' would have achieved its fundamental goal and would then be disbanded.

Conclusion

The establishment of the 'We Love Tachin River Club' has shown that economics development could lead to pollution, which is very difficult to handle properly. The Thai government has been trying to solve but only little has been done, without community participation, which already proved very crucial. The club has achieved much more than the government with much less budgets and less conflicts. Therefore, I think this should be a good example for any environmental management.

References

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