

## Asia / Thailand

**For a better world**

*This article by Sanitsuda Ekachai, was carried in Bangkok Post on 23 June 2005*

We all die. What matters is how we live so the world we leave behind is a better place than when we first came into it. While many of us still have to wrangle with this question, Miya Hawa has passed this criterion with flying colours.

Affectionately called Jaya by her family and friends, the cheerful Muslim mother and dedicated grassroots environmentalist passed away from heart ailment early this month, at her seaside village of Ban Jao Mai in Trang province. She was 47. Miya is survived by her husband Yahed, a fisherman and active grassroots environmentalist, and five children.

My deepest condolences to Yahed, the children, and all fisherfolk at Ban Jao Mai who share Miya's dreams and determination to return life to their once-barren sea.

I first met Miya at Jao Mai in 1994 during my trip to do a story on Tone, a dugong cutie that became the symbol of the Trang fisherfolk's conservation movement.

Outgoing and opinionated, Miya—with her trademark toothy smile and contagious laughter—did not fit one bit the submissive stereotype of traditional Muslim women. Through the years, Miya always worked shoulder-to-shoulder with her husband and other fisherfolk to fight against commercial trawlers, which were destroying their seas. But she would cringe at the idea of being called a feminist.

Her reason for rehabilitating the seagrasses and protecting the dugongs in the Trang sea was very simple. "I do it for my children," she said. You see, Ban Jao Mai, like most other fishing villages in the South, have long cried foul against big trawlers which sweep clean their sea, destroy seagrasses and corals which are nurseries for young marine lives.

Around 1990, the Jao Mai villagers, together with environmentalists from the Yadfon Foundation, started rehabilitating seagrasses in front of their home village.

Only three months afterwards, abundant sea creatures returned. For Miya and other Jao Mai villagers, there was no looking back.

The trawlers, however, remained a threat until a lone, young dugong named Tone became their godsend in 1994. In a rare phenomenon, Tone came to feed on the seagrasses in front of Jao Mai every day. Tame and trusting, it also allowed humans to touch it. When news spread, people came to visit and learned about the Jao Mai fisherfolks' conservation efforts. The ensuing public concern finally forced the authorities to keep trawlers at bay. "Before, we villagers said we protected the sea to save seagrass and dugongs. Now it's the dugong that protects us," said Miya. "I then must protect Tone for my own children."

The little dugong was later killed by trawlers' nets. Its skeleton is still kept at Miya's home as a reminder for her family and her community to continue their fight against destructive trawlers more vigorously.

Miya was proud of the changes she helped bring about in Ban Jao Mai. The fish have returned. Husbands no longer have to work as hired hands on big trawlers, and wives no longer have to leave their children to work in factories in the towns, she once reported.

From helping found fisherfolk's clubs in her village and in Trang Province, Miya was also one of the driving forces behind the Federation of Small-Scale Fisherfolk's campaign for better fishery practices and conservation policies.



Last year, she was honoured with the Conservationist Mother Award from Mahidol University.

Miya blamed State greed for the vast environmental destruction in the country. The government, she charged, sees nature as a mere resource to be exploited for monetary gain, which is why the authorities shun the poor in favour of the rich and powerful, who destroy nature for their own profit.

“Forget money if it ends up destroying community ties,” she once cautioned policymakers. “Also take good care of the environment. For we cannot live if nature dies.” What if the government still turns a deaf ear? “We then must get organized,” she said with deep conviction.

Miya has done her part to leave a better world behind. Have we?

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