



PROFILE

Sunant Jewton

Sunant Jewton, President of a women's group in Baan Tung Prai, Thailand, has helped link conservation with income generating activities

By **Chattima Charnsnoh**
(yadfon@loxinfo.co.th),
Yadfon Association,
a non-government
organization based in
Thailand

Meeet Sunant Jewton, president of the local women's group in Baan Tung Prai, a village in southern Thailand. In just four years, she, along with the other women of this group, have not only managed to regenerate a dying species of local palm but also to position handicraft made from the palm as highly-prized local souvenirs.

Theirs is a story of hardship and resourcefulness, crisis and opportunity; of conservation efforts leading to additional income generation in ways that do not destroy local livelihoods but benefit the community as a whole.

Baan Tung Prai is located in a brackish water area on the Palian Estuary of Trang province in southern Thailand. A small community, 60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent Buddhist, comprising fishers and rubber-tappers, lives here. In the past, Baan Tung Prai was a victim of intensive shrimp farming that overran mangrove forests as well as forests of a local palm—the Nypa palm—resulting in great hardship for the community whose livelihoods were completely dependent on the resources these forests provided.

The shrimp farm industry which had boomed during the 1980s, collapsed in the 1990s with global outbreaks of shrimp disease. Most shrimp farms in the Baan Tung Prai region were abandoned. What remained were degraded swamps, polluted by chemicals and supporting no life. Most severely affected were the fishers as fish stocks went down and other aquatic species disappeared.

“Not all of us are fishers. But, fishing families were badly affected. Fishers could find enough fish for just the family, not for sale, and we knew that it was caused by the loss of the mangrove forests in our homeland,” says Sunant, adding, “So, that's when we started.”

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a conservation group in Baan Tung Prai consisting of local men and women initiated mangrove restoration activities. After the condition of

mangroves improved, local groups began giving serious thought to Nypa palm restoration.

In the year 2005, Sunant Jewton, aware of the looming threats and eager for a solution that would benefit the entire community, began working closely with other locals to develop a sustainable conservation, utilization, and management programme for the Nypa palm.

The Nypa palm is a local plant which yields many products, such as sugar, vinegar, food wrapper and roofing material. But before the local women's group came into being, no one had ever thought that the palm could be used to make handicrafts.

“The art of handicraft-making has always been there in our community, but we never used Nypa palm as a raw material, even though it grows naturally in our area. It all began with a discussion within our group when some members were complaining about waste from Nypa palm, left over from other traditional usages, which became hard-to-get-rid-of junk. As the group was brainstorming, it came out with this most creative solution!” says Sunant.

With initial funds and training for capacity-building from Yadfon Association, the Baan Tung Prai women's group, with Sunant as the group leader, began experimenting with various types of Nypa palm handicraft. Some authorities stepped in to help the group with marketing channels. As a result, today, just four years later, Nypa palm handicraft is regarded as one of the most prized souvenirs in Trang province.

“Now, we have many types of Nypa palm handicraft—fruit trays, baskets and lamps. We don't mark up the price too high, but we do make enough profits to go round,” says Sunant. “Ten per cent of total income is put into the group fund and used for group activities. We also teach the art of handicraft-making to kids in the local schools.”

This resourceful women's group is engaged in sustainable conservation, income generation as well as the handing down of local wisdom to the next generation, ensuring the viability of the community in the long run.

“Today, community members have an alternative job. When a storm comes, no one can go fishing. So, women from fishing families, as well as the kids, can help generate income to keep the family together, without having to leave home to find jobs in factories,” says Sunant with a smile. ☑