



Supaporn Pannarai is chairperson of the Network of Women from Songkhla Lake. Born in 1966, she started fishing when she was 14, accompanying her father on his fishing trips. The island of her birth, Ban Chong Fuen, is located in Pattalung Province, right in the middle of Songkhla Lake. 15 years later, however, Supaporn was forced to give up fishing, as, by this time, there was scarcely any fish left to catch. “My childhood memory”, Supaporn recalls, “is that the lake was rich and community members lived happily on the basis of mutual aid. The

## PROFILE

# Supaporn Pannarai

**Supaporn leads the Network of Women from Songkhla Lake set up to conserve and manage natural resources in the region**

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surplus fish was sold at local markets and shared with neighbours. But now the lake is not as rich as before and more and more people go to work outside.”

What caused this change? The answer to this lies in the history of development in this region. The Songkhla Lake, Thailand’s largest natural lake, is located on the Malay Peninsula in the southern part of the country. Covering an area of 1040 sq km, it borders the provinces of Songkhla and Phattalung. There are three distinct lakes: Thale Noi, Thale Luang and Thale Sap from north to south, which are interconnected by narrow channels. A narrow strait of about 380m width connects Thale Sap with the Gulf of Thailand at its southeastern end. A gradient of salinity exists, therefore, between the brackish water of Thale Sap and the pure freshwater of Thale Noi. The middle lake, Thale Luang, approaches a freshwater condition during the rainy season, but is influenced by the invasion of seawater in other months.

In recent decades the increase in the numbers of fishing vessels and the intensification of fish processing has led to overfishing and degradation. One of the direct causes of the degradation of natural resources and the decrease in marine life has been the closing off of what is called Pak Rawa (the mouth of Rawa) that prevents seawater from entering the lake, significantly changing the lake’s ecology and leading to a decline in fisheries resources. Equally destructive has been the construction of a deep-sea port in the provincial town of Songkhla. These developments have completely changed the ecosystem of the lake. To survive, people are being forced to abandon fishing for other occupations. The roles and livelihoods of women in the fishing communities have also changed. Women from fishing villages are forced to take up external employment, particularly in the fish processing industry. Men have also had to take up alternative employment outside the fishery sector to secure adequate daily incomes.

These changes have deeply affected social relationships as well. Supaporn understands this and pledges to do whatever she can to prevent further deterioration, both of the natural environment and of community relationships. “People are more individualistic,” says Supaporn. “Family members do not live together. We do not have time to enjoy with friends as before. Therefore, I would like to help in whatever way I can to recover the lake.” The Network of Women from Songkhla Lake, which Supaporn leads, is a progressive formation set up in June 2003 by women working around Songkhla Lake to recover, conserve and manage natural resources in the region. It focuses on conserving food security and the lake’s natural resources. It also tries to build the capacities of local women as agents of change in their communities. ❏