

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Despite the declining roles of forests and woodlands as the main sources of food for rural people, there are still a great many rural people who remain dependent on forests for a crucial portion of their food supplies (FAO, 1989). These areas also supply people with fuelwood, construction materials, and medicines (Pepall, 1997).

In Thailand, there are seven main minority groups, viz. Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, Yao, Akha, H'tin (Figure 1). The largest group of ethnic highlanders is Karen, numbering 347,242 persons in 1999 or 48 percent of the total tribal population in 1999. There are all together 69,821 Karen households in 2,037 villages in 1999, register residents, (Tribal Research Institute, 1999). Karen people are known to practise soil conservation measures by land rotation and shifting cultivation. They grow rice as a main crop along with other food crops. Karen people have their own traditional means of forest conservation. They know how to live together with nature and use natural resources according to their beliefs and culture (Nawigemune, 1989).

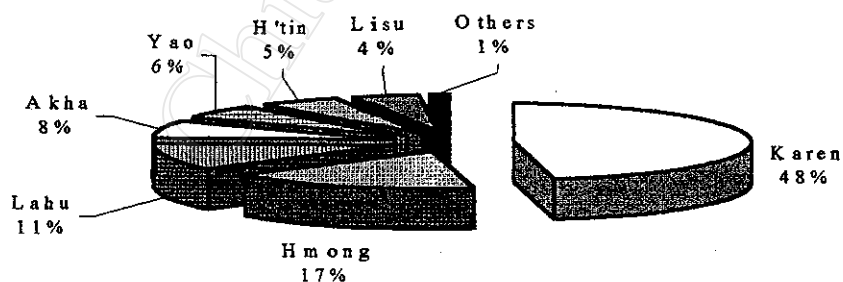


Figure 1. Ethnic groups in Thailand, 1999.

Source: Tribal Research Institute, 1999.

Karen men and women work together and help each other in most cultivation activities, except in very hard work which men usually do. Men and women have access to the forest, the latter often more than the former which spend more time there. From their duties and responsibilities in domestic food production, women collect cultivated plants from fields and gardens. They also gather wild plants to use as food and for other purposes such as fuelwood, bark for dyeing cloth, medicinal plants, and fodder. Wild plants are gathered from both fields and forests, often far away. Wild plants are important food resources, especially in the dry season when cultivated plants in the fields and gardens are mostly absent. Some wild plants have been transplanted to their gardens or fields to make them easy to collect and to ensure a constant food supply.

1.1 Research problems

Due to a rapid decrease of forest areas in Thailand, many organisations are concerned with effects of deforestation, such as floods, drought, soil erosion, and reduced biodiversity. The National Forestry Policy Committee launched a "Reforestation Campaign" during 1994-1996, which will be extended to the end of 1999.

The Eighth National Development Plan (1997-2001) has a main objective in the forestry sector development to preserve and rehabilitate the area of conservation forests to at least 25 percent of the total area of the country. This plan has development programs that include the management of multi-purpose forests and the development of man-made forests to produce wood and non-wood forest products. Non-wood forest products (NWFPs) include a diverse array of useful commodities in

Thailand. They have been one of the most important sources of income and food for rural people. At least 5 million forest dwellers in Thailand depend on NWFPs. No concessions have been granted for NWFPs. Permits for some commodities have been issued on an annual or short-term basis. Records on harvests are scarce and incomplete. Some important NWFP commodities are medicinal and edible plants, rattans, bamboos, bee products, lac, and pine resin (FAO, 1998a).

1.2 Rationale

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are very important to rural people, but data and information on utilisation are scarce and incomplete. This research focuses on forest utilisation by Karen women. Because most Karen villages are in the forest, women spend much time collecting NTFPs. Most studies about Karen communities are about their history, traditional costumes, language, ceremonies, and beliefs. A few studies are about forest utilisation by Karen people, but they are about men dealing with wildlife hunting, logging, and timber forest product utilisation, for example, house construction and fence making.

Popular studies about Karen women involve their social status and their handicrafts, *e.g.* spinning and weaving. There have not been any studies about the responsibilities and duties of Karen women in households for food consumption, especially utilisation of wild plants, which is the most important factor.

Due to this reason, this study focus on forest utilisation by Karen women, especially with wild plants that are gathered for daily consumption and used for other purposes which show their indigenous knowledge.

1.3 Objectives

This study has four objectives in studying Karen women's role in NTFP:

1. To identify wild plants collected by Karen men and women for domestic consumption and utilisation,
2. To describe women's role in Karen households, food production, and consumption,
3. To identify patterns and sources of collection of wild plants by Karen women for household consumption and other purposes, and
4. To assess the decline in abundance of wild plants through time and its effects on household consumption and income.

1.4 Usefulness of this study

Wild food plants which women gather from the forests are an indicator of their local living conditions. Fewer quantities of all kinds of wild plants will affect household consumption and food security. The kinds and quantities of wild plants which women gather from the forests also indicates the stability and health of the forest. Knowledge on wild plant consumption by Karen women, can bring policy makers attention to the non-timber forests uses. Forest tree propagation and conservation programs can be better designed since knowledge of forest use by women is valuable for planning. Gender-based insight of forest use will be especially useful for forest management. This study will also provide a valuable database on plant species which further studies on plant biodiversity can make use of. This study can also be useful for tree domestication, biodiversity, and forest conservation

programs as it provides insights to hilltribe people and their communities, preferences, and values.

1.5 Definition

Wild plants: The local Karen people call plants that come from fields or forests “wild” plants. Some of these plants were probably domesticated time by their ancestors. “Wild plants” in this research therefore mean forest plants.

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