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PROGRAM UPDATE

USAID LEAF and DNP Help Revive the Mae Sa-Kog Ma UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve



The Mae Sa-Kog Ma UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve (MSKM MAB) was established in Thailand in 1977, but with no management plan and little budget or interest, there were few activities to support or promote the MAB designation for the past 38 years. To further environmental preservation, three national parks have been created in the same area since the designation of the MAB. But a UNESCO designated reserve has a very different focus: the centerpiece is the relationship between people and the environment.

In 2012, the Thailand Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP) and the United States Agency for International Development Lowering Emissions in Asia's Forests (USAID LEAF) program began collaborating to breathe new life into the reserve. After only eighteen months, the MAB now has its first ever management plan. The planning process was participatory, beginning with awareness raising and training staff of government agencies, local administration, non-governmental organizations and community members. Several public consultations and workshops followed before the plan was accepted by the communities and endorsed by the DNP at the provincial level. The approval process is currently underway at the national level and it is expected that the budget for the implementation of the plan will be made available within the year.

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The success in developing the management plan led DNP to request USAID LEAF to collaborate on planning for the Huay Tak MAB reserve in the neighboring province. This collaboration furthered public awareness and understanding of the MSKM MAB. Having the UNESCO designation has become a source of pride for many local community members and could contribute to increased tourism and improved livelihoods. With all this attention, the private sector has become interested in financing conservation activities within the MSKM MAB as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. DNP and USAID LEAF have been working with several businesses operating in the Chiang Mai area to create some of the first Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) models in Thailand.

Although life may seem to go on as it has for generations inside the reserve, empowering processes and innovations are helping to ensure that precious natural resources will be cared for and sustained for future generations. A member of the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs assessment team noted in a recent report:

“USAID LEAF brought together all stakeholders within the MSKM MAB, including community leaders, the private sector, the government, other NGO projects and universities, and created not only a sense of ownership of the MSKM MAB Management Plan but a network that can be sustained following the end of the project. The foundation USAID LEAF has established will provide an opportunity for sustained effort towards the creation of a PES mechanism that can continue to provide financial support to conserve and manage the forests in Chiang Mai.”

According to UNESCO, the Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB), launched in 1971, is an Intergovernmental Scientific Programme that aims to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments. MAB combines the natural and social sciences, economics and education to improve human livelihoods and the equitable sharing of benefits, and to safeguard natural and managed ecosystems, thus promoting innovative approaches to economic development that are socially and culturally appropriate, and environmentally sustainable.

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