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‘TURNING THE TIDE’



TURNING THE TIDE

Reclaiming land with the help of nature
By Anchalee Kongrut



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Have you ever been to Bangkok beach? I am talking about a natural beach by the sea, not the one at the Suan Siam water theme park on the outskirts of the city. Bangkok beach is actually part of Bang Khun Thian district. It is the only area in Bangkok that is by the sea.

If you had never known about it, you are not alone. The area has changed so drastically that it is hard to understand how and why the area is called Bangkok beach. To start with, the beach has been swallowed by history. What was once the sea has become an inland swamp, making the area look like a lake district. Several decades ago, however, the beach stretched for about 5km, and much of the site was covered by mangrove forests.

Then came the shrimp farms. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of rai of mangrove forests were cleared to enable quick money to be made from shrimp farms. But with the mangroves gone, the strong waves from

the sea kept eating away the shore line, devouring the beaches.

Due to the unstoppable coastal erosion, the whole area will soon be totally submerged.

According to this year's report by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, Bangkok, Samut Prakan, Samut Songkhram and Samut Sakhon will bear the blunt of climate change, which will probably increase the sea level of the Gulf of Thailand by more than 32cm. More than half of the impact is expected to occur in the western parts of Bangkok, especially Bang Khun Thian district where the shoreline has receded 5km due to coastal erosion.

The study projects that more than a million people in Bang Khun Thian, Bang Khae and Bang Bon districts in Bangkok and Samut Prakan's Phra Samut Chedi district will be hit hardest. The damage is estimated at 140 billion baht.

That sound like an apocalypse in the making for local residents. Yet, the Klongpittayalongkorn School is determined to

fight against the rising tide by replanting mangroves. Facing the sea, the 32-rai school is surrounded by degraded shrimp farms and mangroves.

"We are confronted by harsh conditions. We lack fresh water and the land has been rendered salty by seawater intrusion. So, we have to teach our students to be self-reliant because the elements are against us," said Kritphol Klinhom, the director of the school, who initiated the mangrove reforestation scheme five years ago.

Watching the rising sea eating away the shore line, he decided to make mangrove forest conservation a top priority by assigning his students to take care of newly grown mangrove trees.

"A lot of people have come here to plant mangroves in Bang Khun Thian. Some villagers are even operating a mangrove forest planting business, and they make money from it. But the trees rarely thrive as no one looks after them. So, our school feels it is our duty to help to look after the young trees. As a result, you will never see

fallen or neglected mangrove trees here," said Mr Kritphol.

Mangrove reforestation is only one of the school's many environmental conservation programmes. Other projects include a garbage bank, organic farming, turning food waste into biogas energy and saline agriculture — a special programme to improve soil condition. The school's proudest initiative is the sufficiency-economy project — a scheme created to honour His Majesty the King for introducing this philosophy. Fish, shrimp and cockles are raised in the mangrove forest's water to sell to local vendors. Other by-products from the mangrove forest are also turned into money — the leaves are sold for making herbal tea and the soil is used to make salted eggs.

Everything in the school has value — discarded water tanks are turned into nurseries for breeding fish and frogs. The packages used for containing ice cream are retained — not thrown away as usual — and cleaned so that students can recycle them into baskets, hats or other handicraft items.

For its efforts, Klongpittayalongkorn School has received numerous school awards — the most recent one is from Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The school is also one of 181 schools participating in the Honda School Environment Project V that showcases His Majesty the King's conservation and sufficiency economy principles.

"We have to teach students to learn about their community. We believe students should return to help their community. Therefore, they are taught to protect their mangrove forests and save their land. Here, our students are taught to preserve the environment since a healthy natural environment is the only thing that can help them survive in the long run."

The beach in Bang Khun Thian has passed on, but hope lives at Klongpittayalongkorn School. Sometimes, hope is more beautiful than the sea, sand and sun. ■

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