

Annual Biodiversity Meeting in Khon Kaen

The annual meeting of the Biodiversity Research and Training (BRT) Program was held in the Charoen Thani Princess Hotel in Khon Kaen during 12–15 October. It was a highly successful and very interesting meeting, and attracted about 500 participants from universities and other institutions all over Thailand. As might be expected, staff members and students from northeastern universities were well represented.

The BRT Program, which is supported by The Thailand Research Fund and the National Agency for Science and Technology Development, is the major funding program for research on all aspects of biodiversity in Thailand. The meeting featured a review of the success the program has had in increasing our knowledge of biodiversity during its first three years, discussions about the organization of the planned center for biodiversity in the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, and about 25 scientific presentations about diverse aspects of biodiversity in Thailand. About a hundred posters on biodiversity projects were on view. The lectures given sampled diverse subjects in the broad spectrum of research supported by the program: a new fossil dinosaur, *Phuwiangosaurus sirindhornae*, studies of the taxonomy and distribution of Euphorbiaceae, studies of the distribution of rotifers in freshwaters of the Northeast, studies of phytoplankton and zooplankton, the effects of fire on terrestrial biodiversity, systematic studies of dung beetles of the Northeast, the production of herbal medicines in rural health care, etc. The meeting ended with an interesting panel discussion on how to sell biodiversity to the media and to the public. Like all news, biodiversity has to be packaged into small, colorful bites that will flag the attention of the generally bored TV viewer.

A nicely produced, glossy Annual Report for 1998 was produced which provided a summary of the progress that has been made in stimulating research in biodiversity since the program was initiated in 1995. The document is mostly in Thai, with an Executive Summary and an eight-page summary of “highlights” in English at the end. A total of 299 projects have been funded (many still continuing) for a total of 187.3 million baht in direct support. This includes 147 thesis projects for postgraduate degrees.

The program gives support in seven main areas, which are: (1) inventories, taxonomic research and ecological studies; (2) monitoring of populations and communities; (3) relationships between biodiversity, social and economic activities, and local wisdom; (4) database management, information technology, and publications on biodiversity; (5) graduate degree studies; (6) conservation of resources with pharmacological, agricultural and industrial potential; and (7) study of policies to develop effective management of biodiversity.

The BRT Program requires that grant recipients publish their research results, preferably in an international journal. While progress in publication has been made, it is not yet impressive, given the amount of support provided. A bibliography is included in the report which lists 14 papers published, 16 in press, 14 submitted, 27 studies in manuscript, and 43 in preparation. The BRT Steering Committee which evaluates proposals (on which this reviewer sits) plans to offer help to researchers in preparing and submitting their work for publication.

The founders and supporters of the BRT Program should be proud of the impact it has had on the level of interest in our native fauna and flora by local researchers. The funds have gone a long way. Before 1995 there was little interest in supporting biological surveys

and work in taxonomy, population genetics and ecology. Now, enough decision-makers have realized that these fields are important to our economy and to our quality of life. The program has received particularly strong backing from local chemists, pharmacologists and other biotechnologists. The philosophy embodied in the program is that biodiversity is not only to be conserved, appreciated and enjoyed, but to be used. This will certainly strengthen our arguments for conservation.

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