

Annual Meeting of the Biodiversity Research and Training Program a Success

During October 11–14, the Biodiversity Research and Training (BRT) Program conducted its annual general meeting at the J.B. Hotel in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province. The BRT Program, supported by the Thailand Research Fund and the National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC), has provided the major source of funds for research on all aspects of biodiversity since its establishment in 1996, spending 218.7 million baht (about US\$ 5 million) over four years. The financial crisis in 1997 cut deeply into the funds available, causing reductions to about one-third of the initial level, but the program has still had a major impact.

The 1999 meeting featured about 45 presentations and attracted about 500 participants, more than anticipated. The meeting reviewed the accomplishments over the past year, which are summarized in a handsome annual report (in Thai with summaries in English). During the last year the program spent 32.4 million baht, funding 36 research projects, 64 graduate student thesis research projects, and also 21 training courses. Many of the projects dealt with plant taxonomy and inventories of invertebrates such as rotifers, fairy shrimps, snails, beetles, etc. Six projects dealt with the “relations between biodiversity, social activities and local wisdom.” The 21 training courses were conducted for school teachers and students, NGO groups and other interested people. Several “round table discussions” were organized for scientists who are working in the same research areas to help them exchange knowledge and coordinate their research.

An additional funding area is research on the sustainable development of biotechnology for social and commercial purposes. Six projects were funded in this area. Most concerned the extraction of natural chemicals from plants, fungi and microorganisms and testing for bioactivity against cancer, HSV, malaria, tuberculosis etc. Use of natural products for pest control is also a priority. The BRT Program also provides some support to the National Culture Collection of BIOTEC, which already maintains several thousand types of fungi, bacteria and algae.

The objectives of the BRT Program do not stop with funding research. Emphasis at this year’s annual meeting was placed on publication of results in the English-language scientific literature. A total of 76 publications have resulted from BRT-funded research and 111 additional studies are in manuscript. Several presentations dealt with the problems of publication of results. Three volumes have been published in the BRT-managed, new monograph series, *Thai Studies in Biodiversity*, and more are in preparation.

Looking to the future, the BRT Program is participating in the setting up of a new Thailand Biodiversity Center being planned by the government “to facilitate the protection, management, and research of Thailand’s biodiversity,” and specifically to facilitate implementation of the International Convention on Biodiversity.

On the last day of the meeting, Dr. Malee Suwana-Adth of TISTR proposed the establishment of a periodical covering social and cultural aspects of biodiversity with emphasis on community-level knowledge and activities, in Thai. This idea was well received and BRT is now exploring the possibility.

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