Since the foundation of the Royal Forest Department in 1986, the development of forest politics in Thailand has not only challenged the State’s self-portrayal as an agent of conservation but also its current policies on sustainable development. The activities of the collective and corporate strategic groups and teak companies in the early 1900s have exploited forests resources for logging purposes and surplus concessions. Furthermore, large-scale eucalyptus plantations have stripped Thailand’s national forest of its biodiversity and more importantly, have led to persistent resistance by marginalized farmers in forest areas. The method of “slash and burn” practiced by both small scale farmers and plantation owners in the early 1900s has also contributed to the lost of biodiversity and destruction of the forest resources.

Thailand’s forestry politics began with a corporate strategic group that focused on teak logging and trading companies. The Bowring Treaty of 1852 allowed British companies logging in Burmese forests to take over forests in Northern Thailand. By the 1890s, six major British companies had complete control over logging concessions, saw mills and teak exports in Thailand. Furthermore, corporate strategic groups forced princes and nobles in Thailand, who originally controlled forests in Northern Thailand, out of power and created a new political system that allowed them to destroy and exploit the forests until the early 1900s. In the next few decades, corporate groups, bureaucrats in power and military capital groups would continue to fight over Thailand’s forests in an attempt to gain capital through logging, tree plantations, and saw milling.
1987 “Green Isan” project initiated. With 55 million bahts, the aim was to “re-green” Northeastern Thailand by building dams and reservoirs and reforesting large areas. The paper and pulp industry reacted enthusiastically with plants to plant large eucalyptus plantations.

1989 Logging ban. This marked the end of the saw milling industry as well as bureaucrat state capitalist group.

1990 Suan Kitti scandal happens. A subsidiary of the Soon Hua Seng corporation was caught cutting down natural forest to establish eucalyptus plantations, with the collusion of the RFD.

1990 April: The Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), controlled by the Kra-pakdi clique, set up the ‘Land Distribution Programme for the Poor Living in Degraded National Forest Reserves in the Northeast of Thailand,’ which became known by its Thai abbreviation Khor Jor Kor.

1991 June: A Brutal eviction of Nong Yai villagers in Dongyai Forest, in response to the Khor Jor Kor Project. Military and forestry personnel beat up villagers who refused to leave their homes and arrested ten “leaders” including a Buddhist monk. 105 villagers set up “Thai Refugee Camp” at Wat Satakhien

1992 February: Committee of 36 Forests forms, an Isaan wide network and protest that included thousands of farmers and widespread civil disobedience.

March: Isaan-wide protest rally against Khor Jor Kor

June: Violence by forestry and paramilitary forces was ended after a seventeen day march to Pak Chong (the “door to Isaan”).

July: Khor Jor Kor Project withdrawn

1993 The RFD, supported by the World Bank’s Tropical Forestry Action Plan, using words such as ‘sustainable development and partnership and participation’ began to aim towards having 2.3 million rai of plantation by 1997.

1995 The Isaan network, joined by the Pak Mun Dam protesters and the Northern Farmers Network, mobilized ethnic minorities against the threat of eviction from national parks in the North and formed the Assembly of the Poor.

1997 The constitution grants the rights of communities to participate in the management of local resources.

2005 September: The Conservative Forestry Bill ruled that community forests should not be permitted in conservation areas, thereby denying a role to local communities in natural resource management.

In 1990, the military-run Khor Jor Kor project initiated a goal to reorganize all 352 National Forest Reserves in Northeast Thailand in an attempt to relocate and reallocate land in villages from each forest, thereby freeing nearly nine million rai of forest land for fast-growing tree plantations. It incorporated elements from the Green Isan project for social, infrastructure and occupational development in the Northeast. One million villagers were predicted to be affected by the project. An Isaan-wide protest against the Khor Jor Kor project caused the Thai government to withdraw the project in July 1992.

The victory of farmers and villagers networks against the Khor Jor Kor project led to a counter-strategic group in Thai forestry, in collaboration with the Assembly of the Poor, which developed its own democratic forest management programs.

The fall of the Khor Jor Kor gave back some communities their rights to their local forests. However, during this time, the RFD began to developing programs of reforestation campaigns and national parks. Using titles such as, the “Permanent Reforestation on Commemoration of the Royal Golden Jubilee of His Majesty’s Accession to the Throne” and the “King’s Reforestation Project” the RFD attempted to reforest five million rai in three years. The RFD also attempted to protect forested land under the form of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries or Class 1 watershed areas. The RFD’s goals were a strategy to regain control over forest areas which had been lost. Today, the RFD and groups with similar goals continue to fight for control of forest areas in Thailand.

Although currently, there are several laws and regulations that protect Thai forests and natural resources, the State—as well as collective and corporate groups such as those in collaboration with the RFD—continue to deplete much of Thailand’s natural forest resources through logging and large-scale eucalyptus plantations. Farmers’ networks and communities within the national forests have continued to fight for the rights to local forest managements. The farmers’ movements draw on local traditions of forest conservation and religious customs. Many community forests and conservation activities have already begun in response to the unsustainable logging that began in the mid 1800s. (Pye, O. (2005). Strategic groups and counter-strategic formation in Thai forestry. University of Bonn, 22.)
This area was formerly known as Dong Lam and Phu Poiy forest reserves in Khon Kaen and Loei Provinces. The landscape of rolling limestone hills and valleys between 200 to 800 meters above sea level is the fount of the headwaters of the Nam Pong and other rivers. Scenic spots, waterfalls, cliffs and caves are found in the park. Within the Park's woodland is the headwater of the Nam Pong River, Tard Fah Fall, the very steep Pha Nok Kow Cliff and the heavily-visited Pha Phuang Cave, and other caves such as Kang Kao, Sra Kaew and Lai Tang caves. There are many creeks flowing to Pong River from Phu Kadeung National Park, and from Chern River in Khon Kaen.

The soil in this area comprises of rich, sandy soil as well as stones. The weather is very hot, about 39°C. Phu Pha Mann possesses 203,750 rai (32,600 ha) of forest, mostly hill evergreen and deciduous tree. There are many species of plants and wild life such as redwood, rattan, wild orchids, cogon grass, elephant grass, antelope, boars, barking deer, monkeys, rabbits, pangolins, monitors, birds, and insects.
Historically, Nongjaan dates back to the early 1970s. Today, most of the landscape was surrounded by cassava and sugar cane plantations and rice paddies, but in the 1970s most of the village was primarily surrounded by rubber trees. According to the oral history of the village, the first villagers harvested rubber from the rubber trees for income. Other than this income they mostly lived off the forest, which provided many edible plants, herbs and animals for protein.

Today, Nongjaan is a small village of fifteen households, about sixty villagers. Because it is located in a national park, Nongjaan is not officially a registered village, so they do not have an official headman that is part of the TAO. Their headman is known as the “the overseer.” He is knowledgeable on Thai politics and has a lot of connections within the village as well as outside of the village.

The villagers of Nongjaan have adapted to a more modern way of agriculture by planting rice, cassava and sugar cane in plantations. There is also a few rai of tree plantations that the villagers have planted for lumber. The villagers eat herbs and vegetations from the forests and on occasion, they might hunt for wild animals. They collect guano from the caves to be used as organic fertilizer.

As CIEE Students we decided to spend a few days with the villagers of Nongjaan and their surrounding neighbors to learn about their local knowledge of the forest of Pha Phu Mann National Park. We attempted to immerse ourselves in their daily activities to witness first hand their daily lives on a day to day basis during the harvest season. We also ventured through the forests, escorted by the villagers, exploring high mountains, caves and waterfalls. Through our conversations and exchanges with the villagers, we learned about their oral history regarding the forest surrounding them. We also learned about the different types of plants, herbs and flowers that the villagers found useful as we strolled in the forest. The following is a record of our experience in the village.
Day One

Nongjaan Hamburgers

The day began early, when Joy picked us up at 5:00 in the CIEE van. Despite a few delays (Is it that hard to wake up for an alarm?), we made good time on the journey to Nongjaan, arriving at 7:30 in the morning. Of course, the length of the trip was somewhat inconsequential since all save one member of the group were sleeping – not including Joy of course, after the stop for coffee.

We had been warned when we were preparing for the trip that it would be cold in the village at this time of year. That was a valid warning. Stepping out of the van, we could see our breath. A refreshing change for the authors’ experience of Thailand, the cold didn’t really seem to alter the life of the villagers noticeably. Sure, they wore more layers, but other than that everything was as to be expected. As soon as we arrived we were ushered to the sala and told to sit for a breakfast served in the light of the rising sun. It was a delicious meal, which as is the case for all homestays, exemplified the generosity and hospitality of the Thai people. There was far more food than we could eat, but somehow the plates kept being moved around until everyone present had sampled each dish and been fed more than was healthy. But with the delicious dishes arrayed before us, how could we refuse. That would be rude right?

After the meal, the group remained at the sala as the villagers cleaned up and made all the arrangements for our stay. The life of the villagers was openly on display, not only did they welcome us to their homes, but as we sat there we noticed all of the other inhabitants of the village. These critters were as varied as guinea fowl – scrawny chickens with weird ears – and puppies, who got progressively fatter during our stay. Joy walked to one of the rice fields right next to the headman’s house and picked a few of the dried stalks left after the harvest. Coming back to the group he brandished his knife and chuckling commenced whittling one of the reeds. After a minute or so, he placed the reed to his lips and produced a clear tone. The group, like so many children, decided to try and emulate him. Unfortunately, it was not as easy as Joy made it look. Despite our best efforts – and several mutilated reeds – we were unable to produce our own set of pipes. Joy did his best to demonstrate the proper method of cutting the grass, but it was in vain.

Thankfully, the villagers returned; it was decided that the three males in our group would live with the headman and his family, and that the two females would be living down the street. The group members dispersed to move into to our new
homes while Joy gave the villagers the money to cover the expenses incurred by our stay. Re-gathering at the sala we drank coffee and got to know our hosts. But the villagers wanted to more than introduce themselves. It was important to them that we take a tour of the land encompassed by the village that we get to know it as well as them. So we were loaded onto a tractor and given a tour for about two hours. It was beautiful. The land was a quilt of fields in various stages of harvest and wild forest. The gold of the rice stalks caught the early morning sun reflecting it in contrast to the deep green of the lush cassava fields. We followed the roads in a giant circle of the village, passing under the shadow of several mountains. The road was intimately known by the headman, who was acting as our driver and tour guide.

Each field, pond, or tree had a story. By the time we had returned to the village the sun had risen high in the sky, along with the elevating temperature, and it was time for the villagers to prepare lunch.

In order to get out from under the villagers' feet while they prepared another feast for us and to try and work off some of breakfast, we decided as a group to hike up one of the closer mountains. So the five of us traipsed through the cassava field behind the headman’s house and came up to the edge of the brush filled forest. We picked up fallen bamboo to beat our way through the underbrush and started finding our way up to the summit. The forest was lush, both with flora and fauna and it was a slow process making our way up the slope. Our guide was our own natural intuition and a dog named Duk, who happened to be the mother of the fat puppies. Unfortunately, we had not come prepared to hack our way through the bamboo forest and not being as small as our canine guide we were unable to make through some of the thickets without just demolishing them. And since one of our
group was being eaten alive by the mosquitoes, we decided to turn back before achieving the summit.

Lunch was another massive meal, but if we tried to turn down any single bite of the food prepared, we were informed that we had to eat it, “to make us strong.” The afternoon was spent on the back of a tractor again. We made our way to a waterfall about 9 kilometers away, where we shocked the villagers by jumping in and spending some time swimming. A crowd gathered atop the escarpment to watch the crazy farang frolic in the frothing water, but we didn’t care. Yes, the water was cold but we played for a while. Plus, the swim doubled as our showers for the day.

Returning to the village, we decided to change. The wife of the headman, took this opportunity to present the men of the group with sarongs to wear, some too skimpy to be considered sarongs. The men were then called over to another house, where the villagers were gathered to help construct a new house. The construction was stopped for the moment because it was happy hour. The lao cow was passed around and the villagers officially welcomed the men to the village. The men decided to walk the dirt roads of the countryside for a little and continue exploring the village while wearing their sarongs. The women did their own walking, but going in a different direction and finding starfruit.

As the sun was setting the villagers began several fires to warm and light the scene. We farang gathered around one in a desperate attempt to stay warm. Now that the sun was set, the temperatures plummeted again. We were called away from this haven of warmth for dinner. Were we were stuffed again. Conveniently it was Thanksgiving in America, so being stuffed was
appropriate. Post dinner, we and several villagers once again gathered around the fire and continued to get to know each other. Eventually the villagers decided we might be hungry again, so they mobilized to provide us with a delicacy which we were informed was the ‘Nongjaan hamburger’.

Basically gopher-sized logs of sticky rice coated in salt and cooked over the fire on bamboo and then coated in egg, the hamburgers were delicious. But on top of everything else we had eaten, it was a dangerous amount of food, and since the village decided to use all of the sticky rice already cooked that day to make the hamburgers, we eventually feared internal bleeding. We thought ourselves sneaky as we utilized the fitful light of the flickering flames to attempt to save ourselves by feeding the food to the dogs gathered around us. Eventually we were able to plead fullness and waddled to bed. It looked to be a cold night, but we didn’t notice that until the morning thanks to our food comas.

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**RECIPE FOR “NONGJAAN HAMBURGER”**

**Ingredients and materials:**

- Massive amount of cooked sticky rice
- Salt
- Eggs
- Bamboo roasting sticks
- Campfire

**Directions:**

1. Clean the bamboo roasting sticks with knives
2. Crack eggs into a bowl and mix
3. Put wads of stick rice on the roasting stick so it looks like corn dogs
4. Rub salt on stick rice
5. Roast rice over campfire
6. When rice is toasty brown, spoon eggs onto rice
7. Roast rice with eggs on again until golden brown
8. ENJOY!
Day Two

Things that make you Strong

Our journey began this morning with a trek up to the local wat. Despite out insistence, the villagers hadn’t yet let us walk anywhere of significant distance, so the walk up to the wat was pretty epic. At the wat our families offered up the usual dishes to the monks—eggs, fermented fish, vegetables—while we presented high collagen, low sugar, vegetarian blend soy milk. The monks aren’t allowed to hate people; otherwise I’d be concerned they didn’t like us for our alms. We then sat down to eat breakfast in another sala. Here we tried to institute the “chew slowly or die a slow, agonizing death by overstuffed bellies” plan. It didn’t work, they employed the counter tactic of forcing us to sit there longer and eat. How nice of them. We ended up leaving another meal utterly stuffed with delicious Isaan cuisine. After breakfast, the women tended to the dishes, while the men gave a hand to the new construction at there.

After some time to digest, we followed our families to the rice fields to help collect the harvest. We spent about an hour in the sun working this way, each of us with a right handed stretchy glove. We use the term “work” fairly loosely, as we were simply picking up pre-bundled rice and tossing it on a truck. The villagers commented on the nature of our harvesting methods. The farang are quick to complete the work, while villagers take their time, enjoying their neighbors and surroundings. We hardly noticed, priding ourselves on our haste, until our translator commented on the distinction between work methods. Suddenly it seemed as though saving time is not always the best method. Our stuffed stomachs were forced back to the table for another hearty, delicious meal, this time complemented with lao cow. We were given a massive papaya, to which only one of the group members partook. The rest fed their share to the dogs hoping no one would notice.

After the meal, we took to the not-so-beaten path up the cliff that overlooks Nongjaan village. With a machete in the lead, and a few fearful farang in the rear, we ended up at the top of the cliff with a stunning view of the whole village. According to the villagers, the 5 of us are the first farang they’ve taken up the cliffs.
The climb up was harrowing, as some of us needed to cling to the sharp edge of the cliff for fear of tumbling down the rocks. In honor of our achievement, we brought 2 flags to plant at the top of the cliff that can now be seen from the village. In contrast to the simple beauty of nature, it was a rather complex trip. En route up the path, one member’s sandal broke, perpetuating the clumsy farang stereotype and resulting in a bloody toe. Fortunately, it made a trail of blood we were able to use to follow back down the mountain. This is not as easy as the Thai people made it look, and more than one farang slid butt first down the slope. In contrast another farang made her way down through “jungle girl” swings, mimicking our favorite TV personality.

On the way down, we prodded two men about the nature of the vegetation, “is this edible,” or, “can you use this,” to which we were met with invariably mixed reviews. The older man always seemed to think things were useful and edible, while the younger man thought the contrary. We tend to agree with the older gentleman.
as we ended up eating some of said vegetation for dinner later on. He also showed us how to convert stalks of bamboo into a whistle in case you were to get lost in the woods. Useful skill, if one happens to be carrying a machete.

We got back down through the cassava fields (which smell of flatulence) to the village a little before dinner. We parted for some pre-dinner walks through town, and then met back up for dinner. Another scrumptious meal passed and we began to pass the lao cow once again. The villagers were thoroughly entertained with feeding everyone lao cow, because as we heard so many times, it “makes you strong”. Other things that reportedly make you strong: excessive amounts of peppers, this random root we found in the woods, and sticky rice. Speaking of strong, our intestines were now made of steel, or just compressed lao cow. This paved the way for another late night meal, one that might be seen by many as the equivalent of a Taco Bell run.

Amidst the activity of dining and drinking, we all turned out heads to see a massive piece of machinery travelling down the road making road repairs. Upon further questioning it turns out that the villagers needed road repairs but couldn’t get help from the municipality, so they raised the funds themselves to hire the workers.

We all shared some stories and made a late night of the festivities, setting a good mood for the next day.
Day Three

Mysterious Purple Root

Waking to the freezing mountain air we were able to observe our breath being expelled from our bodies. Regardless of how many blankets we had accumulated during the night no one was capable of generating enough heat to sleep comfortably. As they had every morning, the puppies outside the headman’s house expressed their displeasure with the conditions into which they had been born.

They rarely slept for more than an hour at a time and audibly complained about the low temperatures outside. Beginning day four of our trip we understood that getting out of bed would likely be the easiest part of the day. Today we were supposed to be making a trip to the local Wat to eat breakfast with, and pay alms to two monks. The goal of this morning’s trip to the Wat was not simply to share time with the monks, but to learn from them and attempt to understand the village’s past. Sadly, for unknown reasons the monks, one twenty-eight years old and the other fifty-four years old were unable to accommodate us this morning.

The sun crested the mountains around 6:30am spreading a warm yellow glow over the valley floor. Reminiscing about the night before, we huddled around the smoldering remains of our campfire and conversed with some villagers about the upcoming day’s events. After thirty minutes of discussion and a few cups of coffee the headman walked down the one road leading into town. He quickly returned with a fellow villager, both clutching roosters in their hands and converging near the side of our house. One member of our group was able to speak Isaan quite well so she notified us that a cockfight was going to be occurring.
This was not the stereotypical cockfight atmosphere; we were all struck by the casual setting surrounding the match. There were no crowds of people, loud shots and cheers, or smoked filled rooms. This was simply two men generating excitement with what they had, and quietly sharing a moment of relief before the set out for a long days work. The fight ended shortly after it began with a mutual agreement that no clear winner was established. Other village men gathered around to watch the cockfight including an elderly gentleman who seemed to never leave his sala.

By the time the cock fight had ended the suns warmth became adequate enough for us to feel that swimming in one of the local ponds was possible. In Isaan society it is considered inappropriate for women to be swimming or engaging in “public” activities with men. Because of this the three men in our group had to swim alone while to women laughingly mocked and harassed them. The water was extremely cold causing one of the members of our group, ironically the largest and strongest man, to be physically prodded into the pond. While he stood on the side of the pond distracted by the two men already in the water the women crept up behind him and pushed him into the murky and pungent water. In Nongjaan there are numerous small bodies of water, some are used for swimming, some for drinking, and some solely for washing dishes.

We returned from our swimming adventure wet and cold, but refreshed and alive. Over some drinks the night before two members of our group had agreed to visit the family they had stayed with three months earlier. The father was very ill with migraine headaches and stomach cramping and requested to see the two foreign students he had once welcomed into his home. While the three other students set out to begin a day long hike the two men traveled via a pickup truck to visit there family. The road work that had begun two days earlier had vastly improved the conditions of travel to and from Nongjaan. All of the potholes had been filled and the road now consisted of two lanes with a softer soil base.

The conversation between the students and the ill villager was very quick because the man was weak and exhausted from his frequent trips over 100 kilometers to a hospital in Khon Kaen. Back in Nongjaan the three members of our
group who had set out already were having a completely different and clearly more joyous experience. While the two students were visiting an ill villager, the other three set out for a walk following an old man on a tractor leading them to his field sala, which looked more like an abandoned, rundown shelter, about two kilometer away from Nongjaan. While the villagers prepared yet another stuffing meal for lunch at the rundown shelter, the three member of the group decided to go for a walk in an attempt to burn off some breakfast. Accompanied by two random children that apparently lived down the dirt road, the three strolled through the cultivation site. One of the members stepped on and set off a trap strategically set up for field rats. However, because she was much larger in size compared to a field rat, the only damage the trap managed was a few scratches on the epidermis level on her abdominal. The party continued into the forest, but after practicing some sword wielding moves on random bamboo trees at the entry of the forests, they quickly returned to the rundown shelter with multiple new mosquito bites. At the shelter, they noticed that one of the villagers had brought a soil covered tuber that, when cut up, was bright purple in color. Through the translator, they discovered that the tuber came from a plant that grown nearby the shelter and had been traditionally grown by the villager’s grandparents. The purple root would be made into a delicious, but sweet desert that we consumed after returning from our hike.

Upon further discussions, they also learned that the woman moved to Nongjaan twenty years ago after her home in Ubon Ratchathani was destroyed by a flood cause by the Ubon Ratchathani dam.

Around noon the group reconvened and rendezvoused at the small decrepit shack. We briefly traded stories about the morning’s happenings and prepared to embark on an assumed to be treacherous march through the woods. At the shack we were joined by the families we were staying with, and since it was Saturday the children, freed from the obligations of schooling, were able to join in the upcoming hike. Today we would be hiking with some new faces, but mostly the two men who had led us on the previous day’s hike.
Due to the intake of food that occurred the night before three of the members of our group required frequent trips to the secluded parts of the forest to utilize it as a bathroom. The time was now approaching one and we continued to relax around this formally stable but now run down shack. We watched the villagers prepare food for the upcoming meal and struggled to not further destroy the brittle shack we currently inhabited. After consuming this meal that consisted of eggs, river shrimp, jasmine rice, and assorted vegetables collected from the near by forest we left for our 3-4 hour hike. We set out through a field of cassava further down the road from the shack and entered a dense bamboo forest.

Compared to the hike the day before today’s appeared to be much easier since there was an actual trail that had been recently groomed. 30 minutes into the hike we came across a deep cave in the side of the mountain. This deep echoing hole in the earth was covered around the rim with tree roots, vines, and eroded soil. Our guides smiled excitingly as they presented us the cave and threw a rock into it to display its true depth. Our translator notified us that during the days of the communist movements within Thailand individuals used this particular cave as a hide out.

The day pushed past 3:00pm and we marched towards the summit and another larger cave. Along the way we were informed that there where many caves in close proximity to the village of Nongjaan. Three months earlier on our first

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**RECIPE FOR “PURPLE ROOT DESERT”**

**Ingredients and materials:**
- Purple tuber
- Coconut
- Sugar
- Pot

**Directions:**
1. Peel purple tuber and cut up into small cubes
2. Shave coconut with a coconut shaver
3. Soak coconut shavings 1 liter of water. Squeeze coconut shavings and drain water to separate solids from liquids.
4. Add 2 cup of sugar into the coconut water. Mix well.
5. Add purple root cubes into sugar-coconut water.
6. Cook over fire until root cubes are soften
7. Remove pot from fire
8. ENJOY!
trip the village with CIEE we entered an extremely large cave full of stalactites; we had assumed this was the only cave in the area; apparently there are numerous caves. Reaching the second cave we pulled out the flashlights the villagers had told us to bring earlier that morning. We entered the dark abyss, washing our hands in pools of freshwater that had collected from droplets falling from the roof of the cave. The cave was roughly 100 yards long with small narrow offshoots all throughout. We crept through the dark until we reached a point where the cave opened into an apparent second trail which descended down a separate path.

Feeling like we had conquered this cave as true explorers we came across a small structure. This wooden table was used by the local monks as a place of meditation, a place to contemplate the true beauty of the valley they occupy.

We lingered in this cave for an hour before beginning our descent back to the valley floor and the shack we had left hours before. Along the way back one of the villagers collected a large bag of bat guano to use as a fertilizer in his rice fields. Near the end of our hike we were offered some tree bark that was sweet and would “make us strong.” The villagers also collected some roots they claimed could be turned into tea that would continually make us strong; however, we never partook of said strengthening tea.

We descended from our hike much faster on the way down and quickly returned to the shack as we were tired and sore. Along the way back to our home stay we passed the road construction that had started the first day. It had progressed relatively quickly. We stopped and helped throw bamboo trees that had fallen in the road out of the way. The headman also stopped to cut down some bamboo to be used to make kanomes later that night. That night we consumed another large meal and once again gathered around the camp fire to warm our bodies.
Following the meal we proceeded to make (correction: watch the villagers make) treats that consisted of sticky rice, coconuts, and sugar water. This process went well past our ten o’clock bedtime. So after consuming only two of the kanomes we abandoned our hosts and dispersed to our beds. The day was over and we all went to bed content, full, and again cold.
Day Four

On the Road Again

Restless to conclude our trip to Nongjaan we awoke to a violent and very audible dog fight. One member of our group decided to give the local swimming hole one last go round and we all boarded a pick up truck to go to the bus stop. The process of saying good bye to the villagers was surprisingly speedy. We were dropped off at the bus stop and notified we would be able to catch a bus to Khon Kaen. Oddly, all around the bus stop for as far as the eye can see were vendors selling snowcaps. All of the hats had monkey faces on them. They had little ears poking out of the top so that when you put them on you looked like you were a smiling monkey.

The bus ride was 175 baht and took around two hours because we had to stop frequently along the way. A version of Isaan standup comedy was playing on a TV in the front of the bus. The bus became very crowded along the way so one of our group members was asked to sit on the metallic floor in the back. He awoke 30 minutes into the bus ride shocked to find that he had been resting his head on a monks knee (inappropriate to say the least). This awkward situation was quickly diffused, and he ended up having a fruitful conversation with this monk and the three younger monks who accompanied him. The monks were studying at a Wat in Khon Kaen city, and were currently on their way to Bangkok to celebrate His Royal Majesty the King’s birthday.

Exiting the bus we were all exhausted from the physically taxing trip. It 11 o’clock in the morning and we were on the familiar blue songtaew to Khon Kaen University.
RECIPE FOR “PAK BOUNG” DISH

Ingredients and materials:

- Morning glory (Pak Boung)
- Oyster sauce
- Garlic
- Soya sauce
- Peppers
- Fermented Soybean paste (optional)
- Oil
- Wok

Directions:

1. Cut Morning Glory up
2. Chop up garlic
3. Warm oil in wok
4. Toss Morning Glory in wok when oil is hot
5. Let Morning Glory shrink, then add soya sauce, oyster sauce and peppers
6. Wait 1 minute, then add fermented soybean paste and chopped garlic
7. Remove wok from heat
8. Let Morning Glory soak in sauce
9. ENJOY!
EVIDENCE OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING

Food:
- All meat except pork and some fish come from the village.
- The majority of their produce is grown in their fields or foraged from the surrounding forest.
- All manufactured products funnel into the village through a couple small family owned and home based stores.

Water and Energy:
- All water used is from rain water collected in either massive urns or several scattered watering holes
- Energy and light come from a few solar panels and fire/candles

Entertainment:
- Cock fights
- Exercise
- Hiking
- Music from improvised instruments (bamboo whistles used as emergency devises as well)
- A few radios and even fewer TVs
- Sitting, talking and drinking around the fireside at night

Connection to the outside world:
- A few radios and a couple TVs
- Cell phones
- A couple home based convenience stores
- The occasional hospital visit

Bamboo:
- Food
- Building materials
- Tools (ax/pick/etc. shafts)
- Instruments
Conclusion

For three days we had studied the way of life of the villagers of Nongjaan. We made friends, surveyed the local terrain, and absorbed information not available through traditional educational tactics. While three days is hardly enough time for us to consider ourselves experts, during our time in Nongjaan, we saw an amazing if not blatant example of self-sufficiency. Everything from food, water and energy, even entertainment was all supplied almost completely from the surrounding area. The only exceptions were a few electrical devices, goods from the local stores and the occasional gift from passing farang.

Almost all of that which made us strong, sticky rice, bananas, a whole slew of vegetables, and even a mystical purple root came from the fields and forests surrounding the village. The only exceptions included the pork and fish that provided the meat for most of our meals.

Even their energy was independent as what little electricity they used was supplied by a few solar panels scattered around the village. Otherwise all other sources of light and heat came from traditional candles and the good old' fashioned campfire.

Without consistent electricity, TVs were almost completely useless in most of the households. From what the authors observed, the villagers of Nongjaan spent what free time they had between working and sleeping with such activities as hiking through the woods and fields, sitting around the fire sharing stories and spirits.

In this time of political turmoil and the impending economic crisis, the village of Nongjaan is fortunate in their isolation. Only a worn road by which the two small general stores received their shipment and the occasional radio broadcast kept them linked to the outside world on a regular basis.

Bamboo is the king of plants in Nongjaan as it not only provides materials by which the villagers build their homes and farming tools, but also provides as a source of food and entertainment in the form of a small whistle that also doubles as an emergency survival tool for hikers lost in the woods. In addition to bamboo they have their own timber-wood nursery from which they collect their lumber on an as-needed-basis. They are planted in rows but are otherwise left alone to grow naturally. Even the remaining rubber trees are utilized for their namesake product; even those struck by lightning – considered bad luck for building houses – is an ideal source of lumber for building temples.
After three days, it was time to leave this secluded and independent paradise and return to the modern-industrial world of Khon Kaen. Undoubtedly, we were changed; all of our modern “necessities” seemed so trivial after staying in a place where entertainment was provided not by television, but by sharing stories and discussions with each other and the occasional cock fight; where food came not from a store, but straight from one’s own backyard. Sadly, however, it was time to go – our time in this electric free world had come to an end.