

## Thailand

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# The link between mental health and ecosystem health in Indigenous farming communities

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Case study prepared by:

**Victoria Pratt**

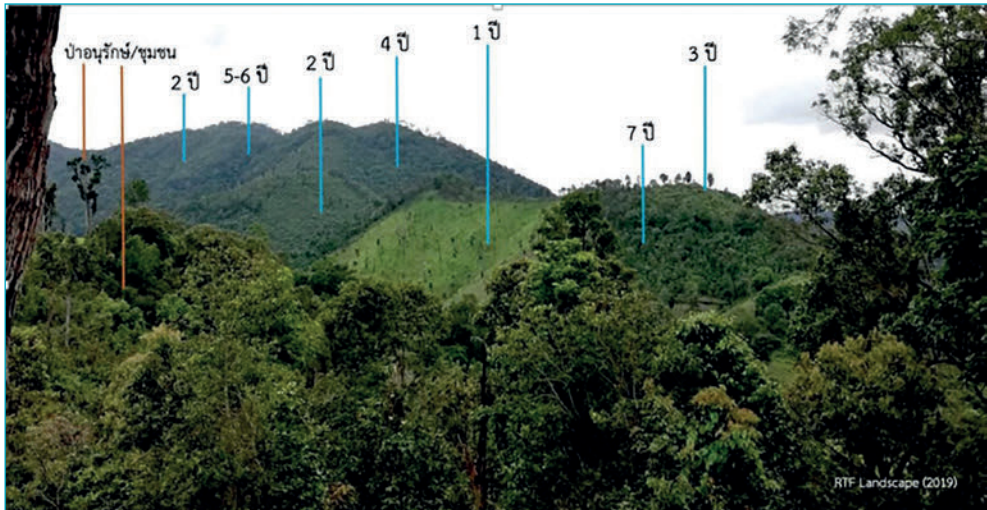
Researchers:

**Siwakorn Odochao, Samrawit Gougsa, Jennifer Katanyoutanant, Colin Luoma, Victoria Pratt and Romit Raj**

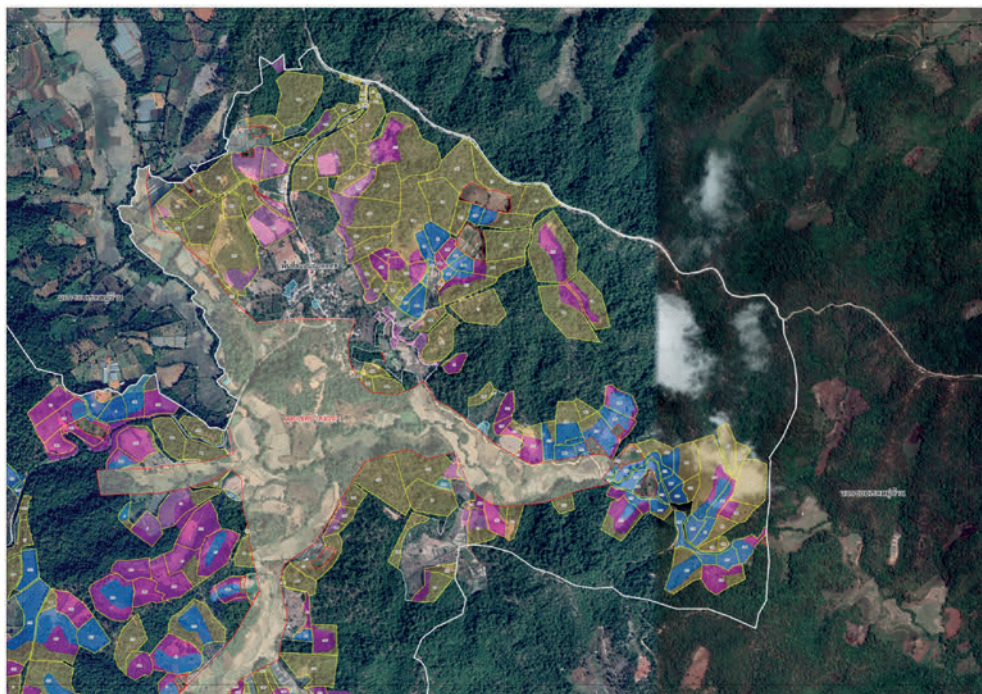
## Focus

Climate change is altering rainfall patterns in Thailand leading to reduced crop yields and affecting food security and nutrition for Indigenous farmers. Additionally, amidst the global climate crisis, the Thai government has implemented conservation policies that outlaw certain Indigenous agricultural practices, which has led to increased stress and mental health challenges for the communities affected.

The Pgak'yau are an Indigenous community in Thailand, many of whom have been displaced from their traditional lands and practices. Pgak'yau people live in small villages in Thailand's north-western highlands and are members of the Karen community who represent the country's largest minority (approximately one million people). For centuries, the Pgak'yau have used a shifting cultivation or rotational farming method which has now been targeted by Thai conservation policies. The method involves farming seven plots over seven years, leaving one plot fallow each year for the soil and the forest to regenerate (Figure 1). A controlled burn forms part of the soil preparation process, before the forest is left to regrow. There are widespread issues with large-scale agricultural burning in Thailand (air pollution, wildfire outbreaks), caused by monocropping and industrial scale processes with which the Pgak'yau's subsistence-based practice has been wrongly conflated. Consequently, the



**Figure 1:** Rotational farming plots over seven years showing tree growth and regeneration of the forest (Credit: Thanagorn Atpradit of the Northern Development Foundation)



**Figure 2:** Community workshop, mapping activities to validate land claims

community has been portrayed negatively in the mainstream Thai media (Mostafan-zhad and Evrard, 2020).

Rotational farming plots form an important cultural, spiritual and economic anchor for the community. The Pgak'yau have farmed this land for generations, but many do not hold official land titles and their plots are being reclassified through a rezoning process. In Lampang, for instance, Karen land is being reclassified to become part of the Tham Pha Thai National Park and Indigenous communities are growing increasingly concerned that further carbon-based conservation initiatives will serve as a pretext for additional rezoning of ancestral land.

In response, the community has mapped their rotational plots (Figures 2 and 3) in an attempt to validate ancestral land claims. However, despite Thailand adopting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the government does not officially recognize the existence of Indigenous Peoples and, by extension, the Pgak'yau people's rights to their land.



**Figure 3:** Pgak'yau community map of plots, made to support claims to ancestral land

### Project

The objective of this research is to explore the deep interconnections of mental health and ecosystem health in communities experiencing the impacts of climate change. The project site is Ban Nong Tao – a Pgak'yau community in Mae Wang District, near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The village is home to 120 families who practice rotational farming to sustainably grow and manage forest resources. Farming knowledge is transferred orally through music, stories and customs or through practice on the land.

The project is led by a team from Land Body Ecologies, a transdisciplinary network of researchers, artists and activists. The team uses qualitative methods such as context immersion (whereby researchers immerse themselves in the communities they study), and arts-based data collection techniques.



## Team

Research and engagement in Thailand were led by Siwakorn Odochao, an Indigenous community leader, and Jennifer Katanyoutanat, a producer, artist and researcher working at the nexus of the environment and arts. Land Body Ecologies provided additional support for the duration of the project timeframe.

## Methods

At the heart of the method was gathering data that focused on the Pgak'yau community's stories and cultural expressions. To achieve this, the team used a mixture of observation, interviews and ethnographic documentation of cultural practices and artefacts. Cultural probes (i.e. prompts and instructions) were also used to elicit artefacts such as stories and songs as well as people's thoughts and feelings. The team involved civil society actors in this process (artists and activists). This approach was designed to ensure Pgak'yau voices were accurately represented.

Data gathering activities included:

1. Gathering audio recordings, in collaboration with the community, that explored Pgak'yau philosophies and traditional stories about reciprocal relationships with the land;
2. Hosting a series of informal workshops with local youth that used traditional storytelling and illustration as starting points to gather songs, poems, community maps, documented walks and drawings;
3. Collecting drone footage of the local landscape.

A review of the data was then undertaken to discover the intersections and interconnections of mental health and ecosystem health in the lives of the Pgak'yau community.

## Results

### **Loss of land is a cultural loss**

The Forestry Department in Mae Wang maps forest versus agricultural land, including rotational farming plots (Maxwell *et al.*, 2020). This data is then used for reallocating land depending on whether it is being used for farming or whether it is classified as forestry. However, this method does not consider the fact that land can appear to be forested when in fact it is part of the rotational farming process. To avoid their land being wrongly classified, many farmers have resorted

**Figure 4:** Community illustration  
of a Pgak'you traditional story



to over-farming their plots (using two- or three-year rotations instead of seven). Throughout the project, the community expressed a sense of suffering at the resultant soil degradation, which represents both a forced adaptation by the community and a form of cultural loss.

The following excerpts from transcribed recordings describe the impact of this loss:

*“The government looks from the perspective of whoever rewards them... Poor people don’t give the government any benefits, so they don’t have any rights to decide what a forest is.”*

– Community elder

*“20% of people in Ban Nong Tao have land titles ... The forest officers decided themselves what is forest and what is community land and drew lines on the map from there.”*

– Community leader

### **Traditional knowledge is transferred through stories**

Pgak'you culture is passed on through stories, songs, poems and ceremonies which promote slowness, care and a reciprocal relationship with the land and other species. The struggle for land rights comes up time and again in these narratives. One, for example, involves the character of the Lazy Orphan (Figure 4), so-called by the king

in the story. In reality, the Lazy Orphan moves respectfully through his environment, taking only what he needs and not exhausting the earth's resources.

These stories are part of Pgak'yau oral tradition and there have been many efforts to preserve them by transcribing and recording them. However, without land rights and to make ends meet, many Pgak'yau youth have been forced to leave their traditional villages to work low-wage jobs in the city. This means fewer people are retaining this important cultural knowledge. Elders mourn their inability to effectively transfer their culture to the younger generation, which to them is akin to 'losing nature' - the consequences of which, they believe, will be borne by the land through soil degradation and deforestation.

### **The language of health and nature are intertwined**

Pgak'yau philosophies, ceremonies and farming methods are deeply interwoven in the community and expressed in the language of nature. The number seven, for example, has practical and spiritual meaning: rotational farming is a seven-year cycle which allows for regeneration; it takes seven days for seeds to sprout. The Pgak'yau even believe that human scars take seven days to heal.

Pgak'yau tradition includes ceremonies to bless rice planting and harvest. Families sing about the relationship between people and the spirits of the earth and ask for health, good food and a good life. In December, when the rice is threshed (Figure 5), communities perform '*got to git ko*' - a ceremony that celebrates the myth of the Tobeekah bird. The Pgak'yau send the bird back to the sky and keep seven seeds for



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**Figure 5:** Annual rice threshing ceremony (Credit: Siwakorn Odocha)

future harvests. These ceremonies exemplify the deep connections in Pgak'yau tradition between land, spirituality and culture.

### **Losing nature is a physical and spiritual loss**

'Losing nature' is an ongoing reality for the Pgak'yau community. When ancestral land is reclassified without consent or consultation, the community's practices, both cultural and spiritual, are entirely uprooted. This reclassification also devalues the traditional Pgak'yau knowledge and regenerative practices that have emerged from a deep understanding of their ecosystems.

### **Ownership represents a 'failure of humanity'**

For the Pgak'yau, notions of land ownership are alien and have no place in their traditional philosophies. They believe that an inability to share land is a failure of humanity in general.

The following excerpt from transcribed recordings describes the Pgak'yau's relationship to the land and its ownership:

*"Life and land are the same. We are the same as land. We come from land. We go back to land. We never needed special certificates or special rights to land. It's only ours for the year we use it. After we cultivate, drop seeds and harvest, we return everything. It only belongs to us when we're using it. The thing that changed is the idea of selling land."*

– Pgak'yau elder

## **Lessons learned**

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (July, 2022) calls for at least 30% of Earth's land and sea surface areas to be effectively conserved and managed. This has prompted some governments to prioritize nature conservation at the expense of Indigenous communities. While the framework recognizes Indigenous Peoples' rights, there are insufficient tools to monitor individual governments' actions. This presents a very real risk of land rights abuses for Indigenous Peoples, evident in the Thai government's continued reclassification of Pgak'yau lands as part of their push to meet biodiversity targets.

Pgak'yau communities, who have lived sustainably and responsibly alongside nature for millennia, are now under threat and their Indigenous land practices are at risk of disappearing. This has both physical and mental health impacts such as



increased stressors of crop failure as well as severed connections to land-based cultural practices and beliefs.

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates the negative mental health and nutritional health impacts of forcibly removing Indigenous communities from their land in the name of conservation (Kokunda *et al.*, 2023; Barume, 2016). There is also growing evidence that land, culture and language are powerful tools for healing, and that control over land has a positive influence on Indigenous health (Vogel *et al.* 2022).

## Recommendations

The case study aims to inform policy and provide solutions to help Indigenous communities maintain their traditional practices, preserve their culture, and ensure their health and well-being in the face of climate change. To this end, the research team offers the following recommendations:

1. Recognize Karen as Indigenous Peoples;
2. Recognize shifting cultivation as a system of wisdom agriculture based on the cultural heritage of the Karen Peoples;
3. Allow the teachings of Pgak'you cultural land practices in the Thai national curriculum;
4. Recognize the role of Indigenous knowledge in conserving lands and biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples as effective, environmental stewards;
5. Accept community and local government-led mapping data as legal data;
6. Incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices into climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts;
7. Change or dismantle the zoning system to align with the Pgak'you way of life;
8. Evaluate and update policies every five years.

## Acknowledgement

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