

Phongsaly: Deforestation

The most Northeastern region of Laos which sticks up in to China like a thumb is known as Phongsaly. This mountainous, sparsely populated, and among the most remote regions of Laos is a melting pot of cultures. Chinese, Lao, and a multitude of tribal languages are all spoken here. My first stop after a tiring 12 hour bus ride down a mostly dirt and very dust road was the provincial capital of the same name,



Phongsaly. Our particular run was actually not that bad it turned out 2 days later the bus

Burning forest for fields

on that same route got in an accident and took 18 hours. As in most places in Laos the attraction is not so much the city but the surrounding countryside and villages. A French Canadian from Quebec was on the same bus and was looking to do a trek. Since splitting the cost made it fairly cheap and I had already forgotten how tired I was after the last 3-day trek, I enlisted for another.

Our guide, Toot's regular job was with the office of science and technology. Which, from what I could gather, was an educational outreach program run by the government. It is also responsible for educating people about the environment, to less success it seems. One of Phongsaly's great assets is its wealth of forests (soon to be was), up until now spared by the relatively sparse population in the area. We had not walked more than 45 minutes when the valley began to echo with popping sounds similar to that of firecrackers I became so familiar with over the New Year's celebration in China. These were not blasts of celebration, but rather the sounds of bamboo exploding in fire, and the sound of slash and burn agriculture. Rounding a bend in the path, flames leaped from the hillside ahead of us. The villagers need land to cultivate rice so they cut down the forest, let the wood and brush dry out and burn it; classic slash and burn agriculture. But since the area is mountainous the soil erodes and the area is not good for cultivation after a few years



Villager cuts down a tree.

and more land must be claimed. This cycle has been amplified by the governments crack down on opium production. While a few years ago villages could get a source of cash from growing opium, now they have only their livestock sales to raise the revenue required to buy metal roofs, flashlights, generators, and other commercially obtained comforts. China is pushing to introduce rubber tree plantations of the type seen all over the Xishuangbanna region of China. A region which I traveled through previously and is almost devoid of forest except in a few protected areas. More area is being cleared to plant rubber trees at the “well intentioned” behest of the Chinese. Wood from the large trees, cut to make room for the rubber, finds its way on to trucks heading down the Chinese built road to China. Laos is the bottom of the chain of exploitation. We exploit the cheap labor in China and get our low cost goods and China running through its own raw materials to quench the consumption looks to neighboring countries like Laos. It’s not an easy

problem to solve. It’s in everyone’s immediate interest keep the chain going. It’s hard to tell the villagers, who have so little, that while there may be short term gain it will and is leading to future loss. The climate and more importantly the water supply appears to already be showing symptoms of the rapid deforestation. The last couple years Toot said have had fewer and fewer days of rain. The water supply is dwindling to the point where as of a few weeks ago the city which gets power from a hydroelectric dam began only production power from 6-10 in the morning and 6-10 at night. In addition, without the forest to hold in the moisture, Phongsaly’s once famously cooler climate is growing warmer. When I mentioned in Namtha that I was going to Phongsaly to one of the restaurant owners he said it’s cold up there and motioned a shiver. In reality Namtha may have been cooler than



After the burning.



Youth uses a “water gun” made from bamboo to wet roof to keep it from catching on fire.

Phongsaly, or at the least comparable in temperature. Throughout the trek while there were areas of forest it seems we were either one step ahead or in many case one step behind the axes and blades of the villagers. In the first village we stayed at, a Pouh Noi village, as we arrive I was puzzled by the kids that were sitting atop the roofs. It be came clear that the village was about to burn a nearby section of forest and they were all on the roofs to make sure no wayward hot ashes lit there thatch roofs on fire.

While this area receives a lot more tourists than the area I trekked in Muang Long, it is still enough where we were some what of a novelty. The kids were very photo shy at first but after a couple of brave ones got to see themselves in on the screen all the kids were clamoring for photo. No such luck in convincing the Akha in the second village we stayed at who were very shy in all respects. The kids would stair at us from behind houses and doorways and squeal and hide when we looked back. The Akha in this area are from a different tribe than those I had seen in Muang Long and Muang Sing. They wear a type of different dress which includes a long chain that hangs from their headdress.

On more serious and sad note, the man's house we stayed at had a 2 year old who had some sort of stomach infection that had been going on for 15 days and had not eaten anything in the last four days. Despite the seemingly dire straight of the child the family refused to take the baby to a hospital because they have their own beliefs. It was a sad and helpless feeling to see this poor child barely conscious, knowing that the child is close to death, and only being able to observe and do nothing.



Kids posing in Pouh Noi village



Tree on its way to China.



Akha woman hangs out the cloths at the Akha village we stayed at.



Akha woman near Phongsaly



Flowering tree: It wasn't all burning forest