



ISDSI CHIANG MAI URBAN SUSTAINABILITY STUDENT STUDY: FALL, 2009

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TITLE: Following the Brown River: Use, access and sustainability of the Mae Ping.

HYPOTHESIS

Despite relatively easy access, the Mae Ping is used only by a small number of recreational fisherpeople and farang boat tours.

METHODS

We studied both sides of the river from Nawarat ridge to Wat Fa Ham past Rama 9 Bridge. Our group chose this area because it was an appropriate sample of the city, with both local and tourist areas. We counted boats and fishermen, used a GPS to gather coordinates for access points and bank composition, and collected descriptions of people, restaurants and markets along the river. Access is defined as ability to easily walk to the river without crossing private property. We used a specific time frame of 8 AM to about 11:30 AM on both Day 1 and Day 2. Both days we walked along both banks from Nawarat Bridge to Rama 9. On Day 2, we rented kayaks and paddled the same stretch, from Nawarat Bridge to Rama 9. However, our entire assessment was limited by the time of day and lack of esoteric scientific instruments.

FINDINGS

Along the riverbanks and in the river there were piles of garbage, food waste, and plastic bags. We saw a picnicking woman throwing her plastic bag into a bush. We also witnessed a cleaning crew washing garbage into the river with soap and water. Of the 18 fishermen and women we saw, most were wearing flip-flops, blue jeans and old t-shirts. There was always more than one line—sometimes up to 6 poles stuck up from the ground around one man. On day two we witnessed the same man fishing in the same area. We did not observe any fish pulled from the river. We did, however, find a dead crab and dozens of oyster and clamshells piled near Narawat Bridge—possible remnants of fishermen. Some people simply sat and watched the Mae Ping, doing nothing specific but reclining on stairs or reading books. Each day we saw monks walking slowly up and down the river. However, the Mae Ping ultimately appeared to be split into two worlds. On the West side of the river we found much more local life—crowded produce markets like Muang Mai and Lam Yai—while on the East side there were numerous resorts and English-titled riverside restaurants—such as Wawee Coffee and Exotic Scene and Cuisine, which limited public access to the river. Overall, in our little stretch, on day one we saw 8 moving boats—four long tails with white passengers, three long tails with no passengers and Thai captains, and one Thai rower—and eight stationary boat—three dinner cruise boats, three small boats parked at restaurants and two long tail tour boats. Day two showed nearly the same amount. We could access around 40% of the banks, although quality varied from extremely muddy to freshly washed concrete. The riverbanks were more artificial closer to dense urban areas and high rise hotels, and more natural near private houses and small businesses.

SUSTAINABILITY

We believe that Mae Ping stands as an underutilized transportation resource. The Mae Ping is close to three major markets and would be a less energy intensive mode of transportation for cargo. All we observed, however, were a few tourist boats. We also believe that the river, and the access areas surrounding, is not being treated in a sustainable manner, considering the piles of garbage.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Does the circle of concern in Thai culture affect river use and pollution? Is there a divide between the West and East side between locals and tourism? Does the river collect more homeless people and low society locals on the West side? What are the standards of “clean” for the river? How safe is it to eat the fish from the Mae Ping? Which side of the river generates more garbage?