

Sustainable rattan boosts local income

“Last year our village earned several thousand dollars by growing and selling rattan. This was a welcome contribution to the local economy, which is mainly dependent on small-scale farming,” says Xiengkeua Sibounheuang who plants and cultivates of rattan in Soppouane village in Laos.

Soppouane is a small village of around 400 inhabitants near the border with Vietnam. The people here have been producing sustainable rattan products since 2006. The project has boosted local income and improved the community spirit.

“Over the years I’ve attended several courses. The money that is generated for the village has given us all a better standard of living. My children are grown up now but the income enables us to pay for food, medicine and other things and still have money over,” says Xiengkeua Sibounheuang as he showcases his plant nursery where the shoots are beginning to grow.

Linthong Vilaisack is chair of the village forest committee. He is also very satisfied.

“We’re proud that our rattan products have entered the EU market. As well as offering better wildlife protection the project also provides many local jobs.”

FSC certification was a giant step forward for the rattan production. FSC (The Forest Stewardship Council.) FSC is a global, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of responsible forest management worldwide.

In 2011 Laos became the first place in the world to have rattan products FSC certified. The aim is for more countries in the region to follow suit.

“Previously, large forest areas were exploited to grow rice and other crops but the certification has led to forest regeneration. The fact that we have a national park nearby has also helped to make people understand the importance of protecting the forest,” says Linthong Vilaisack.

Rattan is a climbing plant (actually a palm) that is often confused with bamboo. The difference is that rattan can be bent and shaped to make chairs and tables. There are close on 600 different varieties of rattan plants, 50 of which are used to make furniture and other things (some are also edible). Rattan uses other plants to climb towards the sunlight and can grow to over a hundred metres in length. Roughly 90 per cent of all processed rattan originates from the natural forest, but rattan is disappearing rapidly due to overexploitation and deforestation of the forests that it grows in. One way of ensuring the survival of rattan is by making its production environmentally sustainable.

“The FSC certified rattan forests contribute to the local economy while protecting nature. A profit sharing system that allocates 17 per cent of the income to local projects has been jointly implemented by WWF and the villages,” says Bouavanh Phachomphonh, who leads the rattan project at WWF in Laos.

More than a hundred villages in Laos have attended sustainable rattan courses over the years. Many villages have also started their own plant nurseries and cultivations. Khensy Milatid leads a group in Thaveng village that makes craft products from rattan. He spends most of his time weaving rattan products and making bamboo baskets.

“I recently attended a craft exhibition in the capital because I want to learn new things,” he says.

Another important part of WWF's rattan initiative is in lobbying public authorities and striving for improved legislation that favours sustainable rattan production. The government in Laos has taken a crucial step by lowering the tax on FSC certified rattan. The only drawback so far is the relatively small amount of rattan that is produced.

“I used to have difficulty getting hold of environmentally sustainable rattan, but the FSC certification has made it possible to get a regular delivery, which is vital for our

customers,” says Saykham Phetmanyvong the owner of Dan Lao Ltd, a small company in Laos that manufactures products from certified rattan. Sixty per cent of Dan Lao’s production goes on export. Some time in the future, Dan Lao is hoping, together with the villagers, to increase the production of certified rattan while improving the quality.

The need for all the players to interact is something that is emphasised by Tam Le Viet, head of the rattan project in the Mekong region.

“The production of sustainable rattan is only commercially viable if there is a stable market and continuous regrowth. Only with efficient forest preservation and responsible producers and consumers can we secure the long-term future of this fascinating natural material.”

The Mekong region

The Mekong region is home to a spectacular variety of species. WWF is involved in several projects to protect the biodiversity while securing the livelihoods of the local population. IKEA and WWF have been collaborating over sustainable rattan production since 2006. The main aim with developing a sustainable industry for rattan production is to protect the remaining natural forests and to provide more jobs for people in the Mekong region.