



HIS MAJESTY King Bhumibol Adulyadej harvests rice at Prochim Buri in 1998.

# THE RICE KING

BY BOB HILL

THAI RICE FARMERS ARE FORTUNATE TO HAVE A HEAD OF STATE WHO DOES MORE THAN OFFER SYMBOLIC SUPPORT—HIS MAJESTY THE KING OF THAILAND IS A MONARCH WHO GENUINELY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

**A** patron is defined as a distinguished person who gives support to an organization or cause by accepting an honorary position.

Since there is no more distinguished person than a king, it follows that royal patronage is something special. It is recognition from a royal figure that the work of an organization is so deeply favored that

it warrants not only a public declaration of support, but also that such support is of a long-standing nature. Moreover, royal patronage is rarely granted outside a monarch's kingdom.

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) is both privileged and honored to have as its Royal Patron "the Development King," King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand. For while mental visions of spectacle and

formality inevitably tumble into any consideration of royalty, it is astonishing, with a perception thus blurred, to discover that there is another, largely unpublished, side to the remarkable reign of King Bhumibol: a selfless dedication to the welfare of his subjects that vastly outweighs the notional bounds of noblesse oblige.

For much of his 60 years on the Thai throne, King Bhumibol has ventured restlessly throughout every corner of his kingdom, often spending more than half of any year away from Bangkok, studying the countryside, listening to the problems of his people, proposing, suggesting, innovating, and inventing.

His ideas and suggestions, after considering the people's needs, the physical environment, and agricultural practices, have been put to the test in more than 4,300 royal projects. They cover almost every conceivable aspect of what is generally labeled "development," but they concentrate heavily on water resources, agriculture, and conservation. The King's projects have long supported the livelihood of small-scale farmers and particularly the rice farmers that constitute the heart of rural Thailand.

His innovations have benefited millions of people, and have given the little people of Thailand the kind of strength that saw them twice deliver record rice harvests, enhancing the country's capacity to export, in the bleak years following Thailand's financial collapse in 1997.

During the massive gatherings in Bangkok to mark the 60th anniversary of his accession to the throne, in June last year, it was a common sight to see mature Thai people weeping unashamedly, overcome with the emotion of sharing the moment with their King. For if there is one characteristic that marks King Bhumibol, and has nurtured the success of his many projects, it is his almost uncanny connection with the common folk, the poor, and the dispossessed.

His landmark Royal Crop Replacement Project, which

successfully eliminated opium growing in the country's mountainous north, directly affected the lives of at least 50,000 people, and won the 1988 Ramon Magsaysay Award. Early last year, the United Nations recognized King Bhumibol as "the Development King," and, in October, His Majesty received the first Dr. Norman E. Borlaug Medallion, awarded by the World Food Prize Foundation for individuals at the highest levels of international society who have given exceptional humanitarian service in reducing hunger and poverty.

His efforts to improve the livelihood of his people are never remote or detached. His is a hands-on, sweat, and rolled-up shirtsleeves commitment. He holds patents for a cloud-seeding

procedure to make artificial rain, two floating aerators for improving the quality of polluted water, and a process for making bio-diesel.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his accession to the throne, in June 1996, King Bhumibol accepted the first and only International Rice Gold Medal awarded by IRRI in recognition of his passionate personal interest in, and devotion to, improving the well-being of rice farmers and consumers. Just over a year later, in September 1997, King Bhumibol recognized IRRI's work and became the Institute's Royal Patron. The Royal Plaque, "the Great Crown of Victory," together with His Majesty's portrait, have since taken pride of place in IRRI's main administration building.

Looking back, it was on 9

June 1946, when his country was still emerging from the Japanese occupation of World War II and was finding peace after having declared war against England, France, and the United States, that Bhumibol became Thailand's King Rama IX. Much of the country was undeveloped; sickness and malnutrition were commonplace. Despite his tender age of 19, it was only a few brief years before his first royal projects began to emerge.

The first involved public health, including a laboratory to produce BCG vaccine to combat tuberculosis, a plant to refine intravenous saline, and a Red Cross river barge dispensing mobile medical help from the banks of the country's rivers. At first, they were funded from the King's own pocket, but a campaign was

launched for public donations, so he could do more.

Soon, the projects assumed the distinctive nature of physical, social, and economic development, driven by His Majesty's often-expressed conviction that to be strong and independent, Thai people should first be self-sufficient. First, His Majesty was given a gift

of *Tilapia* fingerlings by the emperor of Japan. He raised them in a pond, then had them distributed to village and district leaders so they could be farmed as an alternative source of protein. Then he donated bulldozers for a road development project, and later proposed construction of a dam to supply irrigation water to a district in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province. And so the projects grew. However, individually, they never assumed a grand, sweeping scale. King Bhumibol insists that such work should never "attempt to overhaul the whole system," but rather, development should be taken one small step at a time.

Now, after more than half a century, there are so many royal projects, and their scope is so broad, that to refer to them individually is virtually impossible. They are grouped under headings: agriculture, animal husbandry, crop substitution, education, fisheries, irrigation, land development, medical, personal, rain-making, river basin development, road development, and watershed development.

Some of them involve only study, and are intended to fully inform His Majesty of social and physical parameters, so that development guidelines can be written. Others relate directly to solving problems faced by the people. Some are based on His Majesty's own

experimentation, and are funded from his private resources. In other cases, the King gives advice and guidelines to private-sector projects, while in many other cases His Majesty plans and advises government agencies in the study and implementation of development work.

His Majesty championed vetiver grass as a means of stabilizing erosion-prone land, and his advances in the difficult field of artificial rain-making have led to the formation of a year-round cloud-seeding force with 45 aircraft flying from 12 bases around the country, bent on avoiding drought.

It may be easy to assume that, since he is the King, what he says will happen. It is not that simple. He is a constitutional monarch and, as such, can only give advice. Nevertheless, his moral authority is monumental. Still, his initiatives must be feasible and complement government policy, and each is judged on these bases before adoption. Directing, coordinating, and monitoring the vast development network is the Royal Development Projects Board, whose office is a department within the Office of the Prime Minister.

The nature and purpose of the projects are guided by the King's pronouncements, many of which established clear principles that, some years later, were to become accepted practices for the



KING BHUMIBOL greets former IRRI Director General Ronald Cantrell during an August 2004 visit to update His Majesty on IRRI's work.



THE KING said: "If there is any land where rice can grow, then it must be grown." Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn heeds her father's words by transplanting rice on a vacant plot of land at Chulachemklao Royal Military Academy in Nakhon Nayok Province in 2001.

THAI/NO RICE RESEARCH INSTITUTE



wider international development community. Some examples are

“Understanding the situation facing those we want to help is most important. Helping them to acquire the basic needs of life is the most effective means of assistance. Therefore, in each case, before giving assistance, we must take account of their wants and needs. We must understand the situation they are encountering and decide the means and extent to which they can be helped. We should also adhere to the important principle that we help them in order to enable them to help themselves.”

“Providing occupational assistance to farmers to enable them to be self-supporting is crucial because once they become self-supporting, they will certainly be able to build up a higher level of development. In undertaking the step-by-step approach to development, it is significant to promote caution and economy, to protect against failure, and to ensure full success.”

“It is not necessary to promote agricultural production only in terms of quantity because this may be a waste of production costs and destructive to the quality of the soil. In fact, we should examine the state of the agricultural market, including some form of price regulation, to

prevent farmers from being affected by price fluctuations.”

“Development must take account of the topographical and sociological environments involved. The sociological environment means the habits and attitudes of the people. We cannot force others to think in the same way as we do. We can only approach,

and suggest. We cannot offer assistance by expecting them to think the same as us. When we approach them we must learn what their real needs are, and explain to them how they can best achieve their aims and how the principles of the development plan can be successfully applied.”

Explaining those principles became the driving force behind a unique “show window” on the royal projects launched in the early 1980s. His Majesty established six Royal Development Study Centers, scattered throughout the country and catering to the different climatic

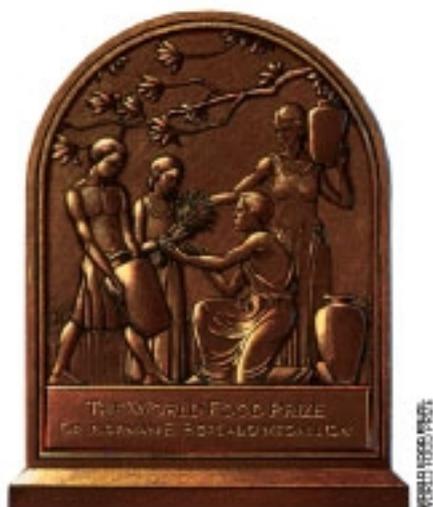
and environmental conditions of the country’s different regions.

The centers set out to be “living natural museums,” bringing together and integrating the innovations, techniques, and systems developed over decades of experimentation, research, and trial. The doors of the centers are open to anyone wishing to learn. People in each of the regions can observe models of modern knowledge and technology, which they can then apply on their own farms. Likewise, students and researchers use the centers, which have become popular meeting-grounds for scientists, bureaucrats, nongovernmental organization workers, and ordinary people, from district and village officials to farmers, housewives, and school children.

Of particular emphasis in the study centers is the King’s concept of sufficiency economy. Originally called “The New Theory,” it aims to promote sustainable self-sufficiency on small farm holdings by combining organic rice, vegetable, and fruit growing with fish and livestock production. It preaches full integration of farming systems and careful resource management. His Majesty urged farmers to adopt the system following the Asian financial disaster in 1997, and many have successfully taken it on.

Although many of the royal projects have been aimed at agriculture in general, some have involved rice growing in particular. His Majesty established a rice bank, from which farmers can borrow, either for seed or for family consumption. In a drive to provide a greater range of rice varieties for farmers in the country’s diverse environmental zones, different varieties were evaluated under different growing conditions.

Soil fertility studies have also been aimed at rice farming problems, particularly declines in irrigated rice yields and the effects of acidity and salinity, but also at developing composting techniques to support organic rice farming, with an emphasis once more on



THE DR. NORMAN E. BORLAUG Medallion, awarded by the World Food Prize Foundation for individuals who have given exceptional humanitarian service in reducing hunger and poverty. King Bhumibol was the first-ever recipient in October 2006.

self-sufficiency. One royal study even discovered that a rat infestation problem afflicting one group of rice growers was a direct result of a local habit of killing and either eating or selling snakes, thereby disrupting the natural biological balance in the area.

His Majesty maintains a close interest in the work of both Thailand's rice science community and international rice research, and regularly speaks out against farmer pessimism for the future of rice growing.

"If someone says it is nonsense to grow rice—that it brings poor returns—then just think: if we do not grow rice, we will end up having to buy it from Vietnam or Burma (Myanmar)," the King said. "If we buy from Vietnam, we will have to pay for transportation and give profits to someone else.

"Thailand must grow more rice because in another 20 years we may have 80 million people and, without enough rice, there may be disagreements among the Thai people. Even if the quality of Thai rice is not as high as that in other countries, we must still grow it. And who cares if people say I'm foolish for saying this. If there is any land where rice can grow, then it must be grown. Thais must eat rice, three times a day. Thais don't eat bread—that is just a snack."

In recent years, King Bhumibol's health, as he approaches his 80th birthday this year, has restricted his constant roaming of the Thai countryside and his direct intervention to improve the lives of his subjects. But Her Majesty the Queen Sirikit, the Crown Prince, His Royal Highness Prince Maha

Vajiralongkorn, and Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn are ensuring that the King's work continues. All have their own development projects modeled after those of the King.

If there is one example that epitomizes the King's extraordinary development work, it is the Chitralada Palace in Bangkok. Hidden from public view behind a moat, tall fences, spreading trees, and armed sentries, it is easy to imagine that within the one-square-kilometer compound are manicured lawns and tropical gardens, ornate statues,



ponds and fountains, polo fields, and stables—perhaps resembling the European style of regal grandeur.

The Chitralada compound, in the jam-packed mayhem of downtown Bangkok, is a complex of agricultural stations, model industrial plants, laboratories, and farming experiments. Crowded with workers, the palace has a full-scale dairy farm, a milk-processing and cheese-making factory, a fruit-processing plant, factories producing bio-gas and bio-diesel, a tissue culture laboratory, experimental rice fields, a factory producing charcoal from rice husks, and a germplasm bank. It also has a school for more than 1,000 children of the people who work on the King's projects. And, at its heart is the Chitralada Villa, with King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit in residence.

Rather than isolating himself within the pomp and ceremony that are the common view of his extraordinary reign, Thailand's Development King—IRRI's Royal Patron—prefers to live at the active heart of a development engine that promises a better future for his 64 million subjects. 🍌

*We are grateful for the assistance of the National Rice Research Institute of Thailand in preparing this story.*

*Bob Hill is a Thailand-based writer specializing in science and technology.*

