

HIS MAJESTY THE KING AND VETIVER WORK FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Sumet Tantivejkul

Secretary-General, Chaipattana Foundation
Bangkok

It is my greatest honour and privilege to have the opportunity to address the topic of “His Majesty the King and vetiver work for the environment”. Since His Majesty’s accession to the throne in 1946, more than fifty years ago, the Thai people have realized that, apart from his role as king, His Majesty has devoted himself to working hard to ease the people’s hardships. He has initiated various development projects on water sources, agriculture, health, career opportunity promotions, communications, and the environment. “Soil conservation and development” is one of the environmental issues on which His Majesty places great emphasis, particularly in using vetiver for this particular purpose.

His Majesty recognized early the problem of soil resource deterioration, which worsened day by day, and thus regularly conducted studies to find ways to counter it. It was in 1991 that His Majesty came up with the idea of carrying out an experiment using vetiver for soil conservation. He kept track of the results and periodically added more suggestions. This allowed vetiver work to develop progressively and led the World Bank, one of the outstanding supporting agencies for vetiver utilization, to be Thailand’s prominent supporter in organizing the First International Conference on Vetiver (ICV-1) on the theme “Vetiver grass: a miracle grass”, which was held from 4 to 8 February 1996 in Chiang Rai province. The main objective of ICV-1 was to commemorate the 50th anniversary (Golden Jubilee) celebrations of His Majesty’s accession to the throne; the other objective was to publicize the use of vetiver in soil and water conservation among people around the world.

The conference was attended by 400 participants from 44 countries. It concluded that vetiver grass is a tropical plant which has a high potential since it revives the environment. As far as Thailand was concerned, there was a commitment to plant more vetiver to benefit the world’s environment. It would help to conserve soil and water as well as to absorb carbon dioxide and other pollutants in the air.

As the first conference was quite successful, the Second International Conference on Vetiver (ICV-2) was proposed to be held once again in Thailand in the year 2000 on the theme “Vetiver grass and the environment”. Later on, the Interim Committee for the International Conference on Vetiver agreed for Thailand to host ICV-2 to commemorate the sixth-cycle birthday anniversary of His Majesty the King on 5 December 1999, and also to serve as a forum for participants to exchange ideas on vetiver at an international level, thus leading to the same direction for vetiver usage in the future.

As already stated, His Majesty’s guidelines strongly focused on the development work in every field and subject. The ultimate objective is to care for the environment, especially in the conservation and development of natural resources in order to achieve sustainability and maximum benefit. Loss of topsoil occurs in every region of Thailand, especially in the North. His Majesty gave the ideas for starting the projects to conserve the topsoil using various methods, such as planting big trees on steep

slopes and also as ground-cover crop. However, the loss of topsoil still occurs because of deforestation, which readily leads to environmental problems.

There is a wide range of uses of vetiver in Thailand under the royal initiative. His Majesty continuously points out the various benefits of vetiver to improve the environment, including soil, water, forests, etc.

On the day of the traditional Ploughing Ceremony, 9 May 1997, for example, His Majesty observed the demonstration farm within the Chitralada Palace and graciously granted a royal initiative concerning the environment to high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, and here I quote his speech as follows:

“Soil conservation should be done simultaneously with forest conservation and rehabilitation. Soil conservation by using vetiver must be expanded widely in order to conserve and prevent the loss of topsoil. Thus the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives should take charge in conserving soil and water as well as rehabilitating the various deteriorated area.”

On 24 July 1997, during the graduation exercise at Kasetsart University, His Majesty granted the following royal advice:

“...Things that are good should be applied technically correctly and suitably to the relevant conditions in order to give us successful results. Vetiver, for example, should be planted in dense rows, lined appropriately with the topographical conditions of the area. For instance, on slopy land, it should be planted along the contours across the slope and in gullies. For the flatland, vetiver should be planted along the farm-plot boundary or along furrows between rows of field crops, whereas around the catchment areas, it should be planted in rows above the water source. Growing vetiver grass in such manners will help to prevent topsoil erosion, maintain soil moisture and trap sediment and pollutants from flowing into the water source. These qualities ultimately contribute to soil and water conservation, and to soil and forest rehabilitation. Graduates who will start working should realize that it is necessary to take into account correctness and appropriateness in their actions. It should come automatically when you do all your business that, apart from having the right knowledge and positive thinking, you must apply your knowledge and thinking correctly, as well as suitably to your work, situation, people and community. Then, you can hope for a complete success...”

On 14 July 1998 when His Majesty paid a visit to the Huey Sai Royal Development Study Centre to follow up the progress of the royal initiative on using vetiver for environmental purposes, he graciously delivered a royal speech as follows:

“...The area with productive soil in Thailand is diminishing, that is why we have to look for areas having bad soil and improve them to become productive. This project is important, and various agencies, including the Land Development Department and the Royal Forest Department, should jointly conduct serious studies. If we can do that, we will never be deprived. Vetiver will retain water and nutrients coming from the mountain. Mountains are the source of water and plant nutrients; there is no need to bring in nutrients from elsewhere. Land development is then easy, with the help from irrigation and forest...”

His Majesty not only focused on the importance of vetiver by granting royal initiatives and advice, but also by establishing the King of Thailand Vetiver Award, worth US\$10 000. The award was first bestowed in 1992 and then on the occasion of the Second International Conference on Vetiver. They are for outstanding work in two categories – research and dissemination of vetiver grass technology. In this instance, after having reviewed a total of 120 papers from various countries, the Committee on Development and Promotion of the Utilization of Vetiver Grass According to His Majesty the King's Royal Initiative selected six papers, three from each category to be eligible for winning the awards.

The use of vetiver grass which was introduced by His Majesty the King for conserving the environment can explain His Majesty's great concern for his subjects, as well as his remarkable recognition of the importance of solving the soil deterioration problem by applying the concept of "using nature to solve nature". This method is economical because vetiver is cheap and easily planted. Besides, farmers can apply it on their own using the local wisdom. His Majesty also granted the principle of a "self-sufficient economy" for his people to adopt in their daily life, which would then lead to the effective and sustainable management of natural resources and the environment, of benefit not only to Thailand but also to the entire world.