

Thai Rice Farmer Comes to Pine Point

By Lu Ann Hurd-Lof

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September 26, 2006 – Minnesotans can count “rice that grows on the water” among their many blessings. In Thailand, growing rice is hard work, Ubon Yuwa, a rice farmer from Thailand, told first grade students at Pine Point School Friday morning.

Yuwa said it takes a ton of rice to feed his family for a year. They eat rice three times a day and feed it to their fish and chickens.



Winona LaDuke helps first graders locate Thailand on the globe. Students in Theresa Loud's classroom welcoming visitors Friday were (from left) Antoine Opegard, Natalie Manypenny, Robbie Fineday, Talia Brown and Nicholas Bellrock, (back) Charles Brown, Sharon Basswood, Curtis Fairbanks and Gwe Gasco. (Lu Ann Hurd-Lof/Enterprise)

Women bring their babies to the fields and, at 12, Yuwa's daughter began transplanting the shoots.

Yuwa and his family grow two to three acres of rice organically. Some families still use water buffalo, but Yuwa uses a small diesel-powered tractor. He called it “an iron buffalo.”

Through an interpreter, Kyra Busch, Yuwa said Thai people use five kinds of rice: jasmine rice, red rice, polished red rice, white rice and purple rice. Purple rice is sticky and usually used to make desserts with mangoes and other tropical fruits.

Yuwa's description of life in Thailand entertained the students. He drew pictures of their houses, wrote his name in Thai and showed a silk cloth with a checked design common to the southern region of the country where he lives.

But the Thai farmer and Busch's visit to White Earth was more than a cultural exchange. They came to learn about Winona LaDuke's struggle with protecting wild rice. Thais also have rice issues.

Yuwa's visit to the United States and an organic farm in northern California was sponsored by the Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE). Busch works for the nonprofit organization, based in San Francisco, whose mission is to link the struggles of Thai communities to the United States. ENGAGE promotes the purchase of “fair trade” rice. While many Americans are familiar with fair trade coffee, buying fair trade rice is a way to help families in Thailand stay intact and continue to maintain sustainable livelihoods. For White Earth, the comparable issue is promoting purchase of hand-harvested wild rice versus paddy-grown rice.

ENGAGE and growers like Yuwa also hope to raise awareness of the need to protect native rice from provisions in the international Fair Trade Agreement, which would lead to the introduction of genetically altered crops.

The fundamental argument matches the one LaDuke has brought to the state Legislature in Minnesota. More recently, the protection of white rice crops in southern states, wild rice stands in California and taro grown in Hawaii has become an issue. “The biotech industry is trying to steal and grow food in Thailand, too,” Busch said. That is why Yuwa wanted to come to White Earth, she added. “Thai people want to be friends with Native people here because they have the same issues, and it is good to have friends, build networking and share solutions with each other.”

“Everybody else in the world has to plant their rice,” LaDuke explained to the first graders, who had all gone with her to harvest wild rice this fall.

“People in Minnesota have many blessings,” Yuwa added. “You have rice that grows on the water, the forest, fish, plenty of food and sugar in your trees.”