PHOTOESSAY


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Accepted 29 November 2006

Background
A restricted diet, if high in saturated fats, sugars, animal products and processed carbohydrates, is associated with many modern diseases1 while diverse diets are considered to be healthy;2 and an effective indicator of food security.3 Dietary guidelines recommend balanced consumption from a number of core food groups to ensure adequate intake of essential nutrients to promote good health4 and prevent non-communicable chronic diseases. The availability of a diverse diet reflects political and economic factors, such as the global trade in foods and national GDP.5

Industrialization has brought many Thais greater dietary diversity as well as more pre-processed foods and more dietary sugar, fat and animal products.6 These dietary changes are reflected in an epidemiological transition with increasing obesity, Type II diabetes, hypertension, stroke, hyperlipidaemia, coronary heart disease and cancer.7

A photographic record of changes in dietary diversity in Khon Kaen, 1988–2006

Khon Kaen is the capital of the north-east or Isaan region where the 20 million residents have the lowest average household income of any Thai region. Rice farming has declined recently but is still the major activity for 85% of farming households,8 as Khon Kaen transitions from an agricultural to an industrial and service economy. Almost 11% of 7–9 year old children are obese, with those from higher income and educated parents particularly at risk.9

Bang Lum Poo (BLP) is the city’s largest central wholesale market from 5 a.m. and local produce and retail market from 10 a.m. Photographs taken at the market in February 2006 were compared with 35 photos taken in February 1988. We also conducted individual and group interviews with stall holders and consumers. An assessment of the differences between the 1988 and 2006 photos provides the following conclusions. In 2006:

- Per stall, there is a greater volume and variety of foods.
- There is a greater volume and variety of fruit and orange vegetables like carrots and capsicum since the Free Trade Agreement between Thailand and China was signed.
- Fruit and vegetables appeared to be of good quality, but interviewees were concerned about inorganic fertilizer and pesticide residues.
- There was a larger range of ready-prepared foods (stir-fry pastes, herb ‘bouquets’, bags of cut-up vegetables, fermented foods), and of ready-to-eat snacks.
- Forest foods (like mushrooms that grow on trees) were not abundant, although insects (including the local delicacy of ant eggs) and water foods (like frogs) were available. Older Khon Kaen residents regretted that only farmed forms of previously wild foods (e.g. frogs, insects) are usually available. This may be a health risk if the nutritional significance of wild foods in the diets of older rural Vietnamese women applies to Thailand.10
- Food safety standards have been improved with metal or steel containers rather than plastic bowls used to hold wet foods and less food is in contact with the ground.

The following photos (1–11) attempt to visually capture the greater diversity in the food supply of this relatively poor region.

Conclusion
The increasing diversity of market foods, particularly green vegetables and herbs, is health promoting as long as residents have sufficient income to participate in the growing market economy.
Bang Lum Poo Market 1988

**Photo 1** 1988: Mangkinoon (insect), chilli (red and green), morning glory, makampom (fruit), papaya, makuapor (eggplant), crab, fermented fish

**Photo 2** 1988: garlic, white cabbage, sweet basil, kheunchai (celery or smallage), shallot, river fish

**Photo 3** 1988: kaipam (leaf from waterways) ground into a paste, a local delicacy
Photo 4 1988: forest mushroom, chilli, sweet basil, onion flower

Bang Lum Poo Market 2006

Photo 5 2006: range of pastes, vegetables and ready to cook ingredients on one stall

Photo 6 2006: orange vegetables
Acknowledgements

We thank the Khon Kaen residents who agreed to be interviewed for this study. The essay forms one part of a mini-project auspiced by the Thai Health Risk Transition Study, which is funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council. Dr Robert MacLennan provided the 1988 photos while the first four authors undertook the fieldwork in 2005 and 2006.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

References


Photo 7(a), (b) 2006: Two tiers of fish seller: left hand image is of farmed fish trucked into market on waist-high stall, and right hand image is locally caught fish being sold from the ground.

Photo 8 2006: wildfoods: pagwan pa [wild (pa) sweet (wan) vegetable (pag)], mushroom and ant eggs.

Photo 9 2006: fruit: strawberries, bananas, apples, green mango, tamarind, oranges.