

*Introducing
The Akha*





About The Akha Heritage Foundation

The Akha Heritage Foundation was set up to provide assistance to the Akha people of south east Asia during a time of rapid social and economic change in the region.

However few people in the world have even heard of the Akha people let alone know their story.

The Thai government has been running a program of forced assimilation against the Akha for decades. Journalists and aid workers keep silent so that they can stay in Thailand rather than inform the public. As a result, the Akha are pushed aside, exploited and their traditional knowledge of the environment is lost. The outside world has no clue beyond the occasional photo in a magazine or guidebook. The Akha Heritage Foundation works to change this.

In addition to publicity the Akha Heritage Foundation provides medical assistance, nutritional aid, clean water systems, and promotes the recording of Akha literature as a means of reinforcing the culture as it comes under great pressure from the outside.

The Akha Heritage Foundation also promotes “results based activism” in order to educate the public about the plight of the Akha and improve their situation.

The Akha are a people without a country, often having had to move due to war. The Akha desire the same human rights as you or I enjoy in the west.

For 13 years we have worked with many volunteers and human rights activists in the Akha villages of Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). Now we take their story to the world.

You are invited to join this effort to defend the human rights of the Akha people. Read on, visit our web site, take action! If you have any questions or would like to organize a presentation, gain more information, work as a volunteer or assist in any other way please contact us.

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Introducing the Akha

The Akha People

The Akha of Southeast Asia are found in five countries. China, Myanmar (Burma), Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Originally from Mongolia they have migrated from Tibet and China. Geneologies go back at least 1500 years. The Akha speak one language, though there are slight differences in pronunciation from country to country. Migrating in areas that now have borders, the Akha have moved only very slowly over hundreds of years, to a distance of a few hundred miles.

Living in the high, lush, mountain jungles, the Akha live privately and have only recently made their way to towns as roads have been built into the region.

The Akha farm, gather from the forest and hunt. They know the features and inhabitants of their forest dwellings completely. Life is a balanced cycle, growing mountain rice and other foods year by year. Until recently the Akha grew most of their own cotton, spun it, dyed it and wove it into durable clothes.

There are 400,000 Akha living in these five countries. 70,000 Akha live in Thailand. Only in the country of Thailand has the new nationalism of the last fifty years tried to construe the Akha as all new comers, despite the fact that they have lived in Thailand at least 150 years.

While Thailand exploits the images and culture of the Akha for tourism, they look at the Akha as “non-Thai” and are reluctant to give them ID cards. Only about 20,000 Akha in Thailand have ID cards despite promises each year from the government that the process will be improved. To travel in Thailand without an ID card is very dangerous.

The Akha are mono theistic, they believe in one God, and are not Buddhist.

As the demand for land grows in Thailand, roads are built year after year and the government works harder in conjunction with western missionaries to get the Akha to abandon their mountain homes. Since there are only a few mountain regions in Thailand, the mountain areas are very valuable lands. The Thais hope to take over these regions although they never lived there in the past. In order to take these lands and force the Akha to move, the government of Thailand, while on one hand exploiting the Akha as curiosities to the tourists, does its best to lay the blame for a host of problems at the feet of the Akha and other hill tribe peoples. Thus while bringing large quantities of tourist dollars into Thailand the Akha are not appreciated by the government and receive little to no benefit from the money they attract to the economy. However almost every tourist will list the hill tribe as one of the destinations they insist on going to see. From the airports, hotels, vans, tours, and taxis the chain of money that is made in getting the tourist to the mountain villages makes many people wealthy. By not having their intellectual property rights defended the Akha share in none of it.

Akha communities are beautiful and peaceful places to raise children, which is the focus of the village. Parents know where their children are, and there are many places for the children to play with all their friends.

However in these recent years forced relocations have moved many Akha off the mountains to low land areas where there is not clean water, very little land to farm, increased chemicals and chemical tainted food, and many more forms of predators. Thai rice, unlike dark mountain rice, is low in vitamins and causes health problems for the mothers and infants. Infant mortality increases after these forced relocations. Many men in the villages are forced to work dangerous jobs or are imprisoned by the police for infractions. Whole villages are made to work for weeks bringing in a local harvest, then the Akha are told that there isn't enough money to pay them.

Improvements in human rights protection, increased public awareness and investment in the Akha community can give them hope for the future.





Culture

“Accumulated knowledge systems” is one good way to describe culture. For more than a millenium the Akha have memorized their traditions in poetry, songs and monthly festivals that keep them in balance with each other and the environment that they have to use to grow their rice and other food.

Only of late has it been that reputable organizations in the west have admitted the importance of culture, language and bio-diversity that the indigenous of the world have been speaking of for so long.

The Akha didn't have books. They memorized their history, and families can repeat for you their entire geneology by heart, most going back at least 57 generations. Now books can benefit those who are displaced.

Akha language is tonal, seven tones, and is beautiful to listen to. Emphasis and distance can change the sound as it comes to the ear, be it in the village or to hear a woman singing as she works in the field. Small children asleep next to the field can tell their parents are always present. In discussions the Akha are all apt to speak at once and are quite talented at listening to more than one conversation at once, even one in the next hut over or across the village.

Language and music are crucial to identity and passing the knowledge of the Akha to the next generation. Efforts to destroy the Akha way of life prohibit use of the language and traditional life.



Ceremonies and Festivals

Planting the rice and other crops must be done at the correct time. Festivals mark each stage of the rice crop and cheer life in the village. Ceremonies are used to cure illness or to stave off a crop loss or plague. The Akha lifestyle is very similar to an orthodox culture, and has strict rules for behaviour and health in the village. This protects the village from disease or tragedy. Elders remind the village when the time comes for these various festivals from the planting of the new rice, to the year end harvest. The most famous festival is the swing festival in August that marks the end of the hard work on the rice crop. In December all the harvested rice is put away in storage barns that the Akha make next to their huts. These large woven baskets with a roof built over them and the sides smeared with mud to keep moisture and the rats out will hold all the family rice for the next year. Soon the Akha must turn the fields over again, and the cycle repeats itself when the first rains come.

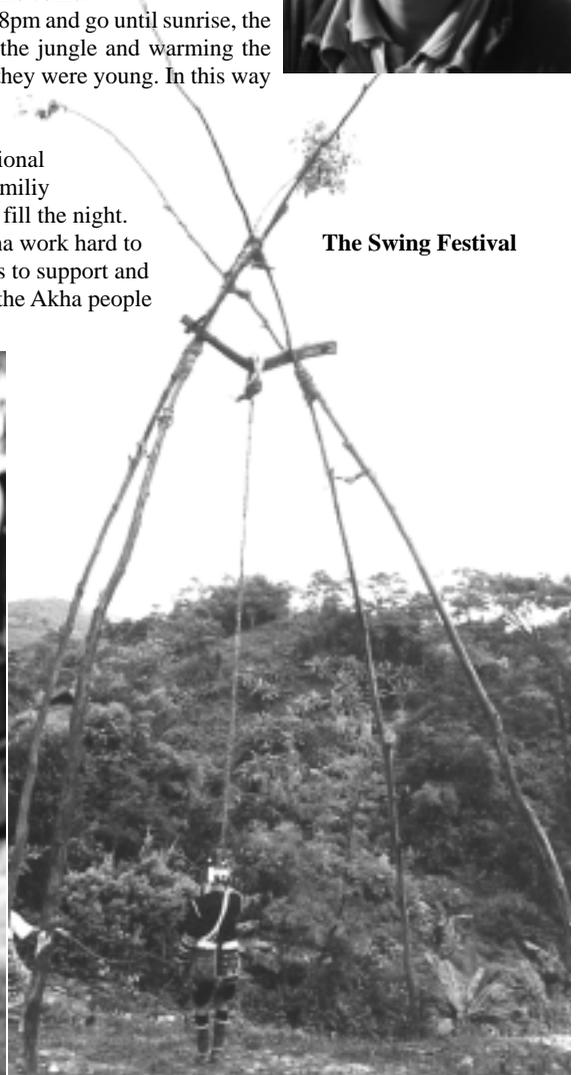
Dances during festivals start late in the evening, about 8pm and go until sunrise, the cadence of drums, gongs and cymbals thundering off the jungle and warming the elderly in their beds, as they did for their parents when they were young. In this way they know that the culture and traditions will carry on.

Every year, one village will have a large celebration to invite other villages to a dance competition for traditional Akha dance. These are excellent times to meet other family members and friends. Beautiful Akha music and vocals fill the night.

Cultural identity is important to the Akha and the Akha work hard to defend it. The work of the Akha Heritage Foundation is to support and encourage the preservation of the traditional culture of the Akha people as a means of survival.



The Swing Festival





Environment - Food

The Akha live in the high mountains of Thailand and neighboring countries. They farm mountain rice on hillsides or in terraces which take many years to build. The Akha say it takes 50 years to build a village. Some villages are hundreds of years old. The fields are left to rest for several years after use, but if the government forces the

Akha to use the same fields over and over rather than let them lay fallow for the right length of time the soils become depleted and the rice crop begins to shrink. In addition to rice the Akha grow beans, corn, soy beans, ginger, bananas, sugar cane, mangos, papayas, chili peppers of all kinds, sunflowers, sweet potatoes, tea, coffee and many other herbs and spices. Each plant has its right time and place.

The Akha pay close attention to the bugs, knowing about the seasons based on what the bugs are doing. Some bugs are used for food, others for medicine. When too many of one bug come to the rice field or other crop the Akha hold special ceremonies to make them go away. The Akha believe that if you kill the bugs, then they will come back in great numbers to your fields.





Food and Economy

The Akha also grow many vegetables which they sell. Here we see a woman holding a vegetable called “mah hurh” which grows in the fruit trees on a vine or on the ground, and is very hard. Boiled for soup, it is also very desirable to other communities and maintains a good price.

During almost every festival rice cakes are made by pounding sticky rice in a wooden mortar as shown here. The rice paste is rolled on a tray that has many black seeds on it, with a little salt of course. The cakes are made by hand and dried. They can be eaten as is, or cut up and fried till they are crispy, always a favorite with children.

Selling vegetables is an early morning task at the market if the Akha live near a town. The Akha are excellent farmers and hunters and gather many kinds of bugs for sale to the low land people. However, government land seizure for resorts and other uses have left many Akha villages landless, faced with starvation. Eggs, meat or dairy products are very rare to see in an Akha village. The Thai government has used starvation to force the Akha out of the mountains in many places.





Nature - Conservation

The mountain lands are fragile. While low land Thais and government resorts take more and more of the mountain land and build roads throughout these areas, the Akha are blamed for deforestation. The more roads there are the more Thai people who come seeking fire wood, exotic plants and animals to sell or eat and special areas for growing consumer agriculture products. In many places large flower farms are built and bamboo is over harvested for these structures. The enclosed areas inside the plastic covering are sprayed endlessly with pesticide while flowers for the Chiangmai market are grown. The Thais of course don't work in these conditions, and more often than not the poorest Akha have to work for these farms, with no health protection. The result is illness, birth defects and death. There is no Thai government regulation of these farms, as the Akha and other hill tribes are seen as expendable.

The Akha can tell you about every plant and animal in the forest, when it disappeared and what the cause was. In trips back to areas that were once Akha villages one can see that the forests are still there, carefully guarded. But in the areas where the roads came, the forest has all been cut

down. Pig farms are built near the rivers, and the chemicals such as fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides flow in, poisoning the water. Chemicals which can no longer be sold in the west are produced by western companies and spread all over Thailand. Bayer and Zeneca are chief offenders.

Two of the most interesting animals in the Akha forest are the pangolin (shown here) and the loris. The pangolin is an armoured ant eater, with protective scales. When caught in the open it rolls up in a tight ball. Young are carried in a pouch. The loris, is a small, timid animal that likes to hide.

In an Akha field one will find many animals, bugs and plants all mixed together. Each one has its use, and the Akha know how to live and work together with these inhabitants which they share the land with. The land is slowly sculpted to be comfortable for all. Water is preserved, soils are caught and enhanced, species of food proliferate. Even at an abandoned village site, the years of labor and investment can still be seen, mixed with nature.

The Akha grow and care for all their food, handling and cleaning it at the right time. Here a woman sorts the wild seeds and small stones out of her rice for the day's cooking. An Akha boy sorts red beans, looking for ones that may have grown some mold while in the field.





Strong Communities

One of the chief goals of the Akha Heritage Foundation is to offer protection and international awareness for Akha communities. Many people take safe communities for granted, but there is no such thing for the Akha. From within the Akha community is ruled in an egalitarian way by seven different kinds of elders. Each has a different job for separate ceremonies. Disputes are settled the same day if possible and grudges are not kept. Once a wrong has been righted, it is unlawful to discuss it again, making for village harmony. Yet forces outside the village are very dangerous to the Akha. Thai soldiers may beat villagers, steal food, shoot animals or demand money.

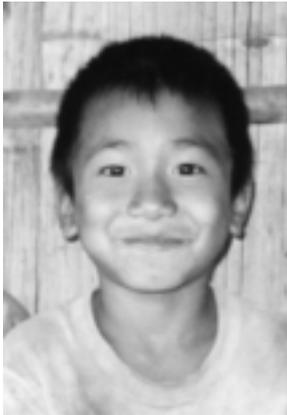


The Akha Heritage Foundation has worked for many years to stop these abuses. Protection has been offered for villages threatened with forced relocation and in the case of Hooch Yoh village, which had all its land taken away by the Queen, we continue to fight for the return of this land to the Akha people who have farmed it for 150 years. In the case of Hooch Yoh, the Royal officials from the project put two pregnant women and several others in prison and forced them to pay large fines to get out. Their “crime” was to farm on land that the army had given them. Thai govern-

ment officials can forcibly relocate a village over night, not even giving the Akha the time to gather all their possessions or crops. In numerous cases in the past, police and army burned whole villages, and all the rice crop was burnt up in the storage barns. Forced to move elsewhere, the villages had to split up and families suffered incredibly.

Missionaries divide many communities, promising aid and a better life if the Akha “convert”. The Akha are monotheistic, believing in one God, but the missionaries tell them it is the wrong “one God”. The promised aid is seldom





forthcoming, but the village destruction has been accomplished, the traditions destroyed. In many cases the missionaries, many from the US, have actually made half the village move to a distant location far away from all their relatives. In the lowlands the Akha become extremely impoverished. Since the missionaries go back to their expensive compounds and snug homes, it is of no concern to them, yet they can show their sponsors “results.”

Education

The Akha have a significant natural education and also learn to read and write Thai, but the government, as part of an assimilation policy, does nothing to help them learn to read and write their own language.

The Akha Heritage Foundation produces traditional cultural texts for the Akha to read, working together with Akha elders. These texts include poetry, history, and music. Here children receive new alphabet books.



Clothing and Ornament

In Laos and Myanmar one can still see the extensive natural spinning, weaving and dyeing of cotton for Akha clothes. The older women are very skilled in this practice and can show you how they very carefully brew the dyes which are made from two different kinds of plants. Akha men and women wear colorful jackets, hand embroidered on this strong cotton. An Akha jacket takes months to make and embroider but will last for years, unlike manufactured clothing which may only last for a few months. Akha handbags are decorated with many beads. The Akha women wear beautiful head dresses made of beads, cloth, wood, and pewter or sometimes silver gotten from old coins. Young women get a head dress when they turn 19 or so. The women take great pride in making each head dress, carefully selecting the right color of beads, and sewing each part of the head dress together with skilled precision.

Across the Region

In the countries of Myanmar, Laos, China and Vietnam the Akha are not persecuted by the government like they are in Thailand. Western missionaries are not allowed to disrupt the villages in these countries. Years before, there were many missionaries in Myanmar, but the government required many of them to leave because of the political disruption they were causing to the local people instead of just helping them. The missions which remain continue to exploit the Akha.

Access to Akha villages in Myanmar and Laos is often by trails rather than roads and this protects the Akha and the environment. Many animals, fish and a large variety of plants can be seen in these areas. The Akha used to cross these border areas regularly, until the borders were militarized and many land mines were planted.





The Struggle to survive

On every level the Akha are faced with a struggle to survive. In Thailand many villages have lost their farm land. Women and men are forced to work for small wages, often no more than \$1.50 per day.

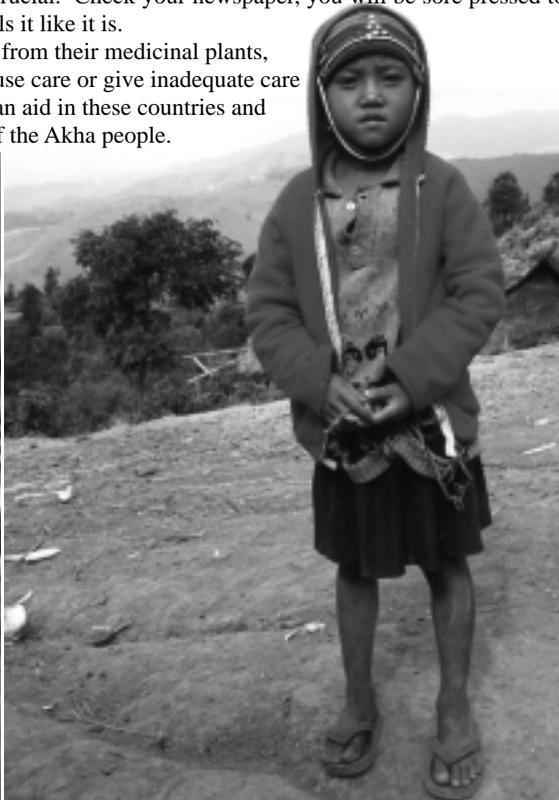
Meanwhile, many things which they were able to make by hand from the forest they must now buy with cash. Missions come to these distressed villages and try to convince the families to give up their children. Widows feel forced to do so by the circumstances. The missions make their money off advertising these children, but could support the children for much less money in the village environment, helping the whole family stay together. What became of their touted “family values”?!?!

None the less, distressed villages do their best to gather plants, herbs and other trees to their new location, working in small rented fields, other people’s fields, or for some nearby business. They work long hours on little food to try and hold their families together. For this reason we make great effort to publicize the Akha situation, seek funding for projects, and bring international pressure on Thailand to recognize the human rights of the Akha people.

Agricultural projects, cottage industries, and organic growing operations are all needed to protect the Akha in these villages and help them find better forms of income to feed their families. Poverty can not be fought without addressing issues of social justice. Families with human rights can defend themselves..

Traditional Akha villages in the highlands need to be offered protection and agricultural assistance to help them rebuild what has been lost. However the Thais are not going to allow this unless they become acutely aware that to continue to do as they are doing to the Akha will bring them a loss in their tourism industry, and in trade of Thai products. This is why partnership with the Akha is so crucial. Check your newspaper, you will be sore pressed to ever see any article about the Akha let alone one that tells it like it is.

Medical services to villages that have been moved far from their medicinal plants, struggle to keep their children alive. Hospitals often refuse care or give inadequate care because of race. Few organizations provide humanitarian aid in these countries and even less are knowledgeable of the culture and reality of the Akha people.



Why Human Rights for “Other” People?

Are we related?

Some of us are of the belief that the life which is experienced by others is just as important as the life we experience and this is why it is important to take care to the human rights of other people. This is the basis of international law and human rights treaties. When people have their human rights protected, they are free to make a living and provide for their families safe from exploitation and duress. For this reason it is important to enforce international human rights treaties such that the rights of the Akha are protected.

The Akha are effected by Thai police, army and forestry departments. The Akha are arrested at a much higher rate than the general population, many times for any infraction that will give the police or army an excuse. Since few care to protect the Akha, the security forces don't fear punishment for what they do. Prisoners are moved far from their families where support is difficult. Reports from other prisoners are that the Akha are fed the worst food, made to work the longest hours even when ill.

Beatings or torture has resulted in the death of many of the Akha in prison. The prison population is estimated to be in the thousands, disproportionate to their overall population in Thailand. Arrest and imprisonment serves as ethnic cleansing. Many of the prisoners are women, giving birth in prison, having their babies taken away or being made to raise their children in prison. Families are tragically broken up. Many prisoners don't even get to go to court for more than a year, even if they have a case in which they can prove they are not guilty. Large numbers of the Akha are in prison due to the US Drug War which makes fortunes for US weapons suppliers helping the Thai government militarize the mountain communities. At the same time there is a silence about human rights abuses. During 2003 more than 2274 people were killed in Thailand by means of extra-judicial executions.

Photos of these victims can be seen at www.akha.org. Millions of dollars per year are given to Thailand by the US government for the drug war. In 2003 when all the people were murdered, US aid was at least \$10 million. US Embassy officials were silent.





Human Rights Protection

Cobra Gold and other US joint military exercises are conducted annually with Thailand. Thailand was given non-Nato ally status in Jan of 2004 by President George Bush. At no time was government of Thailand held accountable for all the killings despite the fact that there were means to do so. Aid continued during and after the killings. Meanwhile, in the US occupied Afghanistan, there was a bumper crop of opium and heroin which made it onto the streets of Europe. Populations of other countries are allowed to sell their opium crop to the west and in an ever greater number of countries marijuana and other drugs are being legalized for harm reduction.

Thai medical facilities force the Akha women to be vaccinated during pregnancy which can result in spontaneous abortion. Many Akha women are sterilized against their will.

The American Baptist missionary Paul W. Lewis, also reported to be a CIA officer, sterilized hundreds of Akha women. Now he lives comfortably in Claremont, California!

What You Can Do - Results Based Activism!

You can make a difference to the Akha people by helping to spread the word about who they are, and the conditions they face. Become a researcher or do other volunteer work.

Activism both in the US and around the world is important in pressuring governments to enforce treaties and uphold the law.

You can write to your congress person or to members of parliament in other countries to inform them of the Akha situation and request action.

Write to the Thai consular offices and embassies around the world and demand that changes be made to protect the Akha.

International organizations such as the International Labor Organization and UN agencies can be pressured to take a greater role in defending the Akha.

Host A Presentation

Host a presentation at social organization, colleges, universities or other public venues. Form a support group in your community.

Help with Fundraising

We need people who can help raise funds for specific projects in the Akha villages. This includes health care, Akha literacy projects, agricultural aid and support to widows.

Assist An Akha Family

This is Meeh Zeeh and her children. They live in a small village near the Thai border. Her husband was taken to a distant prison, and she has a very difficult time supporting her children. You can help by supporting an Akha family. A small donation and postal parcels, can make a big difference to a family.



STOP Thailand's Genocide of the Akha people! Boycott Thailand!

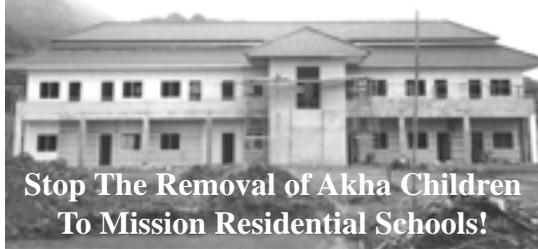
Don't Buy Thai
Don't Fly Thai
Don't Eat Thai

Thailand trafficks in women and children.

Thailand persecutes the Akha and other hill tribe while exploiting them for tourism.

Will the world watch, wait and do nothing?

Contact your radio or TV station, write to your newspaper or a magazine. Demand fair treatment for the Akha!



Help us stop the mission removals of Akha children, now in the thousands. These children are exploited to raise money for expensive buildings like this one, and then separated from their culture.

The Battle For Hooh Yoh Village Land

No land
No farming
No food
No future

Join the battle to get the land back for Hooh Yoh Akha village in Thailand. Email us for details.

Projects:

We make a difference by building strong communities with "Results Based Activism".

We design projects such as increasing the public image of the Akha people, activism for improved rights, and literacy in Akha language.

Protein projects such as fish hatcheries improve food supply and also help the Akha develop a side business. We supply aid for coffee plants, tea plants and fruit trees. We collect vegetable seeds for Akha families to improve nutrition.

You can help our effort to assist forgotten Akhas in prison, the poorest of the poor, by writing them letters.

Join us in petitioning the King of Thailand to pardon the elderly and improve conditions in the prisons.

Vitamins are needed for women with babies and for prenatal care.

We also need a printing press to continue to print Akha

books and other publications that help the Akha people. Publications are crucial to this work.

You can sponsor a well in an Akha village. Few Akha villages have clean water or a protected water source as the well shown below.

Resources You Can Use For Free

At www.akha.org you can download photos, music, video clips and books. Some books are in

Akha language. Link to the site or read the blogs. You can join the E-mail Journal by sending the email: akhaweeklyjournal-subscribe@yahogroups.com

Questions or Comments: akha@akha.org

Your assistance makes a difference in the lives of the Akha people.

Donate

You can support the work on the behalf of the Akha people by making an online donation with PayPal at www.akha.org or you may send a check or money order to :

The Akha Heritage Foundation





Elderly Akha women flip through the pages of the first Akha Journal

Welcome To The Akha Mountains of Northern Thailand

Read about the project, about the work with the Akha Hill Tribe, the unique life and times of these mountain people. Their needs are great, but also their lessons to the world. You will find stories from their villages, about the tools they use, the fields they farm, their ceremonies, songs and dances and the precarious political situation of the environment they live in. Are they mountain villains, or warehouses of knowledge being lost? Find out how notorious western missions rewrite their history, relegating their indigenous knowledge to the dustbin of history, a loss for the Akha and for all of us. There is no lack of events, adventure and food for thought in the lives of these people. There are videos available and you can join a email newsletter by sending an email to akha@akha.org. Much of the wilderness tradition

of the Akha has been lost over the last ten years. We work to protect their village areas. Inside you will get glimpses into their desperate struggle to keep from being over run, relocated and forgotten. Take interest, come to understand the issues and find out how you can get involved and help assist the Akha people.

www.akha.org

