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AGRICULTURE: AYUTTHAYA FAMILIES LEARN BY TRIAL AND ERROR HOW TO RAISE AMPHIBIANS FOR DISCERNING HONG KONG DINERS: A LITTLE MUSIC KEEPS FROGS AND FARMERS HAPPY

BYLINE: SOMPORN THAPANACHAI AND WORANUJ MANEERUNGSEE

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Music entertains not only people but also frogs. Frogs in farms can thrive and grow healthy in a sunny environment with light music, says Pranee Ektrakul.

The owner of a **frog farm** in Sena district, Ayutthaya, Ms Pranee has installed speakers that play music every day to entertain her frogs. The music stimulates them to eat more food and grow quicker, she says.

Frog farming may have a low profile, but it's a lucrative career for some Thai farmers. The country exports about 30 tons a day of frogs to other Asian markets, chiefly Hong Kong where the animals are featured in many dishes.

Frog meat has a colour and taste similar to chicken but it's more juicy and expensive. Some people believe eating frogs can help cure impotence and build energy.

To raise frogs, farmers need to be patient and observant, says Ms Pranee.

Tadpoles need very close attention in the first 15 days of their lives, when they are quite weak and breathing is difficult. Usually, by the 13th day, tadpoles develop legs and are also able to begin breathing through their noses.

Care must also be taken to ensure that tadpoles do not perish because of high temperature and humidity, says Ms Pranee, who works with three other sister-brother families.

"We have to observe them all the time, every two or three hours on hot days, to ensure that the tadpoles are fine. If they do not look healthy, I have to change the water for them immediately to freshen them up."

Three years ago the families invested 500,000 baht to develop 40 ponds, four by four metres each. They lost millions of tadpoles before they succeeded in raising frogs last year.

The Ektrakul families used to earn their income from fresh water fishing in the Noi River in Ayutthaya. But catching fish and shrimp grew difficult, especially when other people began sprinkling chemicals in the water to catch freshwater shrimp that could fetch 500 baht a kilogramme.

Ms Pranee turned to raising frogs in floating nets along the river, but her only customer, who bought the frogs for export mainly to Hong Kong and China, suggested she raise them in concrete ponds to lighten their skin colour. Frogs

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raised in concrete ponds have a yellow colour and white stomachs.

The families decided to borrow 400,000 baht from the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives to build the ponds. Everyone helped in building them to reduce expenses, and all the debts have been repaid.

The floors of some ponds are covered with ceramic tiles, which helps reduce the strain on the frogs' legs when they jump, particularly in the winter. Ms Pranee plans to cover all the ponds later when she has more money.

After a tense fortnight of watching tadpoles, Ms Pranee can relax, but it still takes a lot of observation to look after the young amphibians and keep tabs on their health. She also has to grade frogs by size and put similar sizes in the same ponds, since bigger frogs tend to eat smaller ones.

The price of frogs depends on the season. It reaches 170 baht a kg in January and drops to 70 baht in April and 40 baht in June when the rain comes and there is an oversupply. Unfortunately, the families could not supply any frogs early this year because unusual cold killed the tadpoles.

The farm can raise almost 15 tons of frogs in each breeding season, which lasts four months.

The farm owns about 300 breeding frogs that are raised separately to ensure that they will produce strong tadpoles during the mating period between January and May. Female frogs of the jan species are bigger than the male na species. Three or four female frogs weigh a kilogramme. The parent ponds have a covered roof and light bulbs are kept on in winter to keep the valuable breeders warm.

Ms Pranee can identify many health problems from the way the frogs sit. She once noticed one frog sitting without any movement and found that it was suffering from an inflammation. She also knows when female frogs are ready to mate by touching their bodies.

However, she said the frogs' nature sometimes changed. Ones she once thought were ready for mating failed to yield embryos.

"We have to learn from experience and adapt the methods of raising them along the way. Some farmers stop raising frogs after several failures but we have continued to fight."

Sometimes the families receive less income because the frogs contract diseases with symptoms such as imbalance or red legs and feet. Last year they distributed two tons of frogs to neighbours after buyers turned them down.

Meanwhile, they are making plans to add another 40 ponds in the future. The families also have a big pond to raise many fish species on their five rai of rented land, for which they pay 500 baht a rai each year.

Nop Wongchote, who has been exporting live frogs via air cargo for almost 30 years, said the frogs were mostly served in fine restaurants in Hong Kong. They become part of dishes such as frog congee, clear frog soup and deep-fried frogs' legs.

Exports to Hong Kong are as high as 30 tons a day from approximately 10 Thai shippers, but Mr Nop's business fell after China banned the import of some luxury products including frogs. He now exports about three tons a day.

There is no competition in the export business but Mr Nop anticipates that Cambodia may return as a competitor. Cambodia exported frogs to Hong Kong two decades ago but the business disappeared after the civil war.

He believes frog farming will continue to help both Thai farmers and exporters in the long term if farmers do not expand too rapidly and destroy the price structure of the business.

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