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SUBHEADLINE: By bagging the Unesco-Ahpada 2001 Seal of Excellence award recently, the villagers of Ban Reng Khai have earned a special place in the global silk market

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When Lea Laarakker Dingjan first started the weaving project in Ban Reng Khai _ a small village in northeastern Thailand _ some 14 years ago, the villagers were more than doubtful about the project's future and viability.

With little enthusiasm they saw a weaving hall and looms being erected, thanks to an initial contribution from the Dutch Embassy in Bangkok. Lea's rigid requirements and her pernickety temperament in terms of quality of fabrics, would often wear them out and upset them. What frustration, impatience and indolence they had to stifle ...

Now they can't find enough words to express their appreciation of Auntie Lea or Pa Lea, as they affectionately call her. The Dutch textile designer, who was knighted by HM the Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands in 1995, has brought about an unhoped-for change in many of the villagers' minds and lives.

Those who have taken to weaving as a vocation and have been able to meet the demand of high quality (in terms of yarns, dyes or craftsmanship), can make between 3,000 and 14,000 baht a month from selling silk.

Members of the group benefit from a savings fund, a student fund or an insurance scheme. From one village at the start of the project, Ban Reng Khai's appellation now includes seven villages in two provinces _ Surin and Buri Ram. At present, the project involves altogether 239 weavers, including 39 master weavers.

The Ban Reng Khai project is now known all over the world for the quality of its hand-woven fabric. Some of the finest textile connoisseurs, including

top fashion designers such as Issey Miyake or Kenzo, have purchased their products through some of the many international exhibits participated by the group.

HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana, Queen Fabiola of Belgium, and Queen Beatrix are among the prominent personalities who have been spotted wearing outfits cut out from Ban Reng Khai silk. The Unesco-Ahpada (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation-Asean Handicraft Promotion and Development Association) 2001 Seal of Excellence award the group recently received thus comes as the icing on the cake.

As the colourful certificate awarded to the group for their ``hand-dyed and handwoven silk shawl from Bang Reng Khai Weaving Project in Surin'' explains, the prize is granted in ``recognition of demonstrated excellence and standard-setting high quality in craftsmanship, creative and successful alliance of traditional skills, and innovative application of indigenous material, traditional technique, and indigenous design, expression of cultural identity, traditional aesthetic value and respect of the environment.''

Along with Ban Reng Khai's project, 10 other craft products from the Asean region have been guaranteed of ``high quality and standard'' by the Unesco and the Ahpada.

``This is a recognition of years and years of teaching and patience. We have been aiming for the top,'' Lea explains. ``For the weavers, it is an acknowledgment of the quality of their work. It is a boost for our image and a matter of great pride for the villagers.

``It is a strong stimulus to attain a higher stage of development,'' added Lea, who prefers to keep the exact location of the production place a secret as copying attempts are common.

Defining herself as a free-lance textile designer working as a volunteer on the Ban Reng Khai project, Lea puts special emphasis on the green plus mark of the whole manufacturing process. Their unique solar dyeing in particular is a model of environment-friendly production: it makes use of a dye imported from the Caribbean islands whose fixative reacts to sunlight.

Warp threads are spread in the open and weavers, each with a pot of individual colour, apply their paint by brushing the colour along the

threads at random. The sun fixes the dye in approximately six hours but the process sometimes can take up to 30 hours.

``Solar dyeing is so good for rural areas because nothing except water is needed. Just nature and the sun _ there is no need for cooking the yarns, so there's no need for fuel nor cutting of trees. It is so ecological,`` Lea explains with enthusiasm.

Their immersion dyeing is as environment friendly. All chemical and vegetable dyes used are non-toxic. Caustic soda, which produces a highly toxic waste, is strictly banned and replaced by soda ash to de-gum the silk yarn.

``These ecological techniques take more time, so the weavers can only produce up to 25 metres of silk a month,`` noted Lea, whose other favourite theme is consumer education.

``We have to convince consumers that if they want quality, they need to be patient. Besides, with little money one cannot expect high quality either. For such top quality products, they need not bargain.

``Education in this respect is so important.``

The Australian brand of high-quality women's fashion wear, Salamanca Silks, must have heard of the group's reputation as they are ordering, six months in advance, 700 metres of silk for their Summer collection 2002.

The order is a great encouragement for the hard-working weavers of Ban Reng Khai, who opened a shop in the Hilton Promenade on Wireless Road in November last year as an outlet for their products.

``We hope to form a cottage industry with these groups of weavers from different villages. We want high quality [products], for which people would have to queue,`` Lea said.