



DBU Science Students Help Coffee Plantation Farmers in Laos

Written by Sally Waller

In the late 1800s the French, in an effort to expand their empire, annexed a rural piece of land along the eastern border of Laos known as the Bolaven Plateau. There the French taught its inhabitants agricultural techniques and started planting coffee beans.

Over 100 years later, the primary crop has remained the same—but so have many of the techniques. Many farmers still employ ancient methods of farming that end up doing more harm than good to their land. While dependent on crops to sustain their families, outdated knowledge of farming often keeps most farmers at the poverty level. Were it not for the help of Christ-following men like Sam Say, the conditions could have stayed unchanged for many.

Say, a native Laotian and successful businessman in Hong Kong, returned to his homeland several years ago and was moved by the conditions he found. Wanting to help the people of his country, Say founded Bolaven Farms.

Bolaven Farms is comprised of over 400 acres of land on the Bolaven Plateau. A portion of the land is devoted to grasses, legumes, and feeding livestock, which replenish the soil with nitrogen. The remainder of the land is used to grow coffee.

Through a combination of biblically and organically based farming methods, Bolaven Farms seeks to restore the land by teaching rural farmers how to effectively tend to their crops. This is the focus, because men like Say believe that producing nutrient-rich soil that yields a higher quantity and better quality crop is the ultimate way to break the cycle of poverty in his homeland.

Bolaven Farms believes in sowing seeds of hope—not just coffee beans. Therefore, alongside their training, farmers are given employment at Bolaven Farms, housing and daily meals for their entire family, a regular wage, and assistance with medical bills. Upon graduation from their two-year term at Bolaven Farms, the resident farmers also qualify for a loan that helps them establish a seven acre farm of their own.

Hundreds of miles away, these poor, rural farmers seemingly have nothing to do with Dallas Baptist University—were it not for the love of Christ that has moved people (in Dallas and the Bolaven Plateau alike) to be agents of God's mercy.

Each undergraduate major at DBU has coupled with it a service-learning component that is designed to help students serve people outside the University through their selected major. Dr. Deanna Noyes, professor of natural sciences, teaches the ecology class, which is used to fulfill the service-learning requirements for natural science and biology majors.

The ecology students begin the semester learning how to test soil samples gathered from around the DBU campus. By testing the soil, students are able to discover what kinds of nutrients are lacking around campus and the best ways to fertilize the grounds. Having heard of Bolaven Farms and their efforts to help farmers, Dr. Noyes sought to expand what started as a campus-wide project into a global one.

The first step was to ensure that the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at DBU became a USDA certified soil testing facility. With forms and paperwork completed, DBU can now receive soil from anywhere in the world to be tested. They began with Bolaven Farms.

The ecology class was sent samples of soil directly from Bolaven Farms that they would then test to determine what minerals and nutrients were either present or lacking. By understanding the soil composition, the ecology class was then able to report back to Bolaven Farms specific ways to fertilize their land and ensure a premium crop.

While this is not what most people imagine when they think of avenues to share God's love—because none of the DBU student have ever actually been to the Bolaven Farms—it has shown students that they are not limited to vocations such as missionaries or pastors to be effective. They can be examples of grace and mercy through the field of study to which God has called them.

“So many of my students have said how this class has shown them that they don't have to wait to go overseas or graduate to minister to people,” shared Dr. Noyes. “They can do it right now from where they are. It's shown them how much of an impact learning can have on the world.”