



BRANCHING OUT

Thai acting royalty Khemupsorn 'Cherry' Sirisukha's new calling is to alleviate deforestation

Story by Melalin Mahavongtrakul

After two decades in showbiz, TV superstar Khemupsorn "Cherry" Sirisukha has found herself a new calling. She dreams of replanting the country's forests. While the sight of denuded mountains may have shocked the public earlier this year and sprang different groups to action, the actress said it was rather the dried up creeks and rivers that triggered her and her friends' awareness of the country's environmental crisis.

"We travel around a lot, and we saw how it changed. So we started to brainstorm and in the end we realised the problem came from deforestation. If we could somehow fix that, we can fix both the drought, and even global warming," she said.

At 36, Khemupsorn is part of the Little Forest group that recently partnered with the Faculty of Agro-Industry at Kasetsart University and other organisations to plant 20,000 trees on a 200 rai plot of land in Phrae province a few months back.

The Little Forest group came together initially as Little Help Nepal which raised funds to aid those suffering from the earthquake in Nepal last April. Its members include Pupavis Kripolnara of the Issue clothing brand and Asst Prof Anothai Cholchartpinyo, a lecturer at Kasetsart University.

Growing back the forest is much more than just planting trees, said the actress.

"It's not a long-term solution. If we just plant trees, we don't know how or if the trees will survive as part of the forest. We have to work in three dimensions: planting trees, as well as planting the people and their consciences," said Khemupsorn.

Tree planting sounds easy and straightforward compared to working with humans. With few opportunities for rural dwellers on the mountains, together with limited education, some locals continue to invade the forest to grow crops and raise their cattle. One of the team's tasks is to work with the locals, trying to educate them on the significance of the forest and how to better manage their farmland and business, even suggesting opportunities and finding markets for locally-made products.

Then, their work also expands out to metropolitan cities, educating people in urban areas as to how they can help preserve the forest, as well as realising its significance to all lives in the country.

"It would take a long time for changes to happen," she



Tree planting.

**Khemupsorn 'Cherry' Sirisukha.**

admitted. "But, after we went there and started working with the locals, the things that changed were our perception of the situation. We know how things are now, first-hand. Everyone initially thought of it as a far-off problem that doesn't concern

us, and we blamed this and that person as a culprit.

"But, when we went there, we realised people had their reasons for doing what they did. That toned down our blame game. If anyone's a culprit, then all of us takes part in making

this problem happen. We are all part of the process, the vicious cycle."

Aside from planting trees, the team is currently planning to construct three weirs in Wang Chin district in Phrae by the start of 2017. They have experts from Mae Fah Luang University as mentors. Following the weirs, the distribution of water has to also be managed to ease the drastic drought people are suffering.

We can see Little Forest has come up with an all-round solution to save the forest. And in their small group of just seven or eight members, each of them takes turns taking on different roles as required, while also focusing on their respective careers. Still, Khemupsorn said everyone is more than willing to sacrifice their time, and even some of their personal funds, to pull off this project.

"Since the entire system is interconnecting, we can't just stop at doing one thing and leave it at that. To stop at the first step, we would only feel satisfied that we get to do something, though in actuality it's not really fixing the problem," she said, admitting that she now spends a lot of her time with the project. "It is fun, and I get to learn a lot from it, too."

Khemupsorn made her screen debut in 1996 when she was just 16-years-old. Her acting skills, beautiful features, polite manner and scandal-free career all attributed to her becoming a regular screen presence – especially in the 90s and 2000s – much beloved by Thais. Many wouldn't hesitate to call her one of the princesses of the entertainment industry.

Recently, however, the actress has taken some steps away from the spotlight, partly to set aside time and energy for the Little Forest project. Her last on-screen appearance was last year. She



Trekking the jungle

hasn't starred in any dramas this year, and has none contracted for next year either, despite requests from fans and TV executives.

"I guess I'm leaving showbiz for now, and I'm not sure if I'll be coming back," she revealed. "I want to focus on the present, and that also depends on the opportunity that comes in. It's impossible to tell what the future holds.



The Little Forest volunteers.

"When I'm not acting, I'm also happy in other areas of life. I've been an actress since I was 15 or 16. And, at the start, I worked very hard to juggle studying and my career at the same time. I didn't really get to learn about other aspects of life. There are things I want to try and learn apart from what I've been doing. I don't view it as a big issue."

Whether to leave or to stay, at least she's had 20 years of career success to last a lifetime.

"Even before, I didn't plan on being in showbiz this long. To say this is where I stop won't be strange. Or, if I'm going to continue being in this business, it won't be strange either."

As a public figure, the actress finds that her star power does come in handy when she goes out on her rural outings and liaises with the locals.

"People are quite familiar with us, and that makes them more interested to hear what we have to say," she said. "It works with people on the outside, too."

Public figures can influence people a great deal. Khemupsorn hopes more young and famous stars take part in engaging with community problems, or even become mouthpieces to raise public awareness on different issues. Their voices can be easily heard among the crowd.

"Help doesn't even need to come in the form of money. We all have talent and skills that we can use to benefit others in our own way. Actors and actresses can help in their own way, and so do businessmen, teachers and others."

In all that she does, Khemupsorn cited her inspiration as HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej. His sacrifice for the good of the people, as well as his work in developing the country, has made the late monarch her role model.

"What I'm doing right now can't be compared to what the King did at all, not even by a little. But, to be able to follow the path he paved, that in itself is happiness," said Khemupsorn. "His Majesty will forever be my inspiration."



We are all part of
the process, the
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF KHEMUPSORN SIRISUKHA