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# Thailand Floods 2011: King's Years-Long Battle Against The Water (PHOTOS)



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By DENIS D. GRAY, Associated Press

BANGKOK — As Thailand's ailing king surveys the calamitous scene from his 16th floor hospital window, the 83-year-old monarch encounters an element that has challenged, virtually obsessed, him most of his life: water.

It's rising around him, the floodwaters sweeping through Bangkok and overflowing the banks of the Menam Chao Phraya, the River of Kings, that rushes right past Siriraj Hospital, where he has lived wheelchair-bound for the past two years.

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The flood, the worst in half a century, is something King Bhumibol Adulyadej has tried harder than perhaps anyone to prevent. He has sounded alarm bells – not always heeded – against overdevelopment and come up with ideas that have mitigated the damage from the immense annual surges and retreats of monsoon-spawned water.

The country's current woes – nearly 400 dead and 110,000 displaced – illustrate both the price paid for ignoring his warnings, as well as the limits of man's ability to control nature's sometimes overwhelming force.

Analysts also note that, in tackling such complex problems, no single individual can substitute for well-coordinated and planned action by expert authorities – something critics say Thailand sorely lacks.

Even now, as the Thai capital and its environs fight the onrush, the world's longest reigning monarch is offering advice on how best to channel the unprecedented buildup of water from northern highlands into the sea. But unlike times past, the constitutional but powerful monarch is unable to undertake inspections or cajole, sometimes reprimand, ineffective bureaucrats into action.

Heir to a legacy of Thai kings who saw the controlling of water as a royal task, one of Bhumibol's first development projects was a reservoir in 1963 to trap fresh water and prevent salt intrusion in the seaside resort of Hua Hin. Today, these royally initiated projects number more than 4,300, with 40 percent related to water resources.

"The king's ideas, proposals and implicit or explicit stamps of approval can be detected throughout Thai water resource management policy and practice of the last 40 years at least," says David Blake, a water expert at England's University of East Anglia who has studied the issue in Thailand.

Although never formally schooled in the subject, the U.S.-born king exhibited an engineering and scientific bent which in the early 1990s he turned to Thailand's vulnerable capital.

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"In a way he was a killjoy. This was the time of the great Asian economic boom and yet the king was telling people about floods, bad traffic and misery," says Dominic Faulder, senior editor of a forthcoming book on the king. "The pessimism and warnings were not what many people wanted to hear."

Faulder adds that the king was focused on trying to solve the problem, as opposed to "some of the (political) bickering and recriminations we see going on now."

The king called his most notable move the "monkey cheeks" strategy, recalling from childhood pet monkeys which would munch on bananas, then retain the food in their cheeks to swallow later.

The water that yearly rushes down from the north is diverted into "cheeks" on the approaches to Bangkok, then flushed into the sea or used for irrigation. This involved construction of reservoirs as well as dikes, canals and water gates. Along with an improved drainage system in the city, it's credited with mitigating floods in the 1990s and the past decade.

"We must use the wrath of nature as our teacher," the king said in 1990. "If we can find a way to keep floodwater in reserve and to use it when it's needed, it will be a double boon."

However, Blake says, the plan implied that communities around Bangkok would be sacrificed to save the heart of the capital – something that is now occurring. And overzealous bureaucrats at times diverted waters into farmland rather than the reservoirs.

Since then, potential reservoir sites to the west, east and north of the city have been filled in for industrial parks, housing, golf courses and the international airport.

"The major cause of the flood is the fact that we built our houses on wetlands. My point is that humans have changed nature so much from what it used to be," Bhumibol said.

As early as 1971, the king warned that massive logging of the great northern forests would trigger future floods. Deforestation, which reduces the land's ability to absorb water, is today recognized as a contributor to the flooding.

Over the next two and a half decades, traveling to every corner of the country, Bhumibol set out to both harness and manage water, from draining swamps in the south to designing upland irrigation for indigenous hill tribes in the north.

The king backed the construction of the country's biggest dams, each bearing the name of a royal family member including his own, although he later acknowledged their dangers and began favoring small-scale dams and weirs.

He sought to alleviate drought by seeding clouds to induce rain with chemicals fired from aircraft – a somewhat hit-and-miss effort.

Not all of his ideas worked; in many cases, Blake says, the king's inventions or principles weren't carried out properly.

Bhumibol himself said he was just proposing "feasible ideas. Implementation must remain with those in charge. If they are misinterpreted or mishandled, they are doomed."

Sumet Tantivejkul, who heads the Chaipattana Foundation which implements royal projects, says that among the king's most important contributions is his focus on sustainable water management. He has used his position to propel the issue to the forefront of the national agenda.

Some of his inventions are almost whimsical.

To help clean up a highly polluted swamp in the heart of Bangkok, the king devised a simple filter made of water hyacinths, which easily absorb toxic wastes. The saturated plants are then detoxified and used as fuel, compost and weaving handicrafts.

"Bangkok is a toilet without a flush," the king said, describing a sprawling capital once graced by numerous canals increasingly awash with fetid water.

He also invented a low-cost water aerator resembling a paddle wheel on old steamers for which he was awarded an international patent – the first to any king.



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A woman pulls her daughter behind her in a small raft as she walks along a flooded street, near to the overflowing Chao Phraya river on November 1, 2011 in Bangkok, Thailand. Around 370 people have died in flood-related incidents since late July according to the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation. Thailand is experiencing the worst flooding in 50 years with damages running as high as USD 6 billion which could increase as the floods swamp Bangkok.



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