



Update 20

February 1st 2006

Bodhi's Rant

Note – it's a long one this time. To find out about NATR's current happenings, just skip the ramblings.

A story... once upon a post-tsunami time, in a place not so far away from Kuraburi, there lived a tribe of sea gypsies known as the Moken. The Moken were a peaceful people, and for centuries had shunned the outside world in favor of their nomadic ways. Then, they were told that their traditional island territories were being developed for tourism and conserved as national parks. They were no longer allowed to roam the Andaman Sea, but instead were settled in villages like the one at Koh Surin National Park. Slowly their traditional houseboats, the symbol of Moken independence, fell apart. Then one day, men with cameras came. They promised that they were there to help the Moken by making a reality TV show much like the popular "Survivor." They asked only that 14 of the Moken leave the island to do the show on an island further south. They also took the last two houseboats left at Koh Surin.

Two weeks later, NATR received a phone call – there were 14 Moken stuck at the Kuraburi pier, with no place to sleep, no money left, and no boat back to Koh Surin. The men from the television show had not paid as much as promised, and the money had all been spent on supplies and alcohol. I asked the Moken why they had trusted the TV crew. The Moken responded that they had assumed the TV crew had come to help, like so many others after the tsunami. It was then I saw the houseboats – half-submerged and badly broken – a result of improper towing. These two hand-carved 40-foot vessels, with detailed wooden spirit sticks and traditional vine-fastened oars, had been destroyed through the laziness of the TV crew. The chief of the village informed me that, since the boats were no longer usable, he planned to sell them to a museum collector, who would export them to France. After much discussion, NATR took responsibility for the boats, pulled them out of the water, and had them painstakingly repaired by local Moken artisans.



Months went by, and one day I got a phone call – the reality TV producers had returned to shoot the season finale, and wanted to know what had happened to "their" Moken houseboats. When I explained to them about the condition that the boats had been left in, and our subsequent repairs, they simply reiterated their demand, "Give us the boats, we need them for the TV program."

The very show that claimed to "show the wisdom of Moken indigenous culture" had actually taken the last two traditional houseboats in Thailand, and destroyed them. So, I did the only the thing I could – I said no. And then they got mad, really mad. I received phone calls until 3:00 am, with people telling me things like "the police will arrest you and kick you out of Thailand."

Through the threats and anger, one thing was apparent – these were not men of integrity. These were men willing to lie and threaten in the name of a TV show. They were willing to abandon 14 of the people they were profiting from, penniless and with no boat home.



Now, looking back on the whole thing, I realize that the threats were empty. I also realize that the line between exploitation and documentation lies in the eye of the beholder. It's not that TV shows are evil, it's that intention makes all the difference. And we all must be aware of our personal agenda, profit or otherwise. As for me, when I consider what my personal agenda is, the answer is clear. Every day, I rise up looking forward to work, and after the day is done, I feel good. It hasn't always been this way – there have been months and years of my life where I didn't like myself. So, as NATR moves to the future, I must be constantly wary that this agenda does not hamper my ability to hand the organization over to Thai staff and management. So far, so good.

As for the Moken, their plight is still dire. We are continuing to support Moken children with scholarships, small boat repair, educational supplies, and medical needs. As for the houseboats, they are now in front of our TREC Center, where we will use them for cultural education until they are moved to a permanent home.

Project Updates

Children's Day

At the beginning of every New Year the people of Thailand join together to celebrate children. It is a day of festivities that unites communities all over the nation for a day full of fun, games, performances, food and smiles. Children's Day this year fell during a time of remembrance but it also gave everyone a chance to step back and realize how far these communities have come. The second Saturday in January is a day for the children, a day for the future.



NATR and one of our major donors participated in and supported the festivities in 6 different communities. The performances, games and ceremonies were all initiated and facilitated by the villages themselves. It was an incredible day full of laughs and many surprises, a day to push aside the trials and tribulations of rebuilding their lives, and to just sit back and have fun!

Community Learning and Day Care Centre (Ban Talae Nok)

After almost a full year of headaches and troubles building the Community Learning Centre, we are proud to announce that it is finally up and running! As mentioned in the last update, we had the opening ceremony on December 23rd, 2005 and are now pleased to welcome two new members to the NATR team: Karchana Chanchu, who will be the Community Centre Manager, and Sa-roh Khunarj, the new Daycare Nanny.

Karchana lives near Ban Talae Nok and has relatives in the village. She is happy to be working in the village so that she is not forced to the city in search of employment. She has experience in Public Administration and Marketing, which will be extremely helpful for the Handmade Soap Cooperative that is based at the Community Learning Centre. She will also be helping coordinate activities in the new centre as well as assisting in the Computer classes that will start there shortly.



Sa-roh has 13 years experience in childcare and is enthusiastic about the daycare program. She is from Ban Talae Nok and has interests in Child Development and Community Empowerment. The villagers are excited to have the daycare program start up again, as they had a similar program before the tsunami, but have been unable to start one up again, due to lack of funds.

Training Resource and Education Centre (TREC)

January was filled with curriculum and organizational planning for our new Centre. We have been busy setting up the new classroom, computer centre and office. It is really coming together beautifully. The Grand Opening is on Thursday, February 9th, all friends and supporters are invited to attend.



As we are moving our office to this centre, our address is also changing. Our new address is:

299/1 Moo 1
Tambon Kura, Ampoe Kuraburi
Phang-Nga, Thailand
82150

Long Term Scholarships (Golden Buddha Beach)

Golden Buddha Beach, located on the north western coast of Koh Phratong, was one of the two resorts on the island that was completely destroyed by the tsunami. The fifty-two staff members and their families lost their homes, possessions, and jobs.



NATR conducted scholarship interviews with these children and adults throughout the month of January. Our criteria for long-term scholarships includes: financial need, tsunami-affected status (orphans or single-parent children), motivation of the applicant, academic performance, community service, and the opinion of our village contacts.

NATR hopes that the scholarships can help ease the financial burden on the families whilst providing the students with an opportunity to study until the completion of their desired year level, being middle or high school. NATR has also decided to support scholarships for the adult staff who lost their jobs and homes on Golden Buddha Beach. These scholarships are for specific courses to help these adults gain more experience and expertise in their chosen field. Please request further information if you are interested in supporting the future education of these children and their parents.

Construction Projects

Bridge Replacement (Tung Nang Dam)

The new plans for the replacement of the Tung Nang Dam Bridge are now complete. The plans look great, and much thought has gone into their functionality and applicability in the unique mangrove environment. An engineer was found and hired from the local community which has resulted in local involvement, local knowledge and reasonable cost.



The plans include a sala on the sea side for children and adults to have shelter under while waiting for transportation, which will be particularly useful during the monsoon season. We have nominated a Bridge Committee within the community to monitor and document the construction progress. This will ensure their involvement and will also ensure that the bridge is representative of their wants and needs. All community members are looking forward to the commencement of construction and having full functional use of the new bridge and sala.

Water Tower (Tung Dap)

The water tower construction is moving forward beautifully. We visit the village of Tung Dap on the island of Koh Prathong on a weekly basis for site inspections and progress updates. During a recent coordinating meeting in the village, Chief Supoch expressed that he is extremely happy with the construction process thus far. During the meeting the contractor and the builder made plans to work in cooperation with one another. This relationship and coordination is very promising.



Visitors and Volunteers

We have been pleased to welcome two visitors to NATR this month. Pip Thannarak has brought her marketing expertise and English/Thai language skills into our team and has effortlessly fit into the action packed scene at NATR. Stephanie Groh has come to Kuraburi to participate in our second Community Based Tourism tour. We look forward to her feedback and expertise.