

Volunteering with North Andaman Tsunami Relief

by Lucy Dixon-Clarke

After the devastating tsunami that hit so many parts of Asia, people the world over have been asking how the severity of the wave's impact could have been prevented and how they can now help. I feel so lucky to have been able to assist in a very personal and practical way. In early December 2004, I attended a



Our house before the tsunami



What is left now

yoga retreat on Golden Buddha Beach, off the North Andaman coast of Thailand. The resort is located on the island of Koh Phratong, with the coconut palms and sandy beaches found on screen-savers the world over. But it is now such a different beach to the one I left, as it was one of the many places destroyed by the waves.

From where I was on holiday in Vietnam, I followed the news

reports in a bewildered haze and the call for volunteers came on the day I was flying back to Bangkok. I knew there was no decision to be made - I was on the ground and able to help. My background in development work, training and counselling allowed me to feel that I would be able to assist, mainly by listening to people and facilitating their empowerment process, without getting overwhelmed by the situation myself.

Word from the island was frightening; two of the three nearby villages were flattened. On the mainland, the wave cleaned the shore so effectively that a government official, sent down to assess the damage at Lower Baan Talae Nok, did not realise that the entire village had been wiped out as he could find no evidence that any houses had existed at all.

Bodhi Garrett, the manager from the island, had been in the States when the tsunami struck and worked hard to set up a relief fund immediately. He got back to Thailand in early January, gave me a short hand-

over and headed down to the coast to find out the immediate needs, both of villagers on the island of Koh Phratong and on the mainland. I stayed in the city, commuting by river boat to the Lost Horizons office and dealing with emails from concerned friends of Golden Buddha Beach. I heard endless stories from survivors of the wave. The tsunami had such devastating power, that out of three people, standing in a row, one would be taken out to sea, one into the mangroves and another into the bay. Sometimes, people's lives depended on which tree they hung on to; a self-seeded palm tree had a long enough tap root to withstand the power of the wave, while a transplanted one keeled over and became a weapon of destruction in itself. Thirteen people died at the resort, and hundreds in the nearby villages.

At night, I would return to my guesthouse and see pages and pages of missing people's signs put up around the police station. In the villages, residents knew who was missing and were able to search until they had found all the bodies, but in the tourist areas, no-one could give an accurate count of the numbers affected.



Missing people's notices, Bangkok

After a week, I flew to Ranong, with Bert and Pon, employees of Golden Buddha Beach, who went back to the island to coordinate reconstruction work. I stayed in Kuraburi and helped Bodhi to set up an office and produce documents to formalise the work of NATR. Having a private fund gave us the privileged position of being able to respond to immediate needs that more bureaucratic aid agencies could not fill, such as supplying the tented camps with fresh fruit and vegetables and



Buying vegetables at the market

replacing tools and fish traps that had been destroyed. We also set up a short-term labour project in Hat Praphat so that residents could receive a daily payment for clearing rubble from their villages, the mangrove swamps and surrounding areas. This had



What now remains of the Clubhouse of Golden Buddha Beach on Koh Phratong

the combined effect of allowing a sense of community and purpose to return to the villages, as well as providing much needed income at a time when fishing was no longer possible.



Hat Praphat

The government was working hard to rebuild homes and other organisations were responsible for drinking water and boat repair, but by visiting the villages each day, we were able to gauge the changing needs and look further ahead at offering choices for people's futures.

After such a life-shattering event, it would have been unrealistic to expect that people could just return to their original way of life. Everyone's world view changes and this had to be taken into account with any development initiative. NATR, therefore, explored alternative income-generating activities which could give people choices about when or even whether to return to fishing as a way of life. Ideas



Cashew nut peeling programme

that came up through focus group discussions included livestock production and cashew peeling.

We produced updates each week on our work which ensured that our donors knew

exactly how the money was being spent. I also continued to deal with emails, downloaded slowly from a satellite phone, and coordinated volunteers to arrive over the months ahead to help with rubble clearing, reconstruction and longer-term assistance to the villages, such as educational programmes, handicraft production and marketing.

The week before I left, a superb team arrived and took NATR to a new level. Paula Diaz Mendez, an ecotourism expert, went to the island to coordinate work at the resort. Rachel O'Gorman and Nicole Abiouness who had been with me on the yoga retreat, set to work in the office, networking the computers,



Some of the NATR team: Bodhi, Lucy, Nicole, Noi, Lak, Rachel and Bonnie

producing project proposals for potential donors and setting up our website. Bonnie Doyle conjured up a database, in record time, which is being utilised by all agencies in the region to help prevent duplication of efforts.

We also worked with three

students, Pa, Ning and Bom, who came down from their university to conduct focus group discussions and assist with translations. I loved being with them as they worked with such passion and a willingness to challenge traditional Thai social hierarchies; particularly when looking at how best to assist the Moken, an indigenous 'sea gypsy' community who are looked down upon by other members of Thai society.

One of my favourite assignments was to take supplies out to the Moken village on the Surin Islands, on an enormous speedboat, jointly owned by a group of Kuraburi business people.

Each of the owners had been a hero of the tsunami in their own right, some sending out boats to rescue people from the islands, while others stayed on land to identify bodies and deal with legalities. I delivered a 'wish list' of tools and supplies to the Moken and was honored by the gift of a beautifully carved boat. The story was that it had been washed away in the tsunami, but come back to shore, so it is extremely precious to me, even though it is a little battered about the bow!

That evening, under the full moon, we had a superb party, releasing the tensions and stresses of the previous month with the help of exquisite Thai food, as well as karaoke and dancing on the deck.

I was in my element and would have been happy to volunteer with NATR for the rest of my life!



Pa in the Kuraburi office



The Moken chief, Koh Surin



The beautifully carved model boat