

# Got Ink?

Christopher John

Got up early, not exactly an early riser, but wasn't too bothered by it. I need to balance my sunrises with my sunsets. I also got to get out of the office for a day, not really an office kind of guy either. This might possibly stem from being a welder by trade, and welders try to avoid computers at all costs. I think, for us, avoiding computers would fall in line with topics such as:



sun

avoiding black cats crossing your path, breaking a mirror brings 7 years bad luck, never walking under a ladder, and try to avoid walking on cracks. Before I came to Thailand I was backpacking around Europe trying to figure out just what kind of guy I am. I came here to see if there's anything I could do that might be of use to the people out here. But I feel that I have taught them less while here than they have taught me. Here to try to, for the first time in my life, to be a part of this world I am a part of. Here, to do, quite possibly (but hopefully not) the only selfless, valid, and meaningful thing I accomplish in my life. Here because I feel that these, young naive eyes, have been dormant for far too long.

I took a motorcycle taxi to the temporary settlement for the people of Bak Jok to meet with the fishermen that were waiting for me. I'd scheduled with them to take me out on one of their boats to watch them catching squid in order to better understand their needs and their day to day lives.



brilliant colours

One of our projects had enabled us to replace some of the squid traps that were destroyed by the tsunami. There were 41 families that lost all of their materials for fishing and we provided them with the means necessary to begin getting their lives back together. But I must state that all of my co-workers and I understand that no matter how much we want to help and to give back what they had lost, we

will not be able to replace everything that has been lost.

So I felt honored to see the traps that we gave to them being used. Got to the village at 5:54, I was supposed to be there at 6:00, close one. The boat captain, Kok, finished his breakfast and we set off to find us some squid. Just as we left, the sun began to wake from its slumber and began to light up the sky with inordinately brilliant colors ... Kodak moment (though you can never fully capture it).



Kodak moment

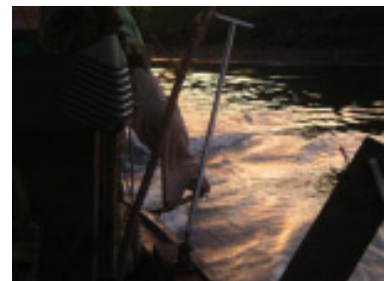


sandbags



Lau

First we all went to a small island of sand that just peaked out of the water on our way to deeper waters (this is where the sand bags that we got are used). We filled ten sandbags full of sand, which looked easy enough till I had a go. The two brothers giggled when I was doing my best to act like it wasn't heavy, and we finished loading them onto the boat, which made our means of transportation noticeably lower in the water to the point that I didn't even have to lean over the boat to grasp the water. As we made our way towards the first trap about 45 minutes away, the one man crew — Lau (Kok's brother and business partner) — prepared all the necessary materials for our day while, Kok, steers with his foot. I sat and watched Lau do his thing. Brought to mind a new realm to the saying being "in the zone". He started his day by preparing the flags, the "homing beacons" for



steers



flags



homing beacons

the traps. He poured sand into plastic bottles, and placed a long, thin, hand-cut tree branch into the bottle and drove two nails into the sides to hold it in place. He

set those aside and turned his attention to a pile of old clothes that lay on the deck of the boat, during this entire time I don't think that he blinked. On that note, I didn't even notice him breathing, either. He took a small butcher's knife, balanced it with his feet and commenced to cut up the fabric into perfect squares, whilst rolling back and forth on the ocean. He then proceeded to sew the flags to the tops of their homemade buoys and attached a cube of Styrofoam for the beacons buoyancy. All this in a time span of about 15 minutes; this guy was at home here where his system has reached perfection. Before I came out here I was told that the Thai work at a different pace than the rest of the world, very laid back. But don't write down everything you hear in ink, #2 pencils are the way to go, because this guy worked non stop. Oh, forgot to mention, he also washed the deck, checked and restitched all the squid nets on deck, filled the empty plastic squid buckets and even had time to offer me a cold water, without me even asking.

Another thing that I noticed while on this trip with the squid fishermen was that nothing is wasted. The materials that we

gave to them are the bare essentials that are needed to sustain their fishing capabilities.

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They recycle what ever they can: any Styrofoam floating in the water they will grab and reuse, the plastic containers used to originally hold motor oil are used as a float to warn the fishermen when the trap is about to reach the surface so that they are ready for it, old flags found floating in the ocean (that once labeled where the trap lay) are reused, the empty water jugs that were once filled with drinking water are filled with wet sand, to keep the makeshift flagpoles upright in the sea. The flags themselves are old clothing that has been cut up and sewn on the opposing end, and finally, any extra broken traps that had been destroyed by large passing ships are rebuilt and used again.

Another thing that I noticed is that everything on the boat has a place and a purpose. There is a large metal wheel, it's purpose is to assist the deck hand (I am using ship terminology here, as much as I know, but keep in mind these ships are more closely represented by a dingy than the Mayflower, and every millimeter of it is part of the squid catching process) raise the traps from the deep blue. The fishermen cut the Styrofoam that we sent to them into 7x5 inch rectangles, and prior to boarding the boat, I wondered why they had to cut it to these specifications. It turns out that it's because then they fit perfectly in the slots in between the

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fabric



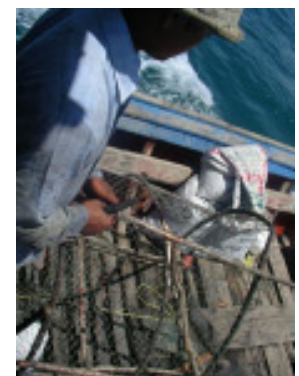
sew



motor oil



broken traps



rebuilt



plastic bottles



tree branch



two nails



feet



metal wheel

ribcage of the boat. Each slot is the exact same size, so the fishermen don't need to tie them down, they will stay in place during their active days.



assist

For my lunch...if that's what you want to call it. I didn't have time to prepare it, so one of NATR's Thai staff, Nim, gave me two packs of dried baby clams? I know, but you learn not to ask questions and be thankful for getting anything. I was exhausted from just watching these two guys, I tried to stay out of their way and not be too much of a burden, seeing as they were doing me a



laundry basket

favor by letting me on their boat. Still, they had an extra plate and Kok's wife had prepared a meal for all of us. Her food was great, I am not the spice king, but had to act like I wasn't in pain when my mouth was on fire (some like it hot, some not). My lips went numb from the heat and though I could hide the tears I couldn't stop my nose from running. Then got back to work and finished



carry

collecting all the rest of traps. We got back to the dock of the bay; they loaded up their catch for the day, 62 squid in all, into a laundry basket. Lau, grabbed the only object left on the boat that he hadn't



scale

touched yet on the boat, a large branch. And strung the branch threw the handles of the basket, which helps them carry their paycheck onto dry land. The brothers placed the squid on the scale and received their money for a very hard days' work.

I guess when I started obtaining the information for replenishing their squid traps I was surprised because they told us that they needed a minimum of 50 traps per fisherman and that seemed like a lot when looking at the size of the traps. But now that I have seen it all in action and how few squid they catch per trap – an average of 1.24 squid per trap– I understand the importance of having so many. (I guess the squid are actually very smart: if they see one of their fellow mates in the net, they don't follow). I also realize how far these fishermen have to travel to catch these squid. That in combination with the cost of gas that is used. Not to mention the cost of other materials, such as bait. Finally, I now understand how much they actually make for the day's catch (close to a 1000 baht or about \$25 for two people). Clearly, they are asking for only the bare necessities to support their families. Here, at NATR, is it not our position to tell these people what they want or need, like many others that treat these people as if they haven't been living as of yet. Or, others talking to the villagers as if they are ignorant and wouldn't be able to know what they want/need. We aren't here to convert these people to our beliefs, but we are here as one of the very few aid groups that are really making a difference.



bait

Just a note, the NATR quote is: "Some people see things the way they are and ask, why?...I see things the way they could be and ask, why not?" R.F.K.



money



finally