

Bodhi Garrett
*Bodhi Building Ecotourism in Thailand,
after the Tsunami*



Born and raised in Kathmandu, Nepal, which deeply influenced the course of his life, Bodhi Garrett moved to Monterey Peninsula in California when he was seven years old, and went on to study at Berkeley for a B.S. in Environmental Science. While, as he says, "confronting the depressing reality of American mainstream values in 2003", Bodhi decided to seek his fortune in the wider world, at least until there was "a regime change" back in the USA. After a pilgrimage to Tibet and some time in the Himalayas, he arrived in southern Thailand in November of 2003. At first, he became the project director for a turtle conservation project, but as all turtles were gone, he joined Golden Buddha Beach Resort,

(an ECOCLUB Ecolodge Member subsequently destroyed by the Tsunami), on Phratong island, as the marketing and conservation director. The Tsunami found Bodhi in the US, on a short leave. He promptly returned to set up on January 7 of this year, North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR) which has been delivering targeted, community-driven tsunami relief ever since. NATR's efforts have grown from simple fresh food delivery and short-term income generation into a tightly knit program with over 60 active or completed projects in 12 villages. Their working relationship with these villages pre-dates the tsunami, and allows NATR to recognize and address areas in which tsunami relief efforts are lacking. In the past 6 months, NATR has sponsored a number of livelihood improvement projects, including fishing net replacement, long-tail boat repair, handicraft production (soap and model boats), community gardening, and scholarships to vocational colleges.



Whose initiative was NATR, and in what ways is it better than the many NGOs set up in the affected countries, after the tsunami disaster?

NATR was the initiative of several committed individuals who decided to serve the communities on and around Koh Phratong. Before the tsunami, I was working in the North Andaman area at Golden Buddha Beach ecotourism resort. I was lucky enough to be visiting America when the tsunami hit, and I returned to Thailand to find that the resort, and many of my friends, was no longer around. With the support of many kind donors and volunteers, I was able to spearhead the collective effort known as North Andaman Tsunami Relief.

NATR has been very effective in its ability to listen to community needs and respond immediately. This is because our relationship with the communities in the area predates the tsunami and consequently we are trusted. In addition, our Thai staff members are from the local area and many were directly affected by the tsunami. Community members

know that they are able to be open about their changing needs and we will listen.



What are your personal responsibilities within NATR?

I am the relief director. I oversee all of our programs, our fundraising and our coalition efforts. We like to say that here at NATR we surf the chaos with as much grace as possible. It is my job to make sure that the surfboard does not break. In addition, I am the manager for our projects in the village of Tung Dap.



What is your overall evaluation of the results of the relief effort in Southern Thailand? Donor money wasted or well-spent? And are funds still flowing in, or do NGOs increasingly have to compete for the attention of individual donors and larger aid agencies?

Overall, the relief efforts here in Thailand have been quite impressive - especially when compared with progress in Banda Aceh, Indonesia or the coastal areas of Sri Lanka. The government has done an impressive job of providing necessities for survivors - food, water, and temporary shelter. Unfortunately, beyond necessities, the government has been very focused on helping predominantly tourist areas to recover, and has not been paid much attention to the economic recovery of the area that NATR works in. As a result, the efforts of NGOs have been extremely important in helping people rebuild their livelihoods (fishing boats and nets) and find permanent housing. In addition, psychological and educational services have been provided mainly organizations from the non-profit sector.

The money is still flowing in, although much less than before. While there has been a lot of money, not all of it has been spent well. Many international organizations are resource rich, but information poor. This has led to unwitting support of corruption, and occasional competition for projects. I have been most impressed with those NGOs that have formed strong alliances with local Thai civil society groups.



Is a better life for local people emerging through NATR's efforts, and in what respect? How do you measure NATR's performance?

By working closely with the tsunami-affected peoples, NATR has developed both short- and long-term initiatives that will ultimately enable self-sufficiency. Long-time relationships between NATR staff and the local population have provided the foundation for our ability to move quickly into the villages and link ourselves with their displaced inhabitants. Ultimately, NATR hopes to empower the local communities through a continuous cycle of needs assessment and project developments that meet those needs in a way that will allow them to retain autonomy.

NATR's success is measured by the degree to which our projects enable communities to do what they want. 'Did the project accomplish what it set out to do? Did it build capacity within the community to address similar problems in the future? Did it distribute resources equally and avoid promoting dependence on external assistance?' These are the questions we ask when evaluating the success of a project.

Is a better life emerging for these communities? A better life can only be built by the

communities themselves, but I believe that NATR is helping local villagers to become empowered in creating a sustainable future for their communities.



As a result of the tsunami, tourism developers are eyeing previously undeveloped areas, further north the Andaman coast. How is NATR preparing the villagers about this? In effect, would you and could you prevent a local fisherman selling out to a developer?

I'm not sure that we can prevent a local fisherman from selling out to a developer. But, we can provide his community with a broader perspective on tourism and development, and provide him with tools to benefit from tourism without selling his land. At that point, it is really the fisherman's decision. So, our idea is to provide concrete benefit and empowerment to local communities that enable them to make informed choices.

What is the main motive of your volunteers? Romanticism and altruism, or free training as a consultant, and a good paragraph in a CV? Does motive matter for you as long as the job gets done?

Good questions. The motivation of a volunteer is the most important aspect of their ability to serve effectively. Without a pure intention, it is very difficult to put one's own needs aside and help selflessly. Many of our volunteers are here for just this reason. Coming from a privileged and wealthy society has both benefits and responsibilities, and NATR is a vehicle to help fulfil the responsibilities. In the end, it will probably look good on a resume, and romanticism is surely part of the motivation, but NATR strives to provide a structure by which people can channel this into service. Also, we work ridiculously hard - this is a function of NATR's commitment to our volunteers and staff as human beings. We love and support and each other, and it is our common vision and friendship that makes us an effective team.



What is your evaluation of the laws for tourism development in your part of Thailand, post-tsunami, better / worse, same? At the local level, is NATR exerting any influence for or against the implementation of these laws?

The laws for tourism development in our part of Thailand are generally weak, as they are across the country. To be more accurate, the laws themselves are well written and ambitious, but their enforcement is sporadic and weak. On the local level, NATR is participating in the planning process for the island of Koh Phratong - we are attending high-level meetings and lobbying local authorities as much as possible. Since these meetings are usually held in the provincial capital, villagers are often excluded. NATR has been shuttling villagers to these meetings to make sure that development plans reflect the needs of local communities (who are small resource users dependent on the bounty of nature).

In the end, though, we must face the fact that we are up against big developers with big money. Therefore, we believe that economic incentives towards positive tourism development are the best way forward. Occasionally, laws can set a precedent and provide motivation towards a more sustainable future. Usually, however, laws reflect the current reality. As such, we must create an economically viable, socially profitable, situation before we can expect it to be supported by the law.



It is commonplace nowadays to that an NGO has to work "with the local community". But who is really the local community in the case of the villages you are working with, How is decision-making taking place in the community. Are there elected leaders, do people vote seeking a majority, a consensus emerges when all have agreed, or are elders taking the decisions. Do you take any steps not to upset the local decision-making traditions, or you believe they should be modernised?

I believe that all decision-making processes are inherently susceptible to corruption and inequality, be they modern or traditional. What we see in the villages is that some communities have a common voice, and others are divided. This is a function of whether local leadership seeks to serve only their families, or if they truly care about the village. In general, there is a balance of power between the chief (who retains his position for life) and the Obataw (who is elected every 2 years).

As for NATR's process - we strive to work with all levels of power in a village. If a project caters to the chief's needs, it will fail from a lack common interest. If a project ignores the chief's desire for recognition, it will be hampered from above. Thus, we make sure to listen to everybody, but we generally place more emphasis on serving the under-represented groups - women and poor families.



Do you worry at all about introducing inequality within the communities through better education and cultivation of entrepreneurial skill. And what about the villages that you are unable to assist, is this causing any envy?

When we offer a program or educational opportunity to a village, we consider equity issues as far as possible by informing all community members during village meetings. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that some people will be keen to take up new opportunities, which may ultimately generate them a higher income, while others would prefer to focus again on the livelihood that they had before the tsunami. Our philosophy is essentially to offer people choices and support them in whatever livelihood they choose, providing it is environmentally and socially sustainable. By coordinating closely with other organizations, we are able to monitor whether all villages are being assisted with educational opportunities and we are able to direct funding to communities that seem to be neglected in any way.



From your perspective as recipient and user of relief funds, what really made people offer their support? Humanitarian feelings of solidarity, solidarity to western tourists, or guilt for third world misery?

Initially, most of the funding that NATR received was from people with personal links with the area who genuinely wanted to help friends and families that they knew. The fact that Thailand has received so much private funding, compared to other tsunami-affected countries, also seems to be because people who have visited Thailand love and respect the way in which they have been welcomed as tourists, and genuinely want to help. Subsequently, we have received funding through international service agencies and these large sums seem to have been generated because people could not believe the scale of this natural disaster. Private individuals seem far less willing to give money to a disaster that is generated directly through human mismanagement.



Your project program for these villages is very worthwhile, ambitious and exhaustive. One cannot help wondering, however, where is the local government?

Local government has been active in the area in many respects, such as providing housing, replacing boats and providing educational support for orphans. However, many of the most disadvantaged communities do not have the official paperwork to show they owned land or boats, or even ID cards. These are the groups that donor organizations are able to help, as well as assisting people who somehow slip through the nets of the inevitable government bureaucracy.



After reviewing some of your projects, it seems NATR has decided, assumed under consultation with the local people, that sustainable tourism and arts & crafts production is a future model of these villages, and you are planning all this with determination, western efficiency and funding. Is there a chance that tourism will get out of hand and those local villagers, who do not benefit, will suddenly decide they were better off as poor fishermen without outside attention?

Many community members have visited places like Phuket, Koh Samui and Khao Lak and can see the potential pitfalls of uncontrolled tourism development in terms of both cultural and environmental degradation. Therefore, the tourism model that we are developing together with the villages is community-based and they can opt in or out at any stage. We are also collaborating with a Thai NGO who has long experience in building CBT initiatives and is aware of both the advantages and disadvantages. If tourism development is truly to be both sustainable and empowering, it must be the choice and responsibility of the villagers themselves to create a positive future. NATR aims to facilitate a space in which communities can explore their relationship to the natural environment and the long-term implications of tourism while also acquiring concrete skills and professional assistance to ensure that their visions work for the benefit of the majority.



What measures are you taking so as not to make villagers dependant on NATR and other outside aid?

NATR will measure its true success by its ability to pull out completely from the projects in which we are currently involved - this is our modus operandi and underlies all our planning.



From these 8 months of everyday hard relief work, what is the most valuable lesson you have learned?

Many of NATR's staff and supporters lost friends or family in the tsunami. Our daily work is full of constant reminders of those that died, and the wave that took them. To be sure, this can be painful, but there are also positive aspects of having to face our loss each and every day. Often, people heal through self-nurturing and disengagement from the more troubling aspects of life. Here at NATR, we are exploring another way of healing - through service. By serving those that share in our losses, we are able to mitigate the suffering within ourselves. In choosing to help others to heal, there is an inevitable healing process within - a subtle transformation of despair into acceptance and then hope. We are

discovering together that working for the greater good can transform sobs of grief into tears of compassion and lighten a heavy heart.

So, to summarize, I have learned that service is good for the soul, but only if done with wisdom and discretion.



Is there anything else you would like to say to our readers, perhaps about your current needs in funding and volunteers?

We have an extremely dedicated team of Thai staff and volunteers at the moment. The only position we need to replace in the near future is that of position of financial manager, ie someone with familiarity with accounts. In terms of funding, we are really looking for large-scale funding for our Community Education, Vocational Training, and ACE Tourism Program. If any of your readers would like to support this, we would be very happy to communicate with them.



Thank you very much.