



::: Secondary Objectives

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We found ourselves on a bit of a side-mission a few days ago, a stab at some secondary objectives for the trip to Thailand. Having met so many devoted people and organizations involved in tsunami recovery, it only seemed right to help someone out in whatever small and quasi-professional way that we could. Even if this meant braving the wonders of a place called the Terar Inn and flirting with the lovely offspring of local mafia.

We took a bus to Khuraburi, which is an hour-long ride north of Takuapa. It was not affected by the tsunami because of its sheltered position behind the island of Koh Phratong, but a number of villages in the surrounding area were almost completely destroyed. These are the lesser known spots, tiny fishing villages devoid of tourism, communities whose traditional ways of life are now being severely threatened.

An organization called North Andaman Tsunami Relief operates out of a friendly, open office along Khuraburi's main drag. Their founder is a dude from California, the very righteous and enigmatic Bodhi Garrett. Bodhi came to Thailand via much study in Nepal, an environmentally conscious and spiritually intelligent guy just this side of mad. As NATR enters a new phase of long-term viability, they are seeking attention. We agreed to stay a couple of days to help him garner some publicity in Canada. As the reader can probably tell from this paragraph, he's a charmer.

The reason I bring it up is that Bodhi's personal touch is a key component to this group's ongoing success, a point actually stated in their in-progress one-year report. He has lived in this area of Thailand since 2003, and been involved in the famous sea turtle conservation project at Koh Phratong's Golden Buddha Beach Resort. He interacts with the Thais as if he were their brother (he would say that he is), and fits into the community unlike any other *farang* that we've met.

When the tsunami hit, he returned from a visit to America and began making phone calls. NATR was born and, now approaching its own one-year anniversary, the organization figures to become a permanent part of the community.



Why are we so enamoured with this particular (small: 10 people) relief op? They do what the big boys can't or won't. They can shift resources and discontinue projects based on feedback, rather than follow a mandate sent from the top down. A phrase that keeps popping to mind is 'fill in the gaps', meaning they do all the smaller projects that these simple Thai villages need after the paint is dry on their new cookie-cutter homes. Jo, the group's Financial Manager, made the comment that "A lot of organizations will come in, drop the aid, fly their banner, and leave."

NATR will do things like build community centres in temporary housing locations, teach vocational skills, hold mini Olympics competitions for kids, pay scholarships, restore mangroves, organize groups of women to make soaps and greeting cards, repair fishing boats, and provide villages with fresh food instead of canned. Given the area's relatively small population, smaller number of those affected, and non-existent tourist industry, less attention has been paid to the plight of these people than in the tourist areas of Phuket and Khao Lak. (The tsunami has actually put Khao Lak on the map.) Consequently, less aid finds its way this far north, making NATR's role that much more vital.

Another reason we like NATR is their commitment to these communities. Being a non-hierarchical, socially conscious outfit, they only initiate projects after extensive consultation with the people they will affect. And, by 'people they will affect', they mean the residents of the villages—not the district chief, not the rich guys, not the regional appointee from Bangkok or any distributor of funding from on high. They go door-to-door, piggyback on already scheduled town meetings, and count their Thai staff as their most valuable assets. Any plan to be implemented must be shown to benefit the community as a whole, not a privileged few, and must not exclude any marginalized groups. Every project has the goal of eventually handing over complete responsibility to qualified local people.



Their challenge at this stage of the recovery process is one shared by Khao Lak, as well. The tourism is coming. In Khao Lak's case, it was already there before the tsunami hit, and in two years' time it will be back up to Phuket-like standards. For villages like Baan Talae Nok, where beach-resort-and-bar-style tourism would irreversibly change the traditional lifestyles practiced, another option must be made available. To this end, NATR will open TREC in January, a training centre for CBT and ETT. (Translated: North Andaman Tsunami Relief, Training Resource and Education Centre, Community Based Tourism, Eco Tourism Training. Acronyms!)

TREC will teach people to use computers and speak English, but also to become full-fledged nature guides and entrepreneurs. When the tourists come to town, there will be many fine options to choose from, but they will be more authentic and less hedonistic than in other places. Visitors may even get to home-stay with a real Thai family. Imagine the conversation! And, if the Marriotts of the world succeed in grabbing some land in the tsunami's aftermath and throwing up a resort spa in this area, at least the local people will have a chance to work there as something more than a custodian.

Oh, NATR. You always seem to say the right thing. In addition to this operation, NATR will actively seek out markets for the graduates of TREC, making sure not to leave any trained professionals out in the (relative) cold. The entrepreneurial aspect of the program will also be key in making the process sustainable and Thai-run.

So tell all your friends. Watch for news articles in the Globe and Mail and maybe Adbusters about the little relief agency that is doing everything right.

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