

The knowledge that saved the sea gypsies

When the water lapping the shores of Yan Chiak in Myanmar suddenly drew back on 26 December, the Moken recognized the signs. *La Boon* was about to strike. Dropping everything, the entire village headed for higher ground and safety. The Moken owe their survival to tales passed down by the elders of the seven waves which came to kill the Moken in their parents' day. As the story goes, those Moken who had anchored their boats close to the shore were crushed by the waves, whereas those who had made for higher ground were saved. *La Boon* is the Moken word for tsunami.



The Moken are 'sea gypsies', one of three groups who have roamed the waters straddling southern Thailand and Myanmar for centuries. They are all animists and culturally distinct from Thais and Burmese, speak their own languages and have their own set of traditions.

where they learned to dive and swim with skill. During low tide, the women scoured the reefs for sea urchins, crabs, mussels and sea cucumbers.

For years, the Moken led an isolated life until the Surin Islands were declared a national marine park in 1981. This would trigger a range of complex issues for the Moken that continue to entangle them today.



A Moken man playing traditional music on a *Kat-ting*

A limited livelihood

Located 55 km off the coast of Phang-Nga Province, Ko Surin is a cluster of five islands with beautiful coves and dense jungles. The channel between the two biggest islands, North and South Surin, used to be known for its beautiful coral reefs, which made for good snorkelling. An assessment of the damage caused to these reefs by the tsunami is currently being undertaken by UNESCO and other bodies.



UNESCO Bangkok office staff dug into their pockets to create a Moken Fund. The 45 000 baht (ca US\$1 000) donated by staff to the fund went to pay for this replacement boat for fishing cum transportation for the Moken in early January. The Moken lost about half of their boats to the tsunami. Many other organizations are providing emergency aid to the Moken in the form of money, clothes, food, etc.



Thanksgiving ceremony organized by the Urak Lawoi community on Rawai Beach two weeks after the tsunami to appease the souls of the dead. The Urak Lawoi community lives on the beaches of Rawai and Ko Sileh in Phuket

Today, some of the 200 Moken living on Yan Chiak island would like to move to the Surin Islands in Thailand to join their relatives. 'Living in Myanmar is very tough', one Moken explains. 'The Burmese soldiers force us to work without pay and, if we refuse, we are jailed for three or four days. The men are forced to carry heavy soil and sand for construction and the women are made to collect rocks'. The problem is that the Surin Islands are under Thai administration and the National Park Authority will not allow more Moken to move there.

While the other sea gypsy groups, the Moklen and the Urak Lawoi, have integrated Thai society and acquired a modern lifestyle on land, the Moken remain semi-nomadic. They live in boats out in the sea during the dry season, coming ashore only during the wet months. The total population amounts to approximately 3000; 200 live on Thailand's Surin Islands and the rest in Myanmar.

The Thai Moken settled on the islands decades ago. Here, they built bamboo huts suspended on stilts several feet above water. Men fished, sold their catch to the mainland and used their earnings to buy rice. Children grew up in the water,

To protect this unique ecosystem, the National Parks Department declared the islands and the surrounding seas a protected national marine park decades after the Moken settlement. Thailand's National Park Act forbids the occupation of land and the gathering and removal of flora and fauna within the protected zone.



Moken girls selling handicrafts made from Pandanus leaves

Others, like Dunung Klatalay, turn to handicrafts. 'I can earn at least 200 baht a day by selling these', he says. 'It's better than working at the national park where I am paid much less.'

Such alternatives, however, are only possible during the tourist months between November and April. What they earn during

the tourist months is normally expended by season's end, so, during the monsoon season, the Moken have to return to subsistence fishing and clam harvesting. Stockpiling is frowned upon by a society that sets great store by sharing and solidarity.

Park officials accepted the Moken's presence, acknowledging the fact that they had been frequenting the islands for centuries. The Moken were allowed to remain but are forbidden to catch fish for commercial use. As long as they fished only for their families, using the *chapan*, a small wooden boat dug out of a tree trunk equipped with a paddle, fishlines, hooks and a spear, the ecological balance of the islands would not be harmed. However, this became a problem for the Moken, who needed cash to buy rice from the mainland.

By 1987, however, Ko Surin had become a popular tourist destination. The Moken resorted to the sale of decorative seashells as souvenirs, a trade which proved very profitable, with households earning as much as 3,000 baht a month (ca US\$75) during the tourist season. The flourishing trade continued until the park issued a ban in 1996.

Getting work on land is not an option for the Moken. Though they have been living on the Surin Islands for decades, they do not have Thai citizenship. Technically, they are stateless people. This means they cannot officially take up jobs in the park or on the mainland. As non-citizens, they are ineligible for monetary support from the government. This also denies them access to welfare services such as free education or health care.

The park had to devise other ways of caring for the Moken without handing out government money. After issuing the ban, park officials collected donations from tourists to help buy rice and necessities for them. Dr Narumon Arunotai from Chulalongkorn University's Social Research Institute, an anthropologist who has studied the tribe for years, subsequently reported that the donations were not sufficient to meet their needs. The practice was later discontinued.

Officials then established a "welfare shop," a convenience store cum restaurant selling snacks, bug spray and drinks to tourists and island residents during the high season. Part of the profits goes to pay the salaries of the 50 Moken contracted to work as boatmen, gardeners and rubbish collectors. According to Puttapoj Khunprasert, vice-superintendent of the national marine park, they could at least 'earn 100 baht a day, have three meals and take leftovers home.'

There were also efforts to make use of traditional carving skills. During the fifth lunar month, the Moken erect a *lobong*, a tall, wooden totem representing an ancestor spirit. However, making souvenirs out of wood and grass proved a failure due to lack of demand and park restrictions on the harvesting of wood.

Tour operators were encouraged to hire the Moken as guides but that, too, proved difficult because the Moken are shy of outsiders.

From houseboat to speedboat

Tourism has increased contact between the Moken and the modern world but changed their lifestyle. They have developed a taste for packaged food. The money they earn in the park is used to buy rice and canned goods, departing from a once predominantly seafood and fish-based diet. Narumon observes that snacks, instant noodles and condensed milk are now favourites.

They have also become consumers, spending money on things such as cigarettes and beer. Four households now have TV sets. Others have stereos. Before, the Moken would sit on the beach under the stars and talk about legends and their past. Now they spend the evening watching Thai soap operas.



A Moken spearfishing on Ko Surin



©UNESCO/Elias



Before and after pictures of a Moken village originally built on the water. In the photo on the right, the Moken village is being reconstructed on Ko Surin. Note how the new location of the village is completely different. The houses have been pushed into the forest, favouring a poor breeze, zero visibility and poor sanitation

These same children are pupils of Surasawadee School, an *ad hoc* educational centre set up by the Fisheries Authority. This single-classroom school provides basic primary education in the Thai language, arithmetic and marine conservation. The inclusion of environmental issues in the curriculum is already commendable. It would be ideal if the curriculum also included classes in the Moken language.

‘Providing education to indigenous children is always complex. There is a risk that offering standardized formal education will alienate indigenous children from their own culture and affect the transmission of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage from one generation to the other,’ says Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of UNESCO’s regional bureau for education in Bangkok. ‘Many strategies have been developed to address this. Gaining initial literacy in one’s mother tongue then moving to literacy in the national language is one such strategy. Most research shows that minority children in primary schools taught in their own language acquire knowledge skills faster,’ says Shaeffer. Another is the inclusion of ancestral stories in learning material – such as that about *La Boon*. In northern Thailand, minorities have established their own educational programmes using ancient tribal stories as content for reading materials. UNESCO and Chulalongkorn University have developed something similar for the Moken.

A working system to preserve indigenous heritage, however, is generally hard to develop, especially for small groups like the Moken. In Surasawadee School, the teacher herself is not Moken and no community member has ever been trained as a teacher.

More haste, less sustainability

‘The fact that the sea gypsies survived, while many others did not, points to certain lessons to be learned from traditional, indigenous knowledge,’ says Richard Engelhardt, UNESCO’s Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific. ‘Twenty years ago, beachfront construction was light and made of bamboo and thatch that, if it collapsed, would not kill the occupants. The use of such traditional construction “rules” should be part-and-parcel of village rehabilitation work’.

Unlike other Thai fishing villages affected by the tsunami, the sea gypsies prefer to remain in their traditional homes by the sea. On Ko Surin, where they also escaped without loss of life thanks to their knowledge of the sea, some 170 people had returned by mid-January to rebuild their homes from traditional bamboo and woven leaf.

Aid agencies have thrown themselves into the task of reconstruction. But Derek Elias of UNESCO’s Bangkok bureau observes with regret that, in the Surin Islands and elsewhere in Thailand, ‘a multitude of aid bodies are bringing in project money and “staking their claim” to certain areas for providing reconstruction assistance that often does not consider practical matters of sustainability’. Citing the example of a newly reconstructed Moken coastal village in Thailand’s Ko Surin National Park, he reports that, ‘new houses have been laid down into the forest too far from the water’s edge, lined up on a grid, built too low to the ground and too close together. The result is poor ventilation and sanitation, as well as obstructed views to the sea, even though clear visibility is essential both for monitoring sea conditions and for daily activities along the coast. Needless to say’, adds Elias, ‘the Moken would like to rebuild their village in the



©UNESCO/Elias

Moken family visiting from Mergui archipelago (Myanmar) on the traditional kabang, anchored at Ko Surin

traditionally sustainable manner at the earliest opportunity, if the park authorities will allow them to do so.'

UNESCO Bangkok developed a proposal last February to produce educational materials in health, disaster preparedness and tsunami education for different target groups, including schools, governments, municipalities and the private sector. Once finalized, these materials will be disseminated as an activity of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

A problem has arisen from lack of consultation by local authorities. Another community saved from the tsunami⁸ by their knowledge of the sea, the Urak Lawoi, was unwilling to move from its village on Ko Sileh beach near Phuket, where only 10 houses had been destroyed and a further 200 damaged. The villagers cited the importance of remaining close to their boats and equipment and the loss of income from fishing if they moved inland. Yet, the Governor indicated in mid-January that 200 new houses would be allocated to the Urak Lawoi community, which was to be relocated to nearby degraded mangrove forest on public land some 300 m back from the sea.

Indigenous peoples part of protected lands

National park managers all over the world have generally considered the indigenous people living in their perimeter as separate entities they are not obliged to protect. In a new trend, however, governments are beginning to recognize that indigenous populations have an intimate relationship with these protected lands and that their heritage needs to be preserved as much as the landscape in which they are living.

One good example is Australia. The aptly named Department of Environment and Heritage currently manages three large national parks alongside resident Australian aborigines. This pioneering model began in 1978 with Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Since then, two other parks have come under joint management: Uluru-Kata Tjuta (Ayer's Rock) National Park, which, at 80 km², is the country's largest, and Booderee National Park, a patch of coastal land along Jervis Bay in New South Wales measuring 6.4 km².

In 1995, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and its management board won UNESCO's highest award, the Picasso Gold Medal. They were commended for distinctive landscape and heritage preservation and for lifting the bar on World Heritage site administration.

In Thailand, there is an apparent openness to such a paradigm. The Department of National Parks, in partnership with Danida, the Danish aid agency, has created a programme for



View of the temporary Moken camp at Ko Surin Park Headquarters

joint management of protected areas. This scheme consists of dialogue with all stakeholders, including indigenous villagers living within the national parks. Issues such as capacity-building for local people, livelihood concerns, land use and tenure will be a focus. According to Chatri Moonstan, environmental programme co-ordinator at the Danida office in Bangkok, the four-year pilot project will encompass 11 national parks and the western forest complex. Included are some parks with indigenous populations: Ob Luang National Park in Chiang Mai province, Doi Phu Ka National Park in Nan, Talay Bun in Satun and Hat Chao Mai in Trang, which is also home to sea gypsy communities.

Unfortunately, both the Surin Islands National Marine Park and the Moken are excluded from the project. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this programme will lead to a common policy that applies to all national parks.

Given the recent inclusion of the Andaman Islands in Thailand's tentative dossier for inscription on the List of World Heritage, now would seem the time for UNESCO to mobilize support for the inscription of Ko Surin as a mixed site of both natural and cultural heritage.

Soimart Rungmanee and Irwin Cruz

For details (in Bangkok⁹): d.elias@unesco-bkk.org; r.soimart@unesco-bkk.org

8. The Urak Lawoi term for tsunami is Uma Udo Bidi, Uma meaning wave, Udyo meaning seven and Bidi being the classification word

9. Derek Elias and Soimart Rungmanee are respectively Co-ordinator of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and Project Assistant for the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) project: www.unesco.org/links