

TRAVEL & TOURISM

Village embraces respectful tourism

Nartladda Klongwitti, or Chim as her friends call her, smiles as she welcomes the group of foreigners to her village on the Andaman Coast. Unlike the majority of visitors over the past few years, this group is not here to see the destruction wrought by the tsunami of 2004. Instead, they are here as tourists to enjoy the cultural and natural splendour of Tung Nang Dam, a village of 70 houses situated in between the coral reefs and dense rainforests of Phang Nga.

Life has not always been so easy for Chim – the majority of her village was destroyed in the tsunami and, due to a lack of initial relief, she was unable to replace her lost boat and fishing nets. With the development of community-based tourism, however, her luck is turning around. She has been able to receive vocational training and a steady income from the small stream of tourists that visit Tung Nang Dam.

Nearly two years after the devastating wave, in an area largely overlooked by the ensuing relief efforts, the villagers are creating new models for living. Unusually, the new opportunities have been created by and for the community, allowing progress to coexist with the traditional fishing culture.



Tourists are set to enjoy a wealth of community-based tours and experiences in Phang Nga, thanks to the NATR's help in setting up Andaman Discoveries.

Tourism, as Chim sees it, is complex – it's inevitable spread across Southern Thailand has led to great economic benefit, but also to cultural and environmental degradation. So, with tourists now returning to the area, Chim and other villagers formed a committee to

decide how tourism might be used as a tool for community development.

The village committee approached North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR), and requested assistance in developing community-based tourism. NATR is an independent, non profit organisation that provides assistance to tsunami-impacted coastal communities of the North Andaman. To date, NATR has implemented over 120 projects in twelve villages, focusing on human needs and services. The NGO projects work towards self-sufficiency and environmental sustainability.

Villagers, with the assistance of NATR, are developing tourism products based around the principals of Community-based Tourism (CBT), that are commercially viable with maximum benefit to communities and minimum impact on environment.

CBT is a tourism that does not simply seek to maximise profits for investors. Rather, it is more concerned with the impact of tourism on the community and environment. CBT emerges from a community development strategy, using tourism management as a tool to strengthen community organisation through community-wide participation.

With the help of the International Labour Organisation and CARE International, NATR was able to provide English lessons, marketing and vocational training. With the consent and assistance of the villagers, the NGO also conducted numerous Community Feasibility Studies to find out if tourism meets the wider needs of the whole community. These studies included workshops to agree on community goals and motivation and the exploration of positive and negative impacts of varying types of tourism,



including field trips to working tourism models – such as The Eco-Club and Homestay Standards of Koh Yao Noi, Community and Cultural tours in Kiriwong, and investigation of rapid tourist development in Khao Lak.

NATR also assisted the villagers to create quality tourist activities, tours and nature trails and organised pilot tours of interested parties to join CBT activities in-village so that the community could experience tourism and assess its suitability and realistic sustainability.

It also helped the village develop skills for tourism through training and community empowerment, and ran workshops to compile a "Sense of Place" booklet to allow villagers to explore, acknowledge and value their cultural identities and surrounding environment.

The ultimate result of the collaboration is the newly launched Andaman Discoveries – a non-profit effort to support community-based tourism in tsunami affected villages. "We provide services

that will allow communities to develop a form of tourism that does not undermine their traditional way of life," said Kelly May, director of Andaman Discoveries.

This month, twenty-two individuals graduated from Andaman Discoveries' vocational training program. The six-month intensive course focused on guiding, small business and community development. Despite being from villages that suffered widespread devastation, the graduates have come to recognise that their communities are once again attractive to foreigners.

When asked about how she feels about the last two years, Chim replies, "The tsunami was a terrible thing, but it also helped us to open our minds to new opportunities. We are now ready to welcome the world, and share our way of life with respectful visitors"

For further information about Andaman Discoveries, go to – www.andamandiscoveries.com



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It was ACE!

At the Annual Phang Nga Regional Planning Meeting in January 2006, the provincial and national government outlined their plan for regional tourism development. Phang Nga was chosen to become the home-stay and eco-tour centre, focusing on forms of 'soft' tourism and development of small and medium sized businesses. The meeting recognised the expansion of tourism northward, from Phuket and Khao Lak, as an opportunity for economic growth without compromising the area's outstanding natural beauty and diversity.

To support the development of Community-based Tourism (CBT) in villages, NATR is running the ACE (Adventure, Community and Eco-tourism) training program. NATR has identified 26 motivated individuals to participate in vocational training – to be known as

the ACE Expert team. The ACE Experts will become a core group of dedicated professionals trained to lay the foundations for successful CBT in their own villages and throughout the region.

The six-month intensive course at NATR's Training Resource Education Centre in Kuraburi, Phang Nga, is providing concrete skills that enable employment and long-term economic benefits. The ACE Expert program and current CBT development enables communities to actively manage tourism on their own terms, reducing dependence and exploitation.

The ACE Experts are learning the necessary skills to support and promote CBT development in their own communities, including cultural, environmental, and adventure-based guiding methods; English language and computer skills; small business management and entrepreneurial training; and hospitality and travel planning skills.

Under NATR guidance, the ACE Ex-

perts help communities to explore their relationship to their environment and the long-term implications of tourism. While the tourism market in Kuraburi is growing, it remains relatively small, so the vocational training efforts build capacity slowly rather than encourage a premature rush towards tourism.

The ACE program's core objective is to bring community empowerment through tourism skills and the development of CBT that will support and enhance the region's tourism development plan and encourage the adoption of sustainable tourism development in future planning. By creating quality tourism products that bring equal cultural exchanges between tourists and hosts, consumers will experience the benefits – and fun – of sustainable tourism. And, it is hoped, they travel this way again in the future.

For more about NATR, visit – www.northandamantsunamirelief.com