

SPOTLIGHT ON *Bodhi Garrett*



Chris Dunbar

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE '00

When the great Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 hit Thailand, Bodhi Garrett was luckier than most of his friends; he was spending the Christmas holiday with family in the United States. But Garrett returned home almost immediately to Thailand's remote North Andaman region to help sort out the nightmare of missing persons. The rogue wave had destroyed his home, erased his job at a local eco-tourism resort, and taken the lives of many of his neighbors. And yet, he says, "I was inspired by those around me who had lost everything, and still dared to dream of a better future."

There was no shortage of volunteers during those first few weeks. Locals worked tirelessly to find survivors, to begin rebuilding, and to just get by. Messages poured in from people around the world asking how they could help. "In one of those emails someone asked where they could donate," Garrett says. "I had to pause because I had no idea. It made me think that there might be a good way to get something bigger started." And so North Andaman Tsunami Relief was born.

The nonprofit Garrett launched was vastly different from mega-charities like the Red Cross, which also descended upon the scene. Such large organizations provided critical resources; however, Garrett realized that they didn't have the capacity to address the devastated communities' long-term needs. "I wanted to build a relief organization that was sustainable," says Garrett. "A model of grassroots, need-based aid. I thought this might be a more successful model than the traditional, more external approach." Garrett's model required intense focus on what the locals truly needed, as well as their participation. His main goal was to develop a model that would eventually be run entirely by local villagers.

"A lot of companies and foundations gave us money for different projects," says Roma Pakdee, a villager from Ban Talae Nok. "In the beginning things were okay. But over time they were not stable." North Andaman Tsunami Relief was different, she says. "They always followed up with us. They're different from other organizations that just give money and then leave."

By Aimee Kelley

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Belief in the power of sustainable community development was a product of Garrett's education. During his senior year at Berkeley in 2000, with support from a CNR grant, Garrett conducted research in a Himalayan national park, examining the links between eco-tourism, firewood use, and deforestation. He credits this experience as giving him his "first taste of international work and the confidence to continue." Though he had never faced anything like the devastation wreaked by the tsunami, this background provided him with the perspective and skills that shaped his fledgling relief organization.

Garrett launched his project with the help of "an all-star revolving cast of characters" that included friends from Berkeley, other international volunteers, and most importantly, tsunami survivors. "Tapping into local knowledge was an instrumental part of this project. Instead of imposing what I had learned onto the situation, I took the time to learn what the local needs truly were," Garrett says. "Then we were able to develop the capacity to meet those needs—not by importing ideas from the outside, but by supporting local creativity and capacity."

Over two years, Garrett and his collaborators completed over 150 tsunami relief and community development projects, starting with emergency needs and moving on to education, livelihood development, and conservation. One key idea was tourism. Traditional livelihoods like fishing had nearly vanished, but locals felt that tourism could support them. They wanted to be sure that it could be done in a way that would preserve their land and benefit their community. So Garrett and the villagers launched Andaman Discoveries. "Tourism can be used not only for economic benefit, but also as a tool for community development," Garrett says. "So for us that means allowing people to come in and participate in the mangrove reforestation efforts, it means helping to replant orchids in the forest and working with the handicraft programs."

Today, Andaman Discoveries runs community-based eco-tours, cultural tours, and a volunteer placement program that was named one of the top 50 "Trips of a Lifetime" by National Geographic. North Andaman Tsunami Relief's other projects, including environmental education, vocational training, a handicraft cooperative, and a community center have also taken off. Garrett predicts that soon the programs will be entirely self-sustaining, thereby working him out of a job. To him that will be the truest measure of success.

For more information on Andaman Discoveries or to get in touch with Bodhi Garrett, visit www.andamandiscoveries.com.

After the Wave

To view a video documentary on Bodhi Garrett's relief work in North Andaman, visit <http://nature.berkeley.edu/breakthroughs>.

