

A youth-powered tsunami recovery

After the 2004 Boxing Day tidal wave brought a halt to traditional life, villages in south-western Thailand are being led by an innovative student-driven learning program to recover their livelihoods and develop solution-finding skills to better manage local natural resources.

In an open studio space just a few blocks from Bangkok's pulsing Khao San Road, Chaluaywan Panya – known simply to her friends as Tui – sits and talks with a quiet contentedness. She's pleased with the recent progress of 'Youth Leverage', the program she set up with partner Dr Opart Panya in mid-2005 to help remote southern Thai villages recover from the devastation of the tsunami.

The walls of the studio are plastered with photos of young students working with local groups – the smiles belie the incredible difficulties the villagers have faced since the disaster, but they also highlight a new positiveness, thanks to the local students that Tui's team has trained to find self-help solutions to the livelihood, environmental and social challenges facing these people.

From Ranong, just beneath Myanmar's lowest border, Thailand stretches 600 km south towards Malaysia in a leg-like, verdant peninsula. Its spectacular western coast, which took the brunt of the tsunami, is world-renowned for the archipelagos of near-shore islands that bejewel the Strait of Malacca.

But the remoteness of these more southerly islands and shores also makes life hard for the poor, mainly Muslim communities that have subsisted in the region for generations.

The tsunami destroyed whole villages and killed working family members, taking with it occupational tools, equipment and the means crucial to food and income – such as fishing boats and gear, or vegetable gardens – and in many cases permanently altered the coastal ecosystems. Some marine species important

Below: Thailand's spectacular south-western coast is home to fishing communities that host small tourism enterprises. James Porteous





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to the communities, such as crabs, were irreparably depleted, and in other places the traditional balance of habitats has now changed, reducing productivity.

These effects have doubly compounded the difficulties of life and made the psychological impact of the disaster difficult to surmount.

‘We felt that these isolated villagers needed a much more empowering alternative to the direct material tsunami aid that was getting through,’ Tui says, revealing her motivations. ‘We had to try to find a way to actually reunite the community, to restore a sense of purposefulness and pride around new livelihood options – that’s the only way to really heal from something like this.’

‘We also wanted to take the chance to build new skills and knowledge while working on cultural and research learning activities, and we felt that training the young people, to empower the rest of the village or town, was the answer for the long term. They have the enthusiasm.’

Although local and international agencies rushed to assist in the region by providing basic relief as well

Young village fishermen are learning to adapt to changed conditions after the tsunami.

Youth Leverage

as replacing essential equipment, the well-intentioned efforts caused unexpected issues. Generally the relief was free, but some required villagers to pay for supplies over time. And where affected villages were closer to main access towns, multiple aid efforts actually became overwhelming and failed to consider any development plans already being run by the locals themselves. In many cases, the remoteness of affected communities meant relief didn’t reach them effectively, or at all.

This caused further tensions and disappointment, and left communities feeling disempowered. Beyond that, there was little assistance given to restoring or dealing with environmental damage.

It was against this background that the Youth Leverage project was designed and then proposed for funding, through Mahidol University in Bangkok, where Tui and Opart teach community based natural resource management.

Dr Panya, who is also Board Chairman of Greenpeace South-East Asia, said that funding for



the project came from the Thai Health Authority after Mahidol University had already run projects, in conjunction with the Undergraduate Volunteers Foundation, to collect data on the tsunami's effects on ecosystems in the region.

'This early tsunami work involved us with southern villages and showed us that something was needed to engage the youth of the affected communities,' he says.

'In Thai society there is a lack of knowledge of both local ecosystems and local culture – it's not a strong enough part of the curriculum. We saw that the Youth Leverage program could involve post-graduates from the university getting experience by training the younger people of the affected villages in how to design and research projects on their local environmental issues and cultural history.

'The program aims to get villages back together through the youth projects, helping people to see for themselves what is still "good" about their communities. It gives empowerment through new skills and knowledge, but with cultural sensitivity,' Dr Panya says.

After meetings at Mahidol University identified that the preference was ultimately to try wherever possible to empower marginalised groups – such as Muslim women and children – 20 graduates from universities around Thailand were selected to work with young

Top right: Fish rearing cages were designed by the Youth Leverage project in Thambon Tha Nglo village, Trang Province.

Youth Leverage

Top left: Tui Panya is building capacity through her Youth Leverage program.

Youth Leverage

Bottom left: Village students learning to research with their teacher and Mahidol University graduate coordinator.

Youth Leverage

students of 20 villages in six provinces along the south-western coast.

The university held workshops to train the graduates in how to teach informal research techniques to the village students so that they could then investigate the most important issues in their villages. This aimed to develop an investigative nature and process.

Supported by the graduates and their local teachers, the students were then divided into groups and asked to inquire among parents and elder village members about the main environmental and resource priorities, local cultural history issues and the potential for community managed ecotourism opportunities. They were also given disposable cameras to record their inquiries.

'This got everyone thinking and remembering and helped them to appreciate their community, as well as to understand that things could be done,' says Tui. 'They started thinking for themselves.'

'We then encouraged the students to design solutions for a conservation project around what they discovered, by all working together. The outcomes were then presented to the village to be shared and accepted. The results inspired everyone and got older village members enthusiastic about the potential for change.'

As a result of this process that Tui calls 'living research,' many of the village projects decided on

18 months ago across the six provinces are now underway, supported by funding from the Youth Leverage program. While there are differences in the thoroughness, progress and participation in the projects depending on the village, it's the fact that some are showing signs of real, long-term practical success that most satisfies Tui and Opart.

'The villagers involved say they have more optimism now and a sense of independence,' says Tui. 'That's what we hoped for.'

After the tsunami hit the fishing village of Ban Thayarng in Ranong Province, fishermen noticed an immediate decline in the crab fishery they rely on for food and income. This was being made worse by poaching from other fishermen with more sophisticated gear, and the fishery was under threat.

Through identifying and discussing this issue with the fishermen, the students involved in Youth Leverage thought of a meshed cage system that when submerged would hold and protect large egg-laden female crabs, allowing hatched larvae to escape and grow locally to replenish the fishery. The project now has six active village members and the cages deployed since last year appear to be working well.

At Ban Bor Jet Luk in Satun Province, students identified that the local fish population was depleting and an alternative income source needed to be found. After consultation, they decided that a tourism and learning centre with accommodation for visitors would be worth a try to showcase the customs and natural assets of the area.

By November 2006 the project was up and running and the first visitors reported a very enjoyable experience. Since then the project has bedded down and is aiming to do some concerted marketing.

After recognising in their project that the nearby reservoir was an underutilised resource, the students of Thambon Tha Nglo in Trang Province suggested setting up fish rearing cages as a way to supply food to the village as well as generate new income from local sales. One hundred cages have now been established which are capable of generating 12 000 Baht (AU\$400) per month for the 17 stakeholders now taking part. The students even designed a rotation system to ensure that those with the oldest fish sell their product first, avoiding competition.

Further north in Ranong Province, the villagers of Ban Tung Nang Dam have been making the most of the marine debris scattered by the tsunami. Their project centres on making small ornaments and artefacts for sale to tourists from driftwood and other material washed onto their beaches. They are also researching a process of tissue culture cultivation in order to propagate and protect a rare orchid which grows in their region, but is being stolen by outsiders for sale.

Meanwhile, in Ban Buu Boi, Satun Province, the locals are finding advantage from the influx of jellyfish which suddenly appeared after the tsunami, forcing a change to regular fishing. As a result of their Youth Leverage involvement, villagers are now working with outsiders to harvest the jellyfish and process them in small shore-side 'factories' for export to Bangkok where the jelly is further refined into commercial agar. The project has united the village and provided a very successful alternative livelihood for many families – another clear success of the program.



A local woman processes jellyfish, now common after the tsunami, at Ban Buu Boi, Satun Province. Youth Leverage

As Tui and Opart encourage the development of the current projects and refine the Youth Leverage training for future ones, they are clear about the overarching goal of the process. 'We want these children and their communities to learn to have wise use and management of their natural resources,' Dr Panya says. 'We also encourage them to use their local voice to work with provincial authorities. They shouldn't just passively take government direction and advice anymore. Now they know they can think for themselves.'

Tui points to a photo that shows a tangle of Thai children playing in the ocean. 'Last year we brought as many of the program's students as we could together for a day so they could meet and learn from each other,' she says. 'It was a very happy day – very satisfying to see how much confidence and assuredness these young people had all gained from their training experience. There were instant friendships, religion didn't matter.'

As it looks ahead, the Youth Leverage team is hoping for some more substantial funding and support from a large organisation. 'We have plenty more to do,' Tui says with a smile. Judging by the achievements so far of this comparatively small and modestly funded post-tsunami relief effort, any support that is pledged will be a worthy investment.

● James Porteous