

## Tom Crowley's Blog

Visiting the Moken of Koh Lao 1/2



Upon retirement from the business world in 1998 I approached the Human Development Foundation, also known as the Mercy Centre, in Bangkok to see if they would accept me as a volunteer. They invited me in and I thought it would be for a year or two. Now fourteen years have passed and I have been privileged to work alongside a wonderful group organization in Thailand. Recently I had occasion to visit a project Mercy has been working on for four years in the South of Thailand, that is education and health assistance to the Moken people, often known as "Sea Gypsies", living on the island of Koh Lao. This island is a thirty minute boat ride from the Thai fishing town of Ranong located on the Andaman Sea along the Thai border with Burma.

The Moken are an indigenous nomadic tribal people, numbering between 2,000 and 4,000 who have lived and fished on the islands of the Andaman seas for over a thousand years. They have a unique language with no written form and very often don't speak either Thai or Burmese. They are animists and worship the gods of the sea. The village I was going to visit has fifty families and a population of approximately 370. This makes it one of the largest of the Moken groups scattered along the Andaman coast and islands. As the boat approaches Koh Lao one of the first things you see emerging from the green jungle background of the island is the collection of wooden homes built on stilts over the water's edge. Though I am not trained as a sociologist or anthropologist the thing that jumped out to me immediately was that these are a very close knit people.

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What led me to that assumption was that the homes were not spread out but rather clustered together in one contiguous mass, each house almost touching the next so that it seemed you could walk from the porch of one house to the next and make your way through the village in that manner. Possibly it's done so that a person doesn't have to get down into the water at high tide to make their way around the village but, whether it's cause or effect, it came to me, as I met with them and learned a bit about the social life of the Moken, that they are indeed a close knit group.

Another thing that quickly becomes apparent is that these people are not living the glorified pastoral life that is sometimes conjured up in National Geographic photo articles, but rather a savage daily fight for survival. When our Mercy staff first approached this village four years ago they found children were dying at the rate of three each month in the first year Mercy worked there. All of the community had intestinal worms which took several treatments over a period of months to eliminate. Now the community is, for the most part, healthy and in the past year only five child deaths have occurred. Mercy's main program with poor children is education but you have to protect the children and their health first.

Today Mercy has established a preschool on the island which teaches 35 children the Thai language, provides medical counseling to the community and, most importantly, provides a nutritious lunch each day. Last year Mercy established a home in the city of Ranong to house 20 of the older Moken children so they could attend primary and junior high school at government schools in the city. While the traditional way of life is passing, there is a basis for hope in the future of the Moken children.