

ENVIRONMENT

Drive to bring in visitors turns community around

Eco-tourism programme restores Ban Bang Rong villages to former glory

ACHATAYA CHUENNIRAN

Unity and collective efforts to restore local resources have turned an area once exploited by deforestation and water-polluting prawn farms on Phuket to a popular ecological tourist attraction.

Ban Bang Rong community consists of five villages along the Bang Rong canal in the southern island province.

The community covers 2,075 rai and houses 1,172 people from 327 families, 80% of whom are Muslims, in tambon Pa Klawk of Thalang district. It borders Phra Thaew mountain in the west and the sea in the east.

Years ago the community lost most of its mangrove forests to shrimp farmers and logging concessionaires who made charcoal. That destroyed the coastal fishery which was the only way local people made a living.

Ban Bang Rong people then had to turn to cultivation but failed as they were unfamiliar with it. Their plantations finally fell into the hands of their creditors. Poverty drove local people to theft and drugs.

The situation prompted local religious leaders to find ways to save their people. Rescue plans started with a fund to help people in financial trouble. The fund saved villagers from harsh interest rates charged by loan sharks.

In 1998, the fund was developed into a fund which supported the activities of villagers, housewives and coastal fishermen. These groups gradually solved local problems such as poverty, crimes and drug addiction.

The activity which has made money for villagers is development of the Ban Bang Rong community as an ecological tourist attraction which highlights the abundant forest on Phra Thaew moun-

Reborn community

Its mangrove forests destroyed, the Ban Bang Rong community has turned itself into an ecotourism site, an initiative that has helped solve local problems of poverty, crime and drug addiction.



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tain, local lifestyles along Bang Rong canal and the natural beauty of mangrove forests and coastal sea water.

Villagers spent two years rehabilitating their mangrove forests and preparing services for visitors such as camp sites, a restaurant which serves local seafood dishes, rental mountain bikes, and coastal kayaks which are guided to seaside caves and fish farms.

“The community has turned itself into a natural classroom where visitors can learn villagers’ lifestyles. In the meantime, local people have jobs and income, and drug addiction and gambling among young people are fading away. This is a dream coming true for community dwellers,” said Jirasak Thortip, head of the tambon Pa Klawk civil society.

Tourist programmes also include mountain treks and visits to a waterfall. Each day the community welcomes 60-70 visitors, mostly Europeans.



Bang Rong villagers take tourists by canoe on a tour of Klong Bang Rong, part of an eco-tourism programme that has helped the community overcome poverty and drug problems. — ACHATAYA CHUENNIRAN

Tonne of rubbish recovered

Trang

More than a tonne of garbage has been brought up from under the sea off this southern province ahead of this year's Underwater Wedding on Feb 13-15 to mark St Valentine's Day.

Salin Tothapthiang, chairman of the Trang Chamber of Commerce, said foreign and local divers cleaned the venue for the underwater wedding off Koh Kradan in Kantang district.

They had brought up rubbish there, and at Morakot cave and Koh Muk, Koh Chuak, Koh Ma and Koh Waen islands.

The divers brought up more than 1,000kg of garbage including anchors, tyres, ropes, boat engines, cloth and

utensils.

Most of the garbage was picked up from Morakot cave, he said.

Mr Salin said 40 couples had expressed interest in taking part in the group wedding. If all showed up, it would set a new record. Last year 36 couples took part, and that record made it to the Guinness Book of Records.

About 30,000 Thai and foreign tourists were expected to visit Trang during the annual event, he said.

Maitri Duangsawat, director of the Marine and Coastal Resources Department, said garbage destroys seaweed and coral reefs. Tour boats should have enough rubbish bins on board to take waste thrown away by tourists.