

The case of Moklen people in southern Thailand

The Moklen are an indigenous community of sea faring people, commonly referred to as sea gypsies, plying the south China seas. They lead a nomadic life, but some have settled along the Andaman coast of southern Thailand. Most of them hold Thai citizenship and have adopted Buddhism, whilst still practising their beliefs in ancestral spirits. As one would expect, the Moklen are primarily dependent on fishing, whilst some have begun to work in rubber and coconut plantations.

Until the tsunami destroyed their housing and seafaring vessels, those on the island of Phra Thong, which has sandy soils with low fertility, continued to pursue fishing as their primary activity. Using traditional knowledge of the value of the ecosystem they have taken care to keep mangroves in good order to enable them to carry on with their fishery-based livelihoods, in particular, crab trapping. Though in despair after the tsunami, the Moklen were amongst the first to return to the island to begin rebuilding their lives.

Assistance through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation soon brought them homes and replaced lost fishing boats and gear, enabling them to recommence their main livelihoods. Being a sea-faring community, they had very little knowledge of land-based livelihoods, so the World Conservation Union undertook a series of participatory needs assessment exercises, after which it was agreed that they would benefit from being trained in home gardening. Several families were then persuaded to plant vegetables in their home gardens, something they had never done before. As sandy soils are very low in fertility, they were first taught how to change this by incorporating organic matter, such as household refuse as fertilizer and are now successfully producing a wide variety of produce.

With this new form of livelihood for the Moklen now established, the World Conservation Union has followed up with training in making liquid bio-fertilizers and such organic farming methods, including the preparation of plant-based natural pesticides, have proved most successful in helping to further improve soil fertility and maintain productivity.

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