



## NEWSLETTER 9

Updated 1st March, 2006

Hi again everyone and a warm hello to those of you who are new to my newsletter.

The last month has been very busy, as usual, with lots of visitors (hi Brian, Ally and Roger, Celeste, Peter and Gayle). Angela has also returned to Cambodia from China and is now helping me with the village (yeehaa!). I've also had lots of positive response from a newspaper article about Prasat Char village that was recently published on the Sunshine Coast.

Thank you again to all of you who continue to help us help the people of Prasat Char village.

Sovanne and I have been continuing our work out at Prasat Char village. We are still constructing water pumps, providing seeds, tools and watering cans, helping people with medical aid, providing emergency supplies of rice, bikes, etc. It seems each time we visit the village we meet yet another family who is barely managing to survive.

### **CONCRETE SLABS AND NASTY SPIRITS** (both ghostly and of the alcoholic variety)

Now that the wet season is over we have finally been able to start to construct concrete slabs around the water pumps. Without them the area is constantly muddy and a breeding ground for mosquitoes (and therefore illness). I asked the same man who made the water pumps to make one concrete slab for us so that I could inspect it before we went ahead and made all of them.

When we met up with him to inspect the first concrete slab we found that one corner of it was broken. My first thought was that he hadn't done a very good job on the foundation. This surprised me for two reasons; 1. he knew we wouldn't ask him to make any more if he didn't do a good job, and 2. he usually takes a lot of pride in his work. I soon realized that he was actually quite upset to see his work broken and that it wasn't his fault at all.

It appears that straight after the concrete slab was finished the woman who lived in the house where the water pump is located became ill. Her husband blamed her illness on spirits that had been upset by the construction of the concrete. After drinking more than his fair share of rice wine the husband decided to take revenge on the concrete by breaking it up. It was a day or two after this occurred that we arrived to inspect it. At this point the woman was still quite ill and had not received any medical attention.

*Brian (from the UK) and the contractor inspecting the concrete slab.*



Once I realized what had happened I informed the husband that he and his family would receive no more help from us until he took his wife to the medical center and fixed the concrete. I then decided that from now on the family receiving the water pumps and concrete had to provide the labor during the construction of them. This means we save a bit of money, but, more importantly, hopefully it means that the recipients will feel more of a sense of ownership of the pump and the concrete and will look after them better. In the end it was a valuable lesson for all of us.

The man did fix the concrete and fortunately his wife did get better (without needing to go to the doctor). In order to appease the spirits the man flattened two large ant hills that were located beside the concrete, thereby changing the lay of the land.

**LAZINESS....?**



This lady, Mrs Seng, is one of the most amazing people we deal with at the village. She is a single mother and has five children. I may have mentioned my admiration for her before. Despite debilitating poverty she still makes sure her children go to school and whenever we visit she is always working hard at something. So I was a little puzzled by the fact that each time we go to visit her, her house seems to be more and more dilapidated. I couldn't understand why she took such pride in everything else and then literally let her house go to rack and ruin. Its literally on the verge of collapse.



The answer was provided by some other villagers who complained to us that they didn't have the materials to repair their houses, as they didn't have any palm trees on their small patch of land. The houses (perhaps I should call them huts or simply shelters) are made out of bamboo and palm leaves. It occurred to me that Mrs Seng also didn't have any palm trees and we asked her if this was the reason she didn't fix her house. This is indeed the case. If the people don't have palm trees on their own land they have to buy the palm leaves from other people. And once again, if you have no cash whatsoever, this is obviously not possible.

I immediately asked Sovanne to find out who we could buy some palm leaves from and we have now placed an order for enough palm leaves for her to repair her house. We also plan to provide seeds or saplings so that Mrs Seng and any of the other families that need them, can grow their own palm trees.



*The palm leaves that the villagers use to make their houses, mats, baskets, etc.*

*A load of palm leaves.*



I'd love to simply go in and build Mrs Seng a new house. It really wouldn't cost much, but our philosophy is to give a hand up, not a hand out. If we build a house for Mrs Seng and her family it would cause jealousy amongst the villagers. It is far more sustainable for us to provide her with the materials so that she can do it herself.

## **WOODEN SOAP AND SHARED SCHOOL SHIRTS**



While visiting Mrs Seng and her family recently, I was observing one of her children getting ready for school. She attended the afternoon session of school while her brother attended the morning session.

First she went to the water pump to wash herself. The family have no way to buy soap and I was amazed to watch her pick up a very rough stick and scrub herself with it. Subsequently, her skin was red raw - talk about exfoliating! I then watched as she patiently stood by and waited for her brother to take off his white school shirt, but I didn't realize what she was waiting for. It soon became clear when he handed her the shirt and she put it on and headed off to school! They only have one shirt between them.

I recently had a visit from Brian Stenson from a charity in the UK that gives medical and scientific aid. Brian and I went to visit an aid organisation called Concern. The two Cambodian men we met there were extremely helpful. One of the main functions of Concern is to facilitate co-operation between all the local aid organisations (of which there are many). Subsequently, Sovanne and I found ourselves in a networking meeting (which is held monthly) attended by many of the local organisations. I was the only foreigner there and the entire meeting was in Cambodian so it was a little tricky, but we still got a lot out of it and made many contacts. One organisation we met focuses on agricultural issues and we are already talking to them about such things as getting better quality seeds and irrigation options. We are also discussing the

possibility of developing "human powered" water pumping machines to enable the villagers to be able to water more crops than they can currently do with just watering cans. Very exciting stuff! (I never imagined I could excited about such things.) You can get petrol or oil powered water pumping machines, but, as I said above, with no cash the villagers can't buy the necessary petrol or oil.

I'll leave you with a few more of my favourite images of the people of Prasat Char village.

Until next time..... ***Deborah***

