

Spared by the sea



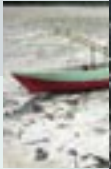
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It is December 26, 2004. Several elders from the Moken tribe, a small community of sea gypsies from the Surin islands Marine National Park off the coast of Phang-Nga Province, Thailand, notice that the sea is churned up and moving in an unusual way. They raise the alarm. Most of the inhabitants rush to take refuge further inland. When they return, the village has been entirely swept away by La Boon, as the Moken call the tsunami that devastated the region. Their boats and houses mounted on piles have been reduced to a heap of wood and debris. But while Thailand mourns more than 5,000 victims, the Moken community was spared. The elders' knowledge of the sea saved their lives. And ever since, their story has spread around the world.

In the aftermath of the catastrophe, UNESCO Bangkok took part in one of the missions launched by the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), based in Phuket, Thailand, to evaluate the damage done to the environment and settlements in the region. Through the Science Sector's Coastal Regions and Small Islands (CSI) programme and the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) CCT project, UNESCO has for the last several years taken an interest in the indigenous peoples of the Andaman ►



The Moken village, built right on the beach, as it was before the tsunami (above)



Photos Derek Elias



- Islands and especially the Moken, who live in a protected zone that has been a national park since 1981. Acting on the conclusions of the UNDAC mission, the team working on the project for the Surin islands travelled there to assess damage and determine what aid the community required.

The Moken are now rebuilding their village, using bamboo and leaves woven together, in a non-traditional location inland, as dictated by the local government authorities. They have settled in a forest, further from the sea, and therefore a presumably safer but certainly not more advantageous site. The new village is less sanitary and has poor ventilation and a cramped design. Of most concern, the visibility of the Moken's natural environment, the sea, is substantially reduced.

The influence of the outside world is growing all the time. Since the national park authorities forbade them from catching certain species such as the sea cucumber and some shellfish that they used to sell, the Moken have been deprived of one of their sources of income. A number of them have already abandoned fishing to work as diving guides for tourists or garbage collectors. The objective of UNESCO's Coastal Regions and Small Islands programme is to call attention to their plight and help influence policy to allow the Moken and other sea gypsy communities in Thailand to continue to uphold their traditions and livelihoods, within the National Parks that encompass their traditional homelands and waters.