

Insight Out caravan

By Nattha Keenapan



Phuket, Thailand, 15 January 2008 - Visitors to the Phuket Aquarium on January 12 , which is Children’s Day in Thailand, must have noticed a large group of children rushing around with point-and-shoot digital cameras in their hands and “photo journalist” identification tags hung around their necks.

One reason for the presence of these 110 young photographers was to shoot photos of the colorful fish and sea creatures on hand, but their main mission for the day was to teach other children visiting the aquarium how to take photos of the fish.

The child photography guides included some 65 Thai Buddhist, Thai Muslim, Moken (also known as Sea Gypsy) and Burmese migrant children from tsunami-affected provinces, as well as 45 children from the violence-wracked provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.

The children, who ranged from 9 to 15 years old, learned their photo skills from professional photographers at the UNICEF-supported InSIGHT Out! photo workshops that are organized several times throughout the year. Under the project, children take photos of their communities and learn how

to write stories to describe their images, 120 of which are now being exhibited at the Phuket Aquarium until the end of February.

The InSIGHT Out! project was born out of the tsunami tragedy. Initiated in 2005 by a group of local and foreign professional photographers who covered the mass destruction and terrible human loss wrought by the tsunami, the project aimed at giving children directly affected by the tsunami the opportunity to express their feelings through photography. Not surprisingly, many of the children's photos shot in the period after the tsunami reflected their memories of the disaster and their sense of loss, with photos showing the ruins of buildings, ravaged trees and empty beaches.

Three years on from the tsunami, the project is continuing but with a different purpose -- it now aims at creating friendship and understanding among children from different communities and cultures.

"Normally, kids from these different communities don't mix much," said project director Jeanne Hallacy. "But they have become friends and are beginning to understand that they actually have a lot in common whether they are Thai Buddhist, Thai Muslim, Moken or Burmese."

A couple of days before coming to the Phuket Aquarium, the children traveled in buses to several different communities and schools in Phang Nga province to talk with other children about the project and to show them their photos, which had been blown up to exhibition size.

"The girl in this picture was lonely because her father went out to the sea," Sakifa Withikul, 10, from Narathiwat province explained about her photo to some 100 students at Baan Chao Thai Mai school in Phang Nga, where most of the students are members of the Moken community.

"I took this picture in the fishing community in Narathiwat," Sakifa said. "I wanted to tell people that Narathiwat also has fishing industry that is just as good as in other provinces."

Piyanudda Dhanasiri, the project's coordinator, said the visits to the schools and local communities help to strengthen the children's capacity and self confidence through public speaking, while at the same time giving them the opportunity to educate others about their communities and cultures.

"When we went to the Moken's Tung Wah village, the Moken children showed the photos they had shot to their families and some of their mothers started to cry," Piyanudda said. "Some parents hadn't really understood what their children had been learning through this project until they saw the photos. It really surprised them and it made them very, very proud."

At the Phuket Aquarium which had about 10,000 visitors on Children's Day, the children participating in the project also had the opportunity to pass on their skills to other children. About 60 child visitors signed up for photo lessons from the InSIGHT Out! photo guides.

"Our young photographers took them around the aquarium and showed them how to best take photos of the fish," Piyanudda said. "They did a pretty good job in teaching other kids how to use the cameras."

The quality of the photos produced by children participating in InSIGHT Out! Have impressed many, including the professional photographers working with the children.

Mongkhonsawat Luaengvorapant, an InSIGHT Out! trainer and freelance photographer, termed a photo shot by 10-year-old Ahmad Wongsontham of a colorful clutch of crabs in a net being pulled out

the sea “as truly incredible.” Mongkhohnsawat said that the young photographer had leaned out over the water and then turned his camera upside down to shoot up into the net to capture the image.

“I was shooting at the same place with him and it hadn’t occurred to me to try this,” said Mongkhonsawat. “It shows how creative children can be and how they look at the world differently than adults often do.”

Mongkhonsawat said at least every single child participating the workshops now know how to take photos. Many of them became the school’s photographer whenever their schools have special events or functions.

Mongkhonsawat said the project has instilled a love of photography in many of the children, and that “some of say they will start saving up their money so that they can buy a professional camera like the one I use. They tell me ‘I will be a photographer when I grow up’.”

InSIGHT Out! will continue to involve more children in the world of photography. This year, the project plans to reach out to children in small and isolated island communities where local livelihoods have been affected by tourism. At the same time, the project is considering setting up an on-line system to market the children’s photos to help bring in sorely needed funding. END