

Song Saa's mission to clean up local villages: A case study – the changing face of Prek Svay (Koh Rong), Cambodia

Introduction

Human activities create waste, and it is the way this waste is handled, stored, collected, and disposed, can pose risks to the environment and human health. Where intense human activities concentrate, such as in urban centers, appropriate and safe solid waste management (SWM) are of utmost importance to allow healthy living conditions for the people. Cambodia acknowledges this problem but lacks financial resources and infrastructure limiting SWM systems to only the larger cities on the mainland such as Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville. The more remote areas that include off-shore islands, where infrastructure and environmental education are important issues such as the Koh Rong Archipelago, are still forgotten worlds.



The Koh Rong Archipelago is a collection of 5 islands, including the two small adjacent islands Koh Ouen and Koh Bong – 'Song Saa' Islands – and the larger island Koh Rong. Of the three main villages on Koh Rong – Daem Thkov, Koh Touch village, and Prek Svay – the latter is the most populated village with 148 families. The majority of the people's livelihoods consists of fishing.

Like many other villages in Cambodia, the increase in population and consumption of goods have contributed to a major waste disposal problem in Prek Svay. The relative isolation of the island, the lack of waste disposal systems, and poverty makes for obvious waste transport difficulties. As a result waste has traditionally been burnt, littered, or dumped in surrounding areas such as beaches, playgrounds, and the sea posing health risks for people and wildlife.

This widely spread rubbish has not only become an environmental issue, but it is also hindering the community's plans to gain income through ecotourism which has been creating great concern among residents.

Being present in the region and as part of their strong emphasis on social and environmental responsibility the Song Saa Private Island feels highly committed to take a forward thinking approach to the growing problem of waste management in close collaboration with other stakeholders and local residents.

Identifying the problem

To understand the behavior of the Prek Svay community residents regarding waste disposal and sustainable livelihoods, surveys and discussions were organized with the most fundamental groups in close collaboration with Live & Learn Environmental Education. Organized events showed that the majority of the people lack the awareness about the impact and consequences of their actions on the environment and their health, whereas a few people identified financial restraints, and lack of recycle bins as the main problems.

Start small... a pilot community-based clean up

To introduce the basic principles of maintaining a clean environment Song Saa has organized community-based clean up events on 22 April and 5 June 2010 to celebrate *World Earth Day* and *World Environment Day*. Such events are a perfect tool to raise local awareness concerning the people's attitude on environment and waste management issues. These events happened in conjunction with a number of organizations and businesses including Project AWARE, Fauna & Flora International, Live & Learn Environmental Education, and EcoSea Dive. The majority of the people cleaning the proposed areas were residents from Prek Svay village.



Results:

- More than 150 people – including navy, environmental committee, and monks – participated in the events;
- Over 350 bags were filled with rubbish; collected items were mainly plastics, tin cans, glass fragments and paper;
- Garden rubbish was separated for composting;
- Over 4 large diving bags were filled with discarded fishing gear.

The organized community-based cleanup events were not only beneficial to the environment and human health, but serve as a great test case for communal participation and solidarity. Effective management of solid waste requires such cooperation of the general public.

It is clear that the community from Prek Svay village has the willingness to change their behavior and raise the profile of their village to gain ecotourism revenue and improve local health conditions. However without any catalyst such as Song Saa or any other stakeholder partnership, a Solid Waste Management system is still beyond reach.

Building the bridge to a clean future

Together with local NGOs, Song Saa continues to support the local community and has initiated a program to establish a solid waste management system. For such projects to have a continuing impact, community attitude and participation is a precondition and this entails involving the community at different stages and degrees of intensity in the project cycle.

Further steps that will be undertaken involve the following aspects:

- Raising awareness and celebrating world environmental days;
- Education and training;
- Daily door-to-door garbage collection;
- Encourage waste segregation – reuse, reduce, recycle – and separate organic from inorganic material;
- Promoting and installing composting units;
- Transportation of waste to the mainland;
- Generating local employment.

Furthermore Song Saa's goals include the integration of environmental education in the primary school curriculum to conserve this pristine environment of the Archipelago for the benefits of the future generations. On the longer-term Song Saa will be focusing on improving the current sanitation and sewage condition of the houses in Prek Svay.

Essentially such a program does not only positively affect the ecosystem but also improves local health conditions and disease outbreaks. It will reduce the risks to dengue fever and bacterial infections which are major problems at Prek Svay.

In areas adjacent to important ecosystems like the Koh Rong Archipelago, appropriate similar systems should be well established and maintained. Community-based waste management for example is a complex process and this project is addressing a range of waste management challenges, which face many small, remote, islands in this region with growing populations. However, it is critical to pollution prevention and management of terrestrial and marine environments.