

# Koh Ra Ecolodge

## Newsletter #1 (November 2008-February 2009)

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Hello to all of our past and future guests, volunteers, supporters, and friends of the Koh Ra Ecolodge! Thanks to all of you who have visited, volunteered, and supported us since we started, we couldn't do it without you. Since this is our first newsletter and a lot has happened it will be a long one; the next ones will be shorter (I think).

We have been busy after starting things off with a bang for our **grand opening** on November 1<sup>st</sup> with a wild **Halloween Party**, really wild! Everyone dressed up as a jungle or sea creature with the top prizes going to Heather for her disco jellyfish costume and to Joe the Aboriginal mudman.



Honorable mentions went to Bodhi as "Manta Ray Charles" and Awe as a killer squid. Great fun was had by all with a delicious spaghetti dinner, and the sala was rockin' till the wee hours.

### **Guest reviews are in:**

We had our first guests, and then more, and as of mid-January more than 120 guests have stayed with us. We have had rave reviews; here are a couple of recent guestbook entries:

"Thank you for a very special experience - exactly what we were looking for. We appreciated the soft beach, lush forest, delicious food, great company, and the opportunity for more genuine cultural interaction and learning. Staying here for a few days gave us a sense of fulfillment - environmental stewardship and conservation, cultural preservation, and natural beauty are rarely found in a place so welcoming to visitors."

~Maren and Brian, California, USA, December 9, 2008

"A jewel of a place with welcoming people and pets. The staff is encouraging in its enthusiasm for nature and the environment. Never were the questions of a "northern climate-dweller" ignored or made seem "duh!" My only regret

is that my stay was so short. Four days is just enough to get the island rhythm and now I have to go. Thanks for a wonderful experience. I hope you will find success in this new venture. Good luck, God bless, until we meet again."

~Margaret, Canada, November 22, 2008

"What a nice and beautiful place. Although we were not entirely lucky with the weather, the beauty of the island fully compensates for that. It is nice to know that there are still places existing in Thailand where the rainforest touches the beach. The abundance of wildlife is also awesome. Thanks also to all the staff and volunteers for the company. We sure had a great stay on Koh Ra and will recommend this place to others."

~Adrian and Sybille, Laos, December 2, 2008

A group of Thai travel agents and press visited recently to check us out, one from the well known travel group, **Exotissimo**. We are now featured in their [Ecologies of Southeast Asia](http://www.exotissimo.com/about-exotissimo/exo-experiences/exo-exp-jan-09.html) travel guide (<http://www.exotissimo.com/about-exotissimo/exo-experiences/exo-exp-jan-09.html>).



### Press

**Wanderlust** ([www.wanderlust.com](http://www.wanderlust.com)), an awesome UK-based adventure travel mag, featured us in their anniversary issue and article "The 100 Greatest Travel Secrets in the World" saying:

"Others may have longer beaches & almost all have better nightlife, but if your dream Thai island is remote, wild and eco-friendly, head to Koh Ra. Hovering off the Andaman Sea Coast, 2 hrs drive north of Phuket, Koh Ra's tourism infrastructure totals a single cluster of shady bungalows – once a research base, but newly opened as an eco-lodge & dive centre run by marine biologist Kim Obermeyer. Divers & snorkelers can roam the world class reefs of the Surin Islands, while on land, little-explored mangroves & rainforests lure trekkers in search of hornbills, flying squirrels & leopard cats. Volunteers are welcome too".

We will soon be appearing in the next issue of the **Rough Guide** after a great visit from author Lucy Ridout...coming in late 2009:

<http://www.roughguides.com/website/shop/products/Thailands-Beaches-Islands.aspx>

We just appeared in the **Phuket Post** article (Feb. 10, 2009 issue)

<http://phuket-post.com/article/hotel-tourism/voluntourists-make-a-difference/>)

“Volun-tourists make a difference”, the author having changed the original title from “Lair of the eco-warriors” (which we still are).

We heard that somehow we ended up in Bangkok’s “**Hi-So**” magazine, although we have no idea how (or that we even were Hi-So).

Article soon to appear in **Real Travel** and **Untamed Travel** magazines as well.



### **Reef Check and Earthwatch volunteers tackle reef monitoring:**

Our **Earthwatch** teams have been working hard doing Reef Check surveys around our local reefs from Koh Prathong in the south to Koh Ra, Koh Kai, and the Koh Kam group of islands in the north. Exciting news that we found Bumphead parrotfish, an indicator of healthy reefs, in 3 new locations! Also, exciting news from our monitoring from Koh Prathong reefs (Koh Pling)- corals are regrowing rapidly and we had coral cover **DOUBLED** in the last year to 23%! The reefs in the area still need a lot of help after impacts from the tsunami and continuing human impacts from overfishing, garbage, and mainland pollution and runoff. With the help of volunteers our teams have had a great time at Koh Ra and collected valuable information about the health of Thailand’s coral reefs. Thanks to Earthwatch and our other Reef Check volunteers. Send us an e-mail if you would like to join a team between November and April annually, it’s a great way to be a scientist for a week.

Diving has been great at the Surin Islands and Richelieu Rock and many divers had smiling faces after returning. On January 22 our guests were treated to an amazing and rare whale encounter (possibly Bryde’s or Sei whale species).

### **Community-based tours**

We have begun our community tours with Baan Koh Ra, the nearby **Sea Gypsy village**. A huge “thank you” goes out to the Northern Andaman Community Tourism Network, IUCN and Andaman Discoveries for helping set that up. After talking to the local elders, we have started a community fund to contribute towards several projects starting with a drinking well improvement and water catchment system, and a small garden and chicken house. Guests who visit the village contribute a small amount to the community fund.

They are very happy to have the Ecolodge as friendly neighbors, and we have been doing hikes with guides supplied by them to show us traditionally used plants and also doing some small handicrafts and sweet-making with local plants. Nipa palms and mangroves are especially important to them for all sorts of uses (food, sweetener, roofing material, mats, charcoal...) but they are now less abundant in the area. We would like to implement a small reforestation project at their village sites and will be looking for volunteers (and funding) for this soon.



### **Organic garden and sustainability initiatives**

George, our first WWOOFer (**Willing Workers On Organic Farms**) volunteer, has been busy over the last two and a half months putting in compost and leaf collecting bins and turning our sandy soil into a suitable place for growing vegetables and herbs. Starting with small papaya plants grown from seed and reusing discarded wood, old plastic bottles, and even nurtures his young seedlings and works hard keeping puppies out the garden, he is also now in the process of building a wetland area behind our dishwashing station that will use sand and gravel to filter the soapy water for plant life. George has been a great addition to the Koh Ra family, especially when he strums his guitar in the evenings or plays the ukelele while singing his original number “Welcome to Koh Ra.”

Ring in the WWOOFer New Year has been the arrival of new volunteers, Lucas and Iris from Eukia, California and Iceland, respectively. They have been busy and are now done with our new clay wood-fired pizza oven!!! That’s right, fresh pizza, pies, cobbler, cookies, bread, lasagna, and more, more, more is about to rock Koh Ra. The crew and guests are ready to gain some weight! The clay came from on-site and we will be planning future building projects and maybe workshops in working with this clean, green building material.



The organic garden is well on its way now in February, with several beds of veggies growing nicely. The compost has been strengthened with EM (effective microorganisms) and the young seedlings treated with a natural pesticide made from a native Thai tree.

### **Solar power**

We built a new kayak shed to house our rental kayaks and Zodiak, as well as to serve as a sunny spot to place our solar array. With the beautiful, sun-filled days on Koh Ra, we can now use free, solar power during the day to run computers and charge cell phones and flashlights. We have started to wire lights for the sala and may soon be able to operate basically without the generator.

Other sustainability projects completed or ongoing:

Bioswale waste water filtration for kitchen gray-water

Composting and EM (effective micro-organisms), natural pesticides

Creative reuses for beach garbage and junk

Biochar- a way to sequester and actually draw carbon from the atmosphere

We will update you on the progress of all these next time...

### **Trail system:**

Longterm volunteers and Superstars, Jarod and Heather Raithel have planned, flagged, and built several new trails around Koh Ra, also cleaning up some of the existing ones. The “Samet Daeng” loop known for its shaggy red trees and profuse orchids has become a guest favorite and was built by raking and hand pulling weeds without the use of petrol or chemicals. A lot of hard work, but worth it! We also have a trail to the swimming (soaking) hole with a connecting trail to a spur trail around the creek. Our trails have been a great place to do some bird watching, including catching a glimpse of our resident oriental pied hornbills! “Ranger Jarod” has even been leading our guests on informational nature hikes along the trail system. And, NEW in 2009 is the Ridge Trail- we finally found the “easy” way onto the steep mountain ridge above the valley, it takes only 45 minutes to get up to the top and we’ll be working to connect it with the next bay over the ridge and then back along the beach for a nice longer and more strenuous loop hike. We have also scouted two other routes to different ridges and bays on the north and west coasts- lots of hiking to do now.



We have put together a very nice trail map with highlights and a Nature Guide to Koh Ra with about 40 species of plants and animals found on Koh Ra.

### **Jungle ecology project:**

As a way to get our guests involved in our wildlife monitoring, we have developed a survey to estimate the size of our local hornbill population. By doing bird counts along a set transect line, we are hoping to estimate the population density of these fascinating birds. It was wonderful seeing groups of at least 10 hornbills (and other birds) feasting on a fig tree near Bungalow 7 for a week in December. Our highest survey count for hornbills in 22! We are also collecting behavioral data on the long-tailed macaque group that frequents our rocky point. There is so much that is still unknown about the wildlife of our island.

### **Wildlife Notes:**

We've had some great wildlife sightings, aided by keen birders and botanists lately. We've had a pair of Crested serpent eagles roosting and hunting about lately and have found a White-bellied sea eagle nest. Other commonly seen birds have been Rufus-headed bee eaters, back for the dry season, golden orioles shrikes, and a lot more. Wild pigs have been coming down at night and occasionally during the day for water and to eat the banana tree trunks. Leopard cat tracks started appearing everywhere (our beach and three other adjacent beaches, most trails) recently and we are planning a night-hike to see them. We had a look at a treed adult awhile back too! We've seen several banded sea snakes around the beaches and a couple dolphin sightings from our beach. People have often seen sea turtles including what looked to be mating, but no nests found on our beaches. Apparently, they are late nesting this year, possibly due to cold temperatures according to Monica at the Naucrates project on Koh Pratong. We are hoping to expend our nesting beach surveys to the west coast and need some volunteers (and gas money) for this.



Orchids have been blooming and smelling sweet and we've been able to identify several species now from the flowers. There are surely dozens more that are difficult to ID without flowers.



### **Controlling island dog populations**

Now this was really fun! We had a Thai non-profit, **Soi Dogs Foundation**, come up from Phuket to help us with our burgeoning island dog population. The Koh Ra Ecolodge has committed to helping control the dog population in a humane way and funded the vets visit to capture, sterilize, and vaccinate 12 dogs! We waited for weeks amid scrapping dogs, puppies underfoot and nighttime kitchen raids! When the vets finally appeared, they were greeted by the staff with open arms. We had fun chasing and tranquilizing pooches left and right with a well-equipped jungle dog clinic. One after another, they fell and we chuckled as we nestled the still-sleeping dogs, minus their bits, in a nice row. All of the hard work was worth it as even our 4 month old puppies are neutered, and we are seeing many improvements in dog behavior. Thanks to Dr. Max and the crew at Soi Dog!



### **Christmas and New Year celebration**

Christmas and New Years was fun-filled and we also filled up all the rooms, much to our surprise with 26 guests. We also had up to seven kids running around for the holidays which added to the fun. Santa Claus actually found us on Koh Ra (with the help of GPS no doubt) and left a load of presents under the Casuarinas pine (sp.) next to the sala for the elated children. We rang in the New Year with a nice bonfire and Kim's special lamyai (Thai fruit) sangria.



### **Partners in conservation**

Jim Enright and staff and supporters from the Mangrove Action Project (MAP; <http://www.mangroveactionproject.org/>) stopped by for a visit recently to talk about developing joint learning centers on Koh Ra and Koh Prathong and have a look at our diverse little area of mangroves. We are hoping to develop a small reforestation project at the Moken village on Koh Ra soon.

Big thanks to our friends at Andaman Discoveries as well for all their great community work.

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Stay tuned for more, as we are an energetic crew! COME JOIN US! By staying at the Ecolodge, guests and volunteers are contributing (through directed revenue and/or participation) to natural and cultural conservation and sustainability in this, jewel of a place, Koh Ra and the Northern Andaman Sea coast. We are an alternative to Thailand's current model of high-impact mass tourism and demonstration of sustainable tourism and living.

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Sincerely,

Kim, Awe, Jarod, Heather, Baw, Tos, Rut, Juum, Sii, Lucas, Iris, and the Dogs of Koh Ra  
(too many to name)

