

# Eye on Cambodia: Waste Management

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## *Location*

Koh Pdao and Koh Preah villages are both set on islands of the Mekong that unfold between Kratie and Strung Treng Provinces, both are CRDT project sites and both are home to many of the livelihood activities CRDT use to enrich the lives of rural Cambodian people. Koh Pdao is a well established community-based ecotourism destination that offers unassuming relaxation and fireside sunsets to those that make the short journey there from Kratie town. Koh Preah, on the other hand, is new to ecotourism and is still keen to prove itself and live up to the high standards CRDT have helped to found on Koh Pdao further downstream...



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## *Background Issues*

Waste management is a hot topic among the islanders that choose to make their voices heard. What to do with rubbish from consumables (degradable *and* biodegradable) affects the village on several levels. It gives way to sickness and poor health, which in turn affects income, as well as pollution of the precious Mekong waters and the land they farm for sustenance and a way of life. As well as making the whole area look unattractive, why would any tourist want to see a village covered in plastic bags and rotting debris? And it's not just about creating a good environment for ecotourism to flourish, but for the villagers themselves, to feel good about the place they live in. Plastic bags, as well as waste wrappers from consumables like shampoo and sweets and snacks are a common sight in the rural areas, and can often be found around the villagers water supplies and at the rivers edge. They are visually unattractive, cause harm to the aquatic and terrestrial wildlife, and can take hundreds, if not thousands of years to break up.

But waste management is not just about putting rubbish in bins, it's about sanitation and education, having the facilities and the knowledge to be able to go to a real toilet and wash with clean water, water you can let your children drink without fearing tomorrow's consequences.

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## *Family Histories*



**Mr. Seng Sokim** is 71 and has a family that currently totals 6. They are all farmers apart from one that is currently studying off the island. He has been on Koh Pdao since birth and got married in 1971 just a few short years before the Khmer Rouge took hold of the country: "I was able to stay on Koh Pdao but we were made to farm rice all day with nothing to eat. All of my friends were killed".



At the youthful age of 14, **Mrs. Seng Sokhem** is sprightly and quick witted. It wasn't until later that she revealed her little joke by giving in and whispering her real age of 53. Very funny. She got married in 1976 with 4 other couples as was the way during the Pol Pot regime. She is an active member of the Koh Pdao CBET group.



In 1970 **Mr. Meas Min** came to Koh Pdao to become a farmer, after getting married that same year. All of his children have followed him in that occupation, bar 1 that went on to continue his studies, but was quick to say that they all went to school. Good for them.



3 of **Mrs. Nyon Vannarah's** 4 children are continuing their studies after leaving school and 1 now works in a health centre. She is the treasurer for the Koh Preah CBET CBO, as well as being active in several other community projects on Koh Preah. She has been married twice in her 45 years and mentions that during the Pol Pot times she was moved to a new commune in Kampong Thom Province, from which only 200 people survived. She came back to Koh Preah in 1979 to find that most of the inhabitants had been killed from overworking and starvation.



A divorcee and mother of 2 children, **Mrs. Su Channah** is an active member of the Koh Preah CBET CBO as well as being a teacher. Her 10 year old goes to school and her eldest is continuing to study since leaving. Her mother lives at home with them, she was present at the meeting, she was walking around the grounds beating baskets of rice to ready them for lunch.

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### *CRDT's Presence: Koh Pdao*

All the beneficiaries interviewed said that before CRDT came to the island they were worse off, they all said that they made a low income but had very high expenses, most money going on buying medicine and generally treating bad health due to the fact that they were very often sick, the children especially. They mentioned also, that before the island had any waste management or sanitation aids provided by CRDT, their houses all smelt very bad, the pungent stench of rotting food and unconsidered waste left lying around. But again all those questioned on Koh Pdao were quick to tell us what CRDT had brought to the island: "Chicken, pig and duck raising, fish ponds, rainwater storage, biodigesters, ecotourism, toilets, rubbish bins". Also mentioned was "knowledge and agriculture techniques". Good to hear the work done summed up so effortlessly as 'Knowledge'...

Since 2005 CRDT have been committed to Koh Pdao, and between January and June 2009 alone there have been a multitude of waste management activities and trainings, as well as physical ventures to keep the ball moving and the standard high. In April there was a 'Community clean environment day' which saw the villagers get together and gather rubbish strewn across the land and the waters of the Mekong. Alongside this is monthly rubbish collecting duties that sees 2 people employed to clear plastic bags and wrappers found on the floor and take them to the island's incinerators. Another person is employed to pick up rubbish from the ecotourism sites. Speaking of incinerators, 3 more have been added to the 1 that existed already in the last 6 months; these allow safe burning of degradable waste rather than starting fires around their homes that are a danger to children and animals. There have been several training seminars on waste management covering alternative uses, like composting instead of using chemical fertilizers, and 1000 environmental education posters displaying information about the benefits of good waste management have been printed. Since the start of the year 25 rubbish bins have been installed; 20 at the houses of the CBET members, 2 at schools in the village, 2 at tourist sites, and 1 at the pagoda. And all that is just in the last 6 months.



A rubbish bin installed by CRDT on Koh Pdao. Sugar cane press not included...



...And here's one implemented *not* by CRDT, but by a villager that wants to get involved.

So with all this work have CRDT made an impact on the attitudes towards sanitation and waste management? The villagers told us of how they have been educated about the environment, and the damage rubbish and untreated human effluence can do, and that simply throwing the rubbish in the provided rubbish bins that are nailed to the front gates of many of the homes can go some way to making a change for the better. One very promising soundbite provided by Mr. Meas Min was that they had learned to "extend their knowledge to other people"... Thank you Mr. Meas Min.

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### *CRDT's Presence: Koh Preah*

CRDT's waste management strategy is still in its infancy on Koh Preah, the initiative only officially began in July 2009 and as yet there has been just 1 meeting with the CBO council and the commune chief. So if this case study is to be viewed as anything, view it as a comparison, or the journey between points A and B that CRDT and the people of Koh Preah will soon embark on.

But despite the lack of waste management interventions, it was clear from the words of the villagers that given the chance, they would welcome any action taken with open arms and strive to proliferate. Mrs. Nyon Vannarah seemed empowered with the livelihood activities CRDT have already introduced to the island and would clearly like to get her hands on the practices CRDT can offer: "CRDT want to improve the living standards of the people in the village, and teach them how to generate their own income. They have brought us animals to raise and we can grow vegetables in the vegetable gardens, we have rainwater storage and they have shown us SRI for the rice, as well as bringing tourists to the island". Mrs. Su Channah was present also, and interjected with: "Most families cannot afford to buy chickens, pigs and ducks, but CRDT provided these things for us, as well as seeds for the vegetable gardens." And continued with: "they brought us bio-digesters which we had never seen before. Before CRDT came, people needed to bring firewood from the forest, but now they can put cow dung into the digester and it produces gas and light... They want to help the people of this commune because we live near to the dolphin pools and they want to conserve the dolphins."

As soon as resources and education are made more widely available it seems Koh Preah could be the new Koh Pdao. Mrs. Nyon Vannarah had recently been on a study tour to another village that revealed many practices to help conserve the natural beauty of their environment by correctly managing waste. She said that she could see that this was a very important issue that they needed on their island as soon as possible, and raised this at the monthly CBO meetings with the commune chief that had also been on the study tour. The chief said that he didn't care about learning waste management practices from other villages and felt ecotourism was more the pressing issue, the problem being that the villagers will follow whatever decision the commune chief makes. Seems CRDT have some work ahead of them, but they are used to that.



**Left:** With the addition of rainwater storage, villagers can wash, cook and drink with clean water.

**Right:** Pigs provide meat to eat, and if they have the surplus, to sell.

**Below left:** Cleaning materials

**Below right:** Phrases written on the beams of houses to say to tourists.



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### *Koh Pdao: Today...*

In Sambo village, the hopping-off point for trips to Koh Pdao, there was a thin covering of sweet wrappers and bits of indeterminate plastic on the floor, like dabs of colour on a palette. Hopefully the situation will be different in Koh Pdao village... On arrival it was clear that although waste management has come far here, there is still a way to go. The floor did seem to be littered with old plastic bags and food wrappers, but the place was by no means a pig sty. (That was round the back with the chickens and the fish ponds.) The important thing is, have attitudes changed? Can the people see this smattering of rubbish on the floor and know that it is a menace to their society? Do they know why it should be removed and placed into a bin or properly disposed of? Questioning Mr. Seng Sokhim revealed: "Waste management is important because it creates a better environment in the village, and this helps protect the people's health. Throwing rubbish away wherever and putting waste in the river creates pollution, and this gives way to Climate change". On his attitude towards these things now he said: "Before CRDT came and told us about waste management, none of the villagers would care or try to make a change. I used to throw rubbish everywhere and didn't care, but now I know that we shouldn't live in an ugly and dirty place, I always clean around my house and other villagers all collect the plastic bags and other rubbish and bring them to my house for disposal". A clear shift in attitude then? After running to the house of Mr. Meas Min because of the rain, he said: "Before I would burn all of my rubbish, which is a strong pollutant, and when a cow or buffalo died, we would just eat it, no one cared. But pollution can make us sick, especially in the Mekong river where many people get water from, and this increases our expenditure on medicines. CRDT want to help people come out from poverty, to increase their income and reduce their sickness and expenditure".



Koh Pdao is home to a night-show that is put on by the villagers, for other villages in the area. They are invited to come and watch as subjects like waste disposal, environmental awareness, animals and health are dramatized by children dressed as animals and other community members, in an attempt to spread the word around rural Cambodia and proliferate the work started by CRDT. Sound, lighting and a video screen are all used. The atmosphere is very much one of celebration.

Under a large TV aerial hung from the rafters, and in a house full of electrical equipment no doubt used for the environmental awareness night-show that Koh Pdao hosts whenever possible, the head of the islands art group and a member of the CBO that plans and puts on the show, Mrs. Seng Sokem relaxes against a hammock. She is taking a break from her rattan weaving to talk a little about her new shift in thinking about waste management. "Before I would

never think about the rubbish, I threw it around my house which developed a very bad smell, and also on the riverbank. When the weather was bad it would be carried downstream by the Mekong. I now know that rubbish is bad and that it must be removed. My family never gets sick like they used to, and we are spending less money on health goods". She hopes that in the future her family and the village as a whole all join together to keep the environment of the

Island and of the river, clean, and that they throw all the rubbish in the bin. And Cambodia? "I want everyone to understand the environment, so we can be as good as other countries at this".

Mr. Seng Sokem has similar wishes for the village, and goes on to wish that all the poor people in Cambodia have good health, and gives some advice for villages just starting to learn about the benefits of waste management. "Join together to protect the environment, join together to protect the water, we must all focus on waste management".

"Mr. Meas Min, What do you hope for the future for your family, the village, and Cambodia?" -  
"I wish the same for my family, my village and Cambodia, try to have knowledge about the social issues and of the environment, no waste has to be burned! Waste can be recycled. I hope that no one gets sick and that people will be better, no more violence"

Koh Pdao has come a long way in a short time and there is more to come. The villagers seem empowered and enthusiastic, they want to be helped, but I suspect as time goes on, they will want to be set free to take up these challenges alone using the knowledge CRDT has instilled in this small community.



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### *Koh Preah: Today...*

After arriving on Koh Preah and at the house of Mrs. Su Channah (which by the way is the old CRDT field office) 3 seats were lined up opposite Mrs. Su Channah and her friend and fellow villager Mrs. Nyon Vannarah and suddenly the interview took on an unexpectedly formal feel... This was shattered seconds later by the warm hospitality with which these two ladies greet their guests. Down to business.

CRDT has just started its first waste management project on Koh Preah, and both these ladies were present at the CBO meeting held that talked of the changes that were to come. What did they think? Is waste management important for the people of Koh Preah? Mrs. Su Channah, over to you: "Yes, waste management is very important for people here, for our health, if the environment is good our health is good also, when waste is well-managed the village is a good place to look at and to live in, I would feel happy living here, but if waste is not well managed it can flow into the river and villagers drink the waste, making them ill. Rubbish, plastic bags and cow manure; if people do not care it will flow into the Mekong, but if rubbish goes in the bin it is good for the village." So it seems they are fully aware of the issues, and to help highlight what CRDT can do, they were asked about what they currently do with their waste, their rubbish and their effluence, and although Mrs. Su Channah has CRDT provided rainwater storage and a biodigester, she is one of the few on the island that do. What about everyone else? Where do they get their water?

Mrs. Su Channah currently has a basket in her house for rubbish, but non-biodegradable rubbish such as the dreaded plastic bag, is burnt in a small pit. But surprisingly, she has a cage buried some way into the ground that she fills with degradable natural waste and adds cow manure to make compost. Mrs. Nyon Vannarah's answer was not so inspiring: "If it's rubbish that cannot degrade, like plastic bags I burn it. If it can decay like leaves and vegetables I have no pit, bin, or biodigester, so I put it in a plastic bag and throw into the river so it flows away." Both ladies mentioned that most of the village drinks river water, but they are part of the lucky few that have had rainwater storage installed by CRDT. Both said that during the wet season they are able to use the rain from the storage units for drinking and washing, but during the dry season there often isn't enough rain to cover the whole family so they have to use boiled river water for drinking.

Koh Preah is a burgeoning community-based ecotourism site and a beautiful one at that, if this is to be preserved for those that come to visit, and maintained for those that dwell there, CRDT's approach to empowering communities through education and good practice is a good start.



Mrs. Su Channah said she feels annoyed when she sees rubbish in the river and in the village. When the water level is high you cannot see as much rubbish, but when dry season comes and the water level is lower, you see many plastic bags that have become caught on branches. She can't do anything though, as others in the commune do not care about waste management, people that live upstream dump their rubbish in the river and she gets it washed up on her part of the bank... "I don't know what will happen to the Mekong river in the future if people treat it like this".

Mrs. Su Channah has a toilet provided by AusAid, but Mrs. Nyon Vannarah says: "When I was living in another house in the village I had a toilet provided by Red Cross, but when I moved to my current house I lost that, and now I have no toilet. I go to the bushes and dig a small pit which I cover afterwards, but the children do not dig a pit, they just leave it." She went on to say: "My husband and I do not get sick very often, but our children do, especially the youngest, normally because he eats or drinks something not clean. He drinks water whether it is clean or not, straight from the river without it being boiled. Also the youngest gets malaria, as well as problems with the intestines from not eating clean foods that give him diarrhea. My youngest has got sick this year twice already and we have spent 200,000 Riel on medicine for him".

But these are a couple of the most well-off of the villagers, Mrs. Su Channah especially. When asked about her hopes for the future she said: "I hope my family keeps doing well. I have a house and a job, my son doesn't get sick and goes to school regularly, I really hope this continues. For the village can see that things will get better if we stick with the new livelihoods CRDT have introduced, tourists do not come often but when they do we know how to get the benefits from that. Livestock production is good, we must encourage the farmers to continue with it". All good from her so far, but she continues: "If the situation at the moment stays the same, I do not think that health will be much improved in the future, the other villagers do not take care of their waste. Only small amount of people here understand waste management or have a toilet". She conceded that the future of Cambodia is too big an issue for her to consider an answer...

But both ladies were in agreement that when they see another village pioneering a livelihood, or embracing a new paradigm, or just appearing to succeed, that they would like to learn from them: "When they do something good, we want to learn something good too. Then you can do

something good as a model for the family next door, and give advice to each other then the whole village will be as good as our families". Wise words.

Following the interview we were invited to stay for lunch, it would have been rude to decline... We waited for dinner to be ready among the livelihood chickens and pigs, and laughed at her youngest shouting "All of my T-shirts are in English and I can't read them!"

