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## Making a difference

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**Slowly but surely, one man's dream of creating sustainable living in Laos is materialising.**

We often grumble about what is not right in the world, but how many of us actually do something about it? Most think it is too much work, or that maybe someone else will attend to it.

Well, how about making that someone you?

Growing up in the tiny village of Vang Vieng, Laos, Sengkeo Frichithavong, or Bob for short, was used to lush rainforests, clean air and unpolluted rivers. Bob and his family moved to Canada as refugees.

He returned to Vang Vieng 12 years later, and was shocked to see the drastic transformation of the village he loved. While tourism created new opportunities for the locals, the rapid development affected the environment and depleted the rainforest.



Volunteers and village kids participating in some fun and games. — Photos by Joleen Lunjew

“When I was a child, you would be lucky to see a road from a helicopter above. There have been massive negative changes, and this made me determined to do something to preserve what we have left before they are all destroyed,” says Bob, 36.

His vision started to take shape when he met Frenchwoman Anaïs Maumet in 2006. They began to discuss the possibilities of creating a sustainable future, and in 2008 established the community-based, non-profit organisation SAELAO in Nathong, a village 7km out of Vang Vieng and close to the tourist attractions Poukham Cave and Blue Lagoon.

SAELAO seeks to address the problem of ecological imbalance through a series of sustainable projects. Top on their list is educating the locals on environmental issues and showing how they can make a difference.

“Every year, each local household cuts thousands of small trees for firewood. None of these are replanted, causing rapid deforestation. Soil is washed into the rivers, and every year the water level gets lower and lower, especially during the dry season,” explains Bob.

SAELAO advocates efficient and sustainable use of resources, promotes natural fertiliser and permaculture methods, and seeks to reduce firewood usage through the employment of rocket stoves that use only 10% of firewood than is normal. They are also in the midst of building a biogas facility that exploits cow manure.

Bob thinks the biogas facility is the key to sustainability.

“We started the construction of the biogas facility a year ago but progress has been halted as we don’t have enough funds to continue. It has been an uphill task,” he says.

Other projects in the pipeline include a water cleaning system that recycles water. SAELAO is also seeking local solutions that can reduce non-recyclable waste – for example, replacing plastic storage containers with natural materials like banana leaves and clay.



Volunteers working on the SAELAO project sign.

All buildings at the site are made of natural materials. The community hall was constructed with mud bricks and rocks, while the lodgings are made of bamboo and recycled wood. A garden supplies most of the vegetables and fruits, and they get their rice from their own padi fields. A portion of their meat comes from animals they rear on the farm.

Much of the activities held at the community centre are educational – English lessons, computer classes, a library and presentations on sustainability. The local community is given the opportunity to learn how to communicate better with foreign tourists. The community centre will also house information on local handicrafts and showcase traditional weaving techniques to tourists.

SAELAO's restaurant uses organic produce and free-range livestock to prepare traditional Laos food and nutritious fruit shakes. With its hammocks and shady tables overlooking a pond, the restaurant is an ideal stopover for visitors enroute to tourist sites.

The success of SAELAO's projects is heavily dependent on volunteers who live at the site. They are the ones who see to much of the farming, gardening, building and teaching.

French photographer Jerome Croizer, 27, was initially involved with the project for a short duration. Then, wanting to contribute more, he returned to volunteer 10 months of his time.

“I can see that this project is beneficial for the community. I wanted to do something big for the spirit, and that is why I have volunteered for such a long period of time,” reveals Croizer.

Croizer acts as a coordinator and volunteer head when Bob is not around. He uses his skills to capture photographs and create videos and visual materials for flyers and their website. Josh Lee, 26, a teacher from Australia, is another volunteer.

“I heard about the project through CouchSurfing and decided to get involved for roughly two weeks. I have decided to stay on for three months,” he reveals.

Lee's most noticeable contribution is the setting up of English Open Day. The open day allows passing tourists the opportunity to volunteer at least 30 minutes of their time to teach English to the local kids.

“This project allows tourist to see what we do. No experience is required, and they don't have to be fluent in English as there are games and other activities that they can be involved in. Hopefully, they like what they have experienced and wish to become volunteers,” says Lee.

Bob and his wife also run a guesthouse in the Vang Vieng town centre, which provided some of the funds used to establish SAELAO. The guesthouse contributes 20% of its profits to the project, so if you stay at Sengkeo Guesthouse, you will be indirectly supporting the project.

*For more information about SAELAO, e-mail Bob at [bobfrich@hotmail.com](mailto:bobfrich@hotmail.com) or visit [www.saelaoproject.com](http://www.saelaoproject.com).*

