Turning the Tide ต้านทานในอ่าวไทย

"Dying in the Gulf of Thailand" is a phrase that conjures images of crystal clear waters, an abundance of marine life and acres of pristine coral reef. Only the Great Barrier reef qualifies more divers than are produced here in the Gulf, and visitors from all corners of the world arrive expecting to be overwhelmed by the rich diversity of marine life in our local waters. In 1992, tourism associated with coral reefs generated US $19 trillion worldwide, over 27 times that generated by the world's marine fisheries. Here in Thailand, tourism has become the leading source of foreign exchange, and underwater tourism plays an unquestionably important role in the Thai economy.

Unfortunately, despite its economic power, tourism is also a major polluter. A national newspaper recently reported that Koh Samui could no longer effectively cope with 75% of the waste that is created by tourists each day. Meanwhile, the beaches in once unspoilt places like Koh Tao are littered with plastic packaging and fishing paraphernalia. None of this waste is produced on Koh Tao, but simply washes up onto its welcoming beaches only to remind the visiting eco tourist that the real world is just a long tail ride away.

Koh Tao (Turtle Island) was once home to a thriving community of sea turtles, yet now spotting a lone adult is rare. The recent discovery of a dead adult turtle floating off the island of Koh Phangan that succumbed when the jellyfish it had chosen for lunch turned out to be a cheap plastic carrier bag, is a devastating example of human impact on the underwater world. A recent article in the Bangkok Post highlighted the plight of turtles in Thailand, stating that the construction of resorts and hotels has meant the destruction of the vast majority of nesting beaches used by the native turtle population. Nets left by fishermen catch turtles, and unable to surface they drown. When the nets are hauled in the bi-product is discovered, the flesh eaten and the shell sold to the tourist trinket sellers. It is not known how many turtles still live in the Thai Gulf, but if we continue to ignore their plight, it is unlikely that those few remaining will live to full maturity.

Yet fishing techniques and visible waste are just the tip of the iceberg. Our reefs are smothered by sediment, and choked by algae growing on nutrient rich sewage and fertilizer run-off. They are damaged by irresponsible tourism and are being severely stressed by the warming of the world's oceans. Some 58 percent of the world's reefs are threatened by human activities. The destruction that has already been wrought, particularly around Samui, has led to growing demands for environmental projects, plans and protection.

Some localized projects have already been instigated by organisations like the Koh Tao Dive Association, who have been looking at proposals to provide a new mooring system for dive boats around the island. Currently all moorings are tied directly onto the reefs themselves, this can cause major damage to the individual reefs with lines dragging over the corals when placed under strain. The mooring buoy concept is simple: install a mooring buoy close to a site where boats traditionally tie off to the coral leaving only descent lines for the divers above the reefs; this also reduces the risk of boating accidents to divers and snorkellers by eliminating boat traffic directly over the dive sites.

The recent introduction of an island-wide coral regeneration programme, and the re-population of offshore fishing habitats also certainly helps, but all these efforts may become a case of too little too late, especially when most of them take place under the continual threat of under-funding.

Scientists estimate that approximately 25% of the world's coral reefs are already destroyed, 16% of this is due to bleaching a direct consequence of global warming. Existing for over 200 million years, these ecosystems are the oldest most productive on earth, they provide homes and vital nursery grounds for