

KAREN HILLTRIBES WATER TRUST PROJECT - Report by Ruth Johnson

In July this year I spent a month working for the Karen Hilltribes Trust in the small village of Ban Huay Naa, located in the Karen region in northern Thailand. As a team of 7 British students, and along with a village of 50 Karen people, we installed a water supply into the village.

After buying our supplies in the main town in the region, we were taken up to the village in a convoy of pick-up trucks. The journey took us up winding mud tracks, and we regularly had to push the trucks out of the mud in order to make it up the steep hills. I became nervous as I realised how remote we were going to be, but the nerves quickly disappeared when we drew into the village and received a warm welcome. The 'head man' of the village shook our hands as we alighted the truck, and many people were on hand to unload all our supplies. The whole village came out to receive us, clearly out of interest, since we were the first group of western people to visit the village.

Dealing with the very different etiquette in the Karen culture proved challenging. On the day we arrived, I attempted to introduce myself to a group of women and their children. I began by telling them my name, and trying to persuade them to tell me theirs. I was faced with blank faces. So I tried again, this time by showing affection to their children, stroking the baby's head – this caused amusement for the women. I then learnt that asking the name of a Karen person is considered rude since they have the right to choose whether they gave you their name. You should also not touch anyone's head, since this is a sign that you think them below you. So despite the list of 'Karen Etiquette' I had studied and memorised before arriving, I managed to hit two more taboos within my first moments in the village.

The first task in the project was to carry cement, sand and rock up through the forest in order to dam the water source and build the filter tanks, and following this we carried pipes along the length of the route. This was a hugely challenging part of the project due to the difficult 4km trek involved in getting to the source, via tracks and across paddy fields, through dense forest and up the steep hill face opposite, all carrying heavy equipment. We did this trek twice a day for the first week, and it felt like a huge achievement to always make it to the source, despite continually doubting that we had the strength to get there.

Initially, the benefits that the water supply would bring to the village was not clearly evident, since the village did have a running water supply in the wet season, be it an unclean and unreliable one. We knew that people in the village had been seriously ill, and deaths had occurred due to unclean water, but we never saw any direct evidence of this. However after our first day's work out in the jungle, we returned to the village and all 7 of us used the existing dirty water supply to wash and refresh ourselves. When we returned to our houses, we realised that the supply had run dry – we had emptied the tanks. We were assured by our translator that this happened often, even in wet season, since the source was not high enough, but this did not help the sense of guilt we were feeling, having deprived other villagers of water. This was a stark reminder as to why we were installing the water supply, and we saw for the first time how the villagers had to often cope without water.

Once the work at the source was completed, we were required to dig a trench from the source to the village, and then bury the pipes. Work in this area was shared between us and some of the villagers, although we were a lot less skilled at working with a hoe as the villagers were!

We came into our own when it came to the next element in the project – building two water storage tanks by the village. After transporting all the concrete ingredients to the location of the tanks, we were required to mix concrete by hand in pits in the ground, and pour the mix into rings formed by metal reusable formwork. This was done in five layers, completing two three metre high tanks. Some of the concrete pours were done in torrential rain, in which urgency was required in order to prevent the water content of the concrete increasing to an unacceptable level. These pours were exciting since we had to get the job done as fast as possible.

We lived in houses with a Karen family. This was rewarding, since we really saw how they lived their daily routine and how they interacted with one-another, and in the end we realised that their lives were very similar to ours, even if this did not initially appear to be the case. They were so interested in us and how we interacted with one another, and we often realised that we had an audience whilst we were going about our daily activities. However, over time the interaction between us grew frustrating since the language barrier prevented us discussing how our lives differed. We could never convey to them how grateful we were to them for making us so welcome, and for looking after us so well. I took a photograph of my family, which became hugely valuable because the villagers could directly relate to the family roles, and compare my family to their own.

It was often through gestures when we could best communicate with the Karen. However those gestures we thought universal, such as a thumbs up, were not understood. Even a 'come here' hand wave caused problems, when we thought they were telling us to go the other way. The only gesture that really worked between the two cultures was a smile – and once we realised this we all went around with huge grins on our faces.

The men and women in the village clearly had different roles. The men were in charge, and did a lot of the hard labour. The women worked hard for the village out in the rice fields, but also brought up the children. This clear segregation between sexes was the most obvious difference between Karen and western culture. As a consequence, way the men and women acted towards us varied a great deal. I had previously thought that the women of my age would be easiest to relate to, but they were very withdrawn and tentative with us, socialising with each other in private. In contrast, the men in the village were very open with us, and interacted with the western boys through games of football. There were clear barriers to the Karen women joining in with this, since men and women culturally did not socialise unless married. In fact, when one of the western girls from our team joined the football game, this was a spectacle for the villagers.

I found this segregation difficult to deal with, since it did not appear that the women had many options available to them. I was told by one Karen man that at the age of 22, 'my truck was gone', meaning no-one would want to marry someone as old as 22 – in the Karen culture I would be considered an old maid! However, things are

changing, and many young people in the current generation have chosen not yet to marry and left the village for a work or a university education. For those who chose not to leave, it was clear that they fully embraced their role in village life. Family was at the core of this community, and the woman's role was highly respected by the men. From living closely with a family, it became clear that she was running the show, whatever appearances may have suggested!

On the final night in the village, a huge party was thrown to celebrate the successful end of the project. The Karen women had woven each of us a bag which was presented to us ceremonially. In exchange, we had brought some British party traditions with us, which went down wonderfully. We blew up balloons, and the toddlers in the village spent the entire afternoon playing with them. I had some bubbles, and soon enough I had 20 children chasing the bubbles all through the village and coming back for more. We had face paints, which we demonstrated by painting ourselves – when we came out there was a queue of women holding up their babies for us to paint. Even a skipping rope caused one of the older Karen men to run down the track in excitement of joining in. The Karen women, who had been so difficult to engage with, were dragging us around wanting us to take photos of them, and the children wanted us to dance with them. This party was the first time we felt part of the village community, although sadly it signified that it was time to leave. This party made us realise how grateful the villagers were that we had visited.