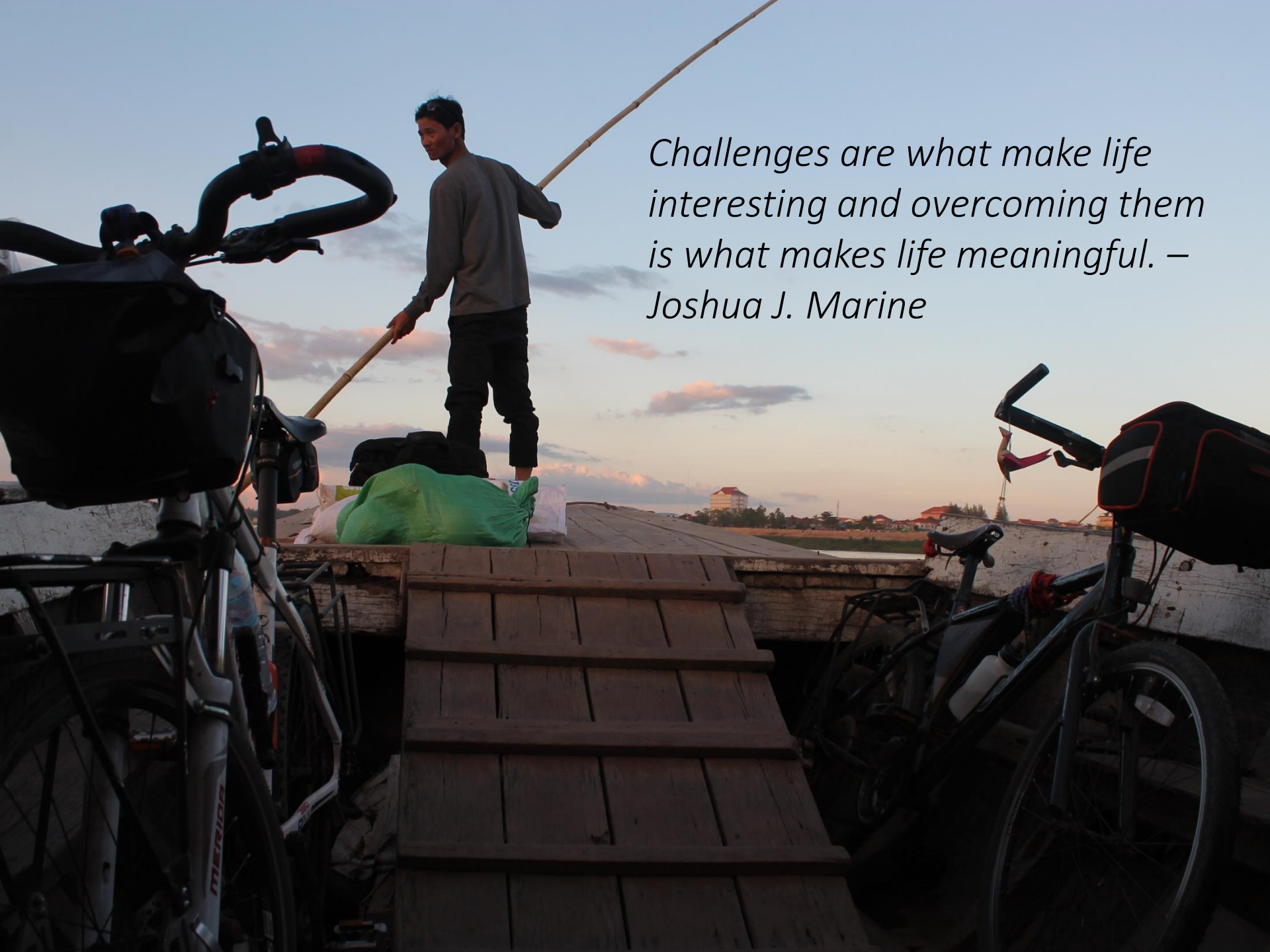


Meandering the Mekong

Four Wheels, Two Women, One River

A photograph of a man standing on a wooden pier or dock. He is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, and is holding a long wooden pole. In the foreground, two bicycles are parked on the pier. The background shows a body of water and a distant town under a sunset sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

*Challenges are what make life
interesting and overcoming them
is what makes life meaningful. –
Joshua J. Marine*

Contents

- ❖ [Introduction](#)
- ❖ [Meet the Team](#)
- ❖ [Expedition Area](#)
- ❖ [Conservation Concerns](#)
- ❖ [Equipment List](#)
- ❖ [Expedition Diary](#)
- ❖ [Conservation Reports](#)
- ❖ [Finances](#)
- ❖ [Practical Advice for future Expeditions](#)
- ❖ [Acknowledgements](#)



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Introduction



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The Mekong

The Mekong is the 10th largest and 12th longest river in the world and is one of the most biodiverse - home to over 20,000 species of plants, 1,200 bird species, 800 species of reptiles and amphibians and 430 mammal species.

Not only wildlife but 60 million people live in the lower Mekong Basin – many of whom rely directly on the river system for their food and livelihoods.

Cycling slowly along the Mekong's banks, we had a fantastic opportunity to report on the conservation work being carried out in the region and learn how NGOs are working with local people to develop long term solutions to many conservation problems.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Aims and Objectives

- To be the first ever female only team to travel the lower length of the Mekong basin by bicycle.
- Report on conservation efforts, with a focus on the Mekong's success stories, and the people working tirelessly to protect it, while also highlighting the challenges that NGOs working in the region face.
- Raise awareness of the region and its incredible biodiversity via the media, an online blog, website and social media.
- To travel entirely by bike or non – consumptive means.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Expedition Area



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Expedition Area: The Mekong Basin

The Mekong River spans six countries: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Our expedition focused on the lower Mekong basin which encompasses the river's course south of the Chinese border through Laos, Cambodia and to the delta in Vietnam.

The lower basin region includes the Tonle Sap in Cambodia, a large freshwater lake that is both a biodiversity hotspot as well as the centre of the world's most productive inland fishery.

The basin also contains many and varied wetlands that perform wide-ranging functions and sustain key social, economic and cultural values. They play a key role in supporting the livelihoods of local people. For example, providing a highly productive environment for agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries. In addition, they are a key natural service providing a means of flood mitigation, water storage and wastewater treatment.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The importance of the river for Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam

The lower Mekong basin is home to over 60 million people who are heavily dependent upon the river and its floodplains.

In Laos and Cambodia for instance, 47 - 80% of animal protein comes from freshwater fisheries, of which 90% is from capture fisheries.

Vietnam's part of the delta is home to 17 million people, and contributes more than 50% of the country's staple food crops. It is the source of 60% of the fish production in Vietnam, providing food for 40 million people and contributing 27% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

The river is also of cultural importance. For example, according to legend, the first pagoda at Wat Phnom in Phnom Penh, was erected in 1373 to house four statues of Buddha, deposited here by the waters of the Mekong River and discovered by a lady called Penh. The following picture is a mural on the ceiling of Wat Phnom that illustrates this story.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



မြင်း ဦးစီး



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Conservation Concerns



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Conservation Concerns

- **Hydropower Development** - 13 dams are currently planned along the Mekong river. Many new proposals to develop hydropower schemes are being advanced by Mekong governments and the private sector, both on the tributaries and on the Lao, Lao-Thai and Cambodian Mekong itself. Whilst generating a renewable source of energy is a positive thing, the impacts on fisheries and aquaculture for the people living along the Mekong could be catastrophic.
- **Over-fishing** – more efficient fishing methods, modern equipment and the growing number of motorized boats are putting huge pressure on fish populations.
- **Poaching** – there is a high demand from surrounding countries for wild flora and fauna products causing population reductions of certain species found within the Mekong and its basin areas.
- **Sand mining** - to provide material for the construction industry. Locally, this has resulted in riverbank collapse and loss of property and, at a basin scale, a reduction in sediment to the delta and wetlands.
- **Climate change** - is expected to contribute to more extreme weather events.
- **Pollution** - particularly from agriculture and residential runoff.



Meet the team



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Natasha Howard

Natasha was an Olympic rower for Great Britain competing in the women's 8+ for five years and at the Beijing Olympics. In 2014 she cycled back towards the UK from China for three months travelling through China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia. A certified swim and rowing coach, First Aider and beach life guard. Natasha has extensive experience living, travelling and working abroad having grown up in Zambia, Namibia and Hong Kong then working in the Maldives and China. She is a certified SCUBA diver and completed her Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award. She spent three months of the summer in 2015 conducting research for her MSc thesis in the Eastern Rainforest Mountains of Madagascar.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Lucy Archer

Lucy has past experience of the Mekong region having travelled and worked throughout South-East Asia. Enjoys running, cycling, diving, sea kayaking and rowing. Lucy has competed in marathons, completed the Boston Long Distance Rowing Race and is a regular hiker. Summits include Mt. Kinabalu in Borneo and Dead Woman's pass in Peru. A Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award holder and exercise enthusiast, Lucy has represented her county in basketball and athletics and is a certified SCUBA diver and First Aider. Lucy will travel far and wide in search of wildlife and has worked with turtles in Cape Verde, Barn Owls in Hungary and Wading birds in Peru. During the summer in 2015, Lucy spent three months in Uganda, conducting her MSc research.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Equipment List

General Expedition Equipment:

- ❖ Tent - 2 man
- ❖ Stove - MSR burns all fuels
- ❖ Cooking pots x 1 set
- ❖ Mummy sleeping bag liners x 2
- ❖ Sleeping mats x 2
- ❖ Torches, head torch and batteries x 4
- ❖ Whistle
- ❖ Portable battery pack to charge electrical items
- ❖ Cannon Camera and lenses
- ❖ Go Pro Hero HD
- ❖ HD memory cards x 2
- ❖ Satellite phone
- ❖ Water Filter
- ❖ Dry Bags
- ❖ Country maps
- ❖ Set of quiz cards
- ❖ Travel guides to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam

Bike Equipment:

- ❖ Bikes x 2
- ❖ Bike lights (front and rear)
- ❖ Handlebar bike bag
- ❖ Front Rack
- ❖ Back Rack
- ❖ Panniers front and back
- ❖ Puncture Repair kit
- ❖ Spare inner tubes
- ❖ Cut up tyre pieces (to patch up tyre if slashed)
- ❖ Bike multi-tool kit and spanners
- ❖ Chain breaker tool
- ❖ Oil
- ❖ Pump
- ❖ Bike Locks x 2
- ❖ Bike Computer
- ❖ Cycle Clothing
- ❖ Cycle gloves



Medical Kit

Painkillers and Ointments:

- ❖ Burneze Spray 60ml-Taken for stove burns
- ❖ E45 Cream 50g
- ❖ Savlon Cream 60g
- ❖ Aspirin 300mg Caplets (16)
- ❖ Ibuprofen 500mg Tablets (64)

Personal First Aid Kit:

- ❖ Personal medication (Hay fever tablets)
- ❖ Malarial Prophylaxis
- ❖ Sun cream
- ❖ Antibacterial hand gel

Diarrhoea Prevention:

- ❖ Dioralyte Sachets (60) - Rehydration sachets.
- ❖ Antibacterial Wipes
- ❖ Hand Sanitiser (100ml) x 2
- ❖ Lopramide tablets x 30

Dressings and Instruments:

- ❖ Antiseptic Cleansing Wipe (20)
- ❖ Blister plasters
- ❖ Cotton Wool
- ❖ Crepe Bandage 7.5cm (4)
- ❖ Eye Dressing (2)
- ❖ Gauze Swabs 5cm (8)
- ❖ Melolin Dressing, Adhesive (10)
- ❖ Melolin Dressing, Non-Adhesive (5)
- ❖ Plasters, Adhesive, Assorted (50)
- ❖ Paperclips
- ❖ Scissors
- ❖ Steri-strip Large (3)
- ❖ Steri-strip Medium (10)
- ❖ Thermometer
- ❖ Triangular Bandage x 2
- ❖ Safety Pins (30)
- ❖ Survival Blanket
- ❖ Zinc Oxide Tape 25mm x 5m
- ❖ SAM Splint



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Expedition Itinerary

Day	Description	Distance Cycled
14.11.15	Arrive HCMC	0km
15.11.15	Meet Dave. Cycle across HCMC to warm showers host	5km
16.11.15	Meeting at WAR office Cycle to My Tho	97km
17.11.15	My Tho – Sa Dec	86km
18.11.15	Sa Dec – Tram Chim	75km
19.11.15	Tram Chim – Cambodian Border	75km
20.11.15	Border town to Phnom Penh	95km
21.11.15	Phnom Penh to Phnom Tamao return	90km
22.11.15	Meeting with Joey Rose, FFI	5km
23.11.15	Meeting at the Royal University of Phnom Penh	10km
24.11.15	Cycle to ACCB	52km



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Expedition Itinerary

Day	Description	Distance Cycled
25.11.15	Cycle to Bantaey Sri	75km
26.11.15	Angkor temples	40km
27.11.15	Rest Day	0km
28.11.15	Rest Day. Wash bikes and write up blogs. Cycle to see bats!	8km
29.11.15	Phnom Penh to Kampong Cham	105km
30.11.15	Kampong Cham to Chlong	86km
01.12.15	Chlong – Kratie Meeting at CRDT	36km
02.12.15	Meeting at WWF River Dolphins and cycle around Kaoh Trong Island	10km
03.12.15	Kratie – Sambour Meeting at MTCC	46km
04.12.15	Yaev – Koh Niai	55km
05.12.15	Koh Niai – Stung Treng	80km



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Expedition Itinerary

Day	Description	Distance Cycled
06.12.15	Stung Treng – Osvay Kayaking in flooded forest	60km
07.12.15	Osvay – Don Khong via Don Som	40km
08.12.15	Don Khong - Champasak	60km
09.12.15	Champasak to Wood Dealer Shop	118km
10.12.15	Wood Dealer Shop – Junction Route 13 and 9B	114km
11.12.15	Junction Route 13 and 9B – Thakhek	136km
12.12.15	Thakhek – Vieng Kham	103km
13.12.15	Vieng Kham – Thabok	142km
14.12.15	Thabok – Vientiane	91km
15.12.15	FINISHED!	0km



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Expedition Diary



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The flight: Friday 13th November 2015

Travelling is never smooth, or maybe Friday the 13th jinxed us? Either way, Emirates refused to let us board unless we had a ticket out of Vietnam and cycling out did not count. So as the other passengers moved serenely through check in, we battled the internet on smart phones to buy the last two cheap tickets with Air Asia.

An hour later, very frazzled having roped in Nathan, Lucy's brother, on the phone to try with a laptop (he failed by the way) we had them and were through departures in no time. The bikes being underweight had been spirited off by a Gok Wan look alike as he assured us that 70 quid for two tickets was “ah good, good - not very expensive!”

Although the main luggage, due to meticulous planning, was a kilo underweight, the same could not be said for Tash's hand luggage... three large bags left Lucy in a panic believing Tash wouldn't be let on the plane, but alas, all went smoothly. As all our stuff made it, we can't be blamed for the Gatwick shut down that occurred just hours later...



Days One and Two: 14th & 15th November

We arrived in Ho Chi Minh (HCM hereafter) early evening after successfully finding our bikes in one piece. Once checked in to a hotel, we wandered out and down a nearby street heaving with bars, restaurants and pavement eateries. We found a quieter section and had a much needed ice cold fruit smoothie, accompanied by a big plate of fruit. One of which was called 'Supilla' and tasted like dark brown sugar. We had been worried about jet lag but having toasted Imperial College, our heads hit the pillow and we were out like lights. We had breakfast on the rooftop terrace then put the bikes together. Nothing bent or broken and we even remembered how many spacers went where. Lucy discovered that cycling will always feel really heavy if tires are semi flat...

We then met Dave Holmes, a friend of Tash's who, luckily for us, is also a keen cyclist and teaches in a school near to HCMC. He gave us some great advice on good routes to take, warnings about dangerous drivers and made sure we were set with a basic lesson in Vietnamese words and lingo. Thanks Dave!



Day Three: Farewell Saigon

16th November. HCM to My Tho. 90km.

Our first venture took us across Ho Chi Minh city (nothing like what must be one the world's most congested cities to get you in the cycling mode) to meet Mr Khoi CEO of Wildlife at Risk (WAR, see separate report). We were up at the crack of dawn to beat the 'rush hour' traffic across the city, although, every hour seems to be rush hour in HCM and by 5.30am the roads were extremely busy.

We had stayed the night at Thibault's, a warm showers host. To get there we had to navigate the alleyways of HCM which opened up a secret world unbeknown to the average visitor, full of laid back and peaceful coffee drinking suburbs which was a vast contrast to the hustle and bustle of the main city streets despite being just a stones throw away. The Go Pro, kindly leant to us by our friend Elliot, is now christened Godfrey Patricia – Penny for short, made sure we have video evidence of us getting lost down hundreds of side alleys.

Leaving HCM after our meeting, we decided to avoid the main highway and took an alternative route out towards the Mekong Delta along Le Van Luong. As we zig-zagged our way across the dense traffic we soon learnt our first lesson; the 'Vietnamese way' of driving. Step one, ignore traffic signs, step two, set off precisely four seconds before a traffic light turns green and step three, only ever worry about what is in front of you – this is perhaps the most important rule of the road, never ever, under any circumstance look behind you! Do this and you are set to cause absolute chaos.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Three: Farewell Saigon

That said, cycling in Ho Chi Minh wasn't half as bad as we'd expected but nonetheless, we were definitely relieved to leave it behind and venture out to the oh so green pastures new, along the small roads and gravel paths towards My Tho. Our friend Dave had told us it would be a sweet ride and boy was he right.... We cycled grinning like Cheshire cats as we passed beautiful countryside with small villages and towns immersed amongst fields of dragon fruit, small scale fish farms and rice seedlings popping up everywhere.

These small roads passed multiple rivers which the guide books will tell you makes travelling here rather laborious. We beg to differ. We crossed the rivers with ease via the brilliant and non stop boat system the Vietnamese have in place, we didn't wait more than five minutes.

We eventually reached My Tho at around 8pm, after taking a premature right hand turn (Tash sounded like she knew this was the way) which added a lovely 10kms+ on to the journey. We had decided not to cycle in the dark but this rule was quickly broken. Lesson two was also learnt on day one... always double check the map at junctions!



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Day Four: My Tho to Sa Dec

Day four (day two of cycling) saw a slightly slower start with both of us unable to move until past 8am, cycling 90km the previous day hit us both hard and our bodies were feeling it. This slow start then became even slower as Tash acquired a puncture whilst leaving the city which saw us sat in a cafe whilst an ever growing audience of Vietnamese men watched in disbelief as Tash fixed it herself! Many an offer of help was thrown our way but we assured them that despite the fact we were women, we really were quite capable.

Puncture repaired, we cycled along one of the Mekong's tributaries to Cai Be, a riverside town famous for its floating markets. We were too late to see this main tourist attraction but we were treated to an almighty shower as the heavens opened above us. We retreated under market stall covers with everyone else in the town and then set off along the small dirt roads to reduce the distance we would have to cycle on the main highway. Despite our efforts we still had a hideous 20km on the highway with non stop beeping and fumes galore. We couldn't have been more relieved to see the turn off for Sa Dec (our sleeping spot for the night, situated on the Mekong) but were then treated to yet another downpour. This time we didn't have time on our side to retreat under cover as we were keen to avoid a repeat of day one and arrive before dark so we peddled on quite enjoying the refreshing shower.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Five: Sa Dec to Tram Chim

We woke up nice and early with the aim of reaching our next destination, Tram Chim, for lunch. Most of the clothes had dried from the previous nights rain and we were soon packed and rolling down the road trying to get our bearings as to where in the town we actually were! Finding ourselves, we headed to the street along the river front which supposedly had some old French colonial buildings. These we may have missed, lost behind market stall awnings and shop fronts, or perhaps they are gone, squashed out by the generic and ubiquitous modern two storey brightly painted box houses.

We did however come across the old house where Huynh Thuy Le, the son of a wealthy Chinese family, lived when he had a love affair with Marguerite Duras who based her 1984 Prix Goncourt-winning novel, *The Lover*, on these events. The house is now a museum and a reminder of what the town must once have looked like prior to concrete modernisation...



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Five: Sa Dec to Tram Chim

Also along this street was the daily market selling everything from fruit to meat to cloth, all colourfully arranged and presided over. Breakfast was cake and fruit smoothie by the river before we set off for the ride out to Tram Chim past the hundreds of nurseries for which Sa Dec is famed. It is a beautifully quaint little town and we could have easily passed the day away reading a book on the riverside. But alas, on we cycled, our schedule is tight and won't allow for such pleasures.

Our route took us along the southern bank of the Mekong before we then crossed it by ferry and headed to Thanh Binh and the turn off for Tram Chim. The ferry steamed us smoothly across while we marvelled at the height of the new bridge being built just downstream. Development is rampant in the whole area, yes, there are quiet backwaters but there are also cities of over a million people within the delta. These we avoided like the plague.

As we eased our way, bathed in sheets of sweat, closer to Tram Chim the houses began to change; now made of corrugated iron some with cute tiled roofs. These were much more spread out offering views across the vast flat rice plains. We also began to see our first wildlife not dead, half dead or in cages. Egrets and swallows soared and darted across the skies above us.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Five: Sa Dec to Tram Chim

After some asking around, well actually flapping our arms about in fabulous imitations of Sarus cranes, we arrived at Tram Chim National Park headquarters. Having been ushered in and poured a cup of tea we were then abandoned to the hot afternoon silence and stopped clock atmosphere that only government buildings exude. We twigged this might not be the place for tourists to get boats into the park. Back out, up the road 500m and there was the visitors centre. We booked a three hour boat trip clambered in with two cold boxes, a guide and driver and set off.

It soon became very clear bird watching in a Ramsar wetland site is not high on the touring agenda as we rocketed down the waterways. Probably like many places, the idea is to leg it to see the cranes (when in season – we were not in season so therefore leg it to the spot you could see cranes when in season) go shopping at the local house and get back fast. Why else would you come? The why else is the beauty of the place. Wending down mill pond waterways, reflecting back blue skies and billowing white clouds, past patches of lotuses with their huge pink and white flowers while catching the sapphire sparkle of king fishers flitting away over the brilliant green reed beds that stretch off either side. Mixed into this are the Melaleuca flooded forests or woodland. It's a true island in a sea of humanity.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Five: Sa Dec to Tram Chim

Even with our Lewis Hamilton driver we managed to see a good range of birds. We stopped half way at a gazebo which we climbed and surveyed the world. Lucy got out the telephoto lens and we spotted and snapped birds while plotting how to get back slowly....

We were quite successful. We got the guide on our side and then flapped arms again, a bit like the signal for crane but faster just using the primary feathers as it were whenever we saw a bird. This took some art as you had to spot the waiting bird well in advance so by the time reluctant Lew had acknowledged our frantic flaps we'd be alongside -ish! Lucy twirled the lens and hit that camera button like a pro as we cruised past egrets, kingfishers, pond herons, cormorants, jacanas (seen later in cages at the nearby restaurant), a bird of prey, owls, moorhen.... yes, yes we need to get a bird book! Even without a book we were able to soon tell the difference between egrets and pond herons unlike our guide.

That evening was spent debating routes into Cambodia. Option one would be faster going directly to Phnom Tamao and our next stop the Siamese crocodile breeding project but it was on the highway. Or option 2 along the Mekong via the back roads up to Phnom Penh then down. We decided to sleep on it. All in all a great day.



Day Six: Tram Chim to the Vietnamese/Cambodian border

On awaking we both agreed the route along the Mekong would not only be true to our remit but also much nicer – a hatred of highways instilled in us from the section we travelled to Sa Dec.

Another early start and fuelled by coffee, some money changing and an amazing steamed rice, sweet beans, sugar and coconut mix all wrapped in a crispy cross between a fajita and pancake -delicious- we were off.

Big skies, flat rice fields stretching into the distance and lots of life going on to watch as we peddled down the road. Old women on scooters cheering us on, or cackling with laughter, water buffaloes plodding down the road towards us and flowers and plants bursting out of everyone's road fronts. We even passed the local honey collector shimmying down a tree clutching a perfect circular honey comb on a stick. No protective clothing and netted hats for him, just a gently smoking cigarette.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Six: Tram Chim to the Cambodian border

Today was the day of strangers kindness - a lovely end to our last day in Vietnam. At 11.30am we stopped to buy ice drinks at a store where a group of ladies were having their morning card game. Before we knew it we'd been sat down to drink the heavenly icy drinks, pumped for details of our route, ages, relationships, jobs and night sleeping plans. We were then invited to stay for lunch. We accepted and I explained Lucy was a vegetarian that she will eat the fish but no pork. This again all in sign language (putting my TEFL to good use). Hand actions for fish and oinking noise for pig. Well they understood immediately but sadly assumed I was the vegetarian so all of them started yelling at me with looks of sheer horror on their faces while Lucy sat and laughed like crazy!

Lunch was fried tilapia, a mini fish salad, rice, pomegranates and unknown fruit - all delicious. The pork sat uncooked in a bag on the floor for when the strange woman left! To requests to stay the night we pleaded the need to get to Phnom Penh and prepared to leave. Just as we were about to set off Aunty, in an acting vein similar to our own, suggested Lucy remain and marry her nephew (my turn to giggle) he was a good catch too - training to be a doctor, had all his teeth and of a similar age! Rikki, just to warn you, if a water buffalo had been offered in exchange I might have had to abandon Lucy... Farewells and apologies for not staying to get married and we parted.



Day Six cont....The Border Crossing



Entering the border region, we arrived in the final town in Vietnam, stopping to have a drink under a tree. Next thing we know two old ladies on a bike pull up next to us and start making motions that look like a cross between a voiding of bowels or having a baby. So we smiled and nodded along. Slowly it dawned on us we were being told to come and use their toilet at their store opposite and no was not an answer. We crossed the road and I was immediately dragged to the back of the building, the toilet door was opened and I was prodded in. I didn't even need to go! Back out again I found Lucy happily swigging ice cold tea entertaining granny two with the map.

Jack fruit, tea and water later we were escorted to the border post by the grand daughter wearing jeans, a track suit jacket and purple woollen hat. Just looking at her made us want to die of heat exhaustion! She sweetly passed us into the care of the border guards and, with a final wave, peddled off into Cambodia while we headed to passport control to start our comparatively slower border crossing.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Six cont....The Border Crossing

The Vinh Xuong border crossing must be one of the most beautiful, located in an old single storey colonial building under swaying palm trees with the mighty Mekong sliding past – a huge band of glistening silver in the midday sun. The formalities on the Vietnamese side passed smoothly – we may even feature in the Vietnamese immigration training manual as we stood posing for photos of our bags going through their new x-ray machine! However, we hit a glitch in no-mans land at the Cambodian border post.

“Ah the man with the visas has gone to Phnom Penh so you cannot cross here.” Riggght. “But don’t worry we will put you in a boat to the other side of the river. There is another visa man there.”

So we wheeled the bikes down the bank, heaved them into a boat with outboard engine which now fully loaded, sat very low in the water. The old man refused to take us across so we did a wobbly transfer into an adjacent boat with a younger more carefree skipper and zoomed across a thankfully glassy Mekong river. It is huge!



Day Six cont....The Border Crossing

On the other side I had to tinker with my derailleur that had become bent in transit before a very nice gentleman issued us our visas having first packed us off to wash hands and faces! We left the border at 4pm, changed money in a road side shop and headed up into Cambodia along the Mekong's left bank. The change between countries immediately apparent. Fewer people and more rural. As evening drew in, large white cows were tethered below houses on stilts, kids on the way back from school yelled hello every two seconds, cooking fires filled the air with wood smoke and clutches of buffalo were passed being given their evening scrub down in the river.

We stopped to buy water, I'm in constant need while Lucy survives perfectly well on about a litre all day, and as I was buying it and a few biscuits Lucy got chatting to the lady next door who, concerned it was getting dark, invited us to stay with her family for the night. We had a great night with Sarem and her husband Sopheak in their house on stilts a hundred meters from the river. They shared their home with Sarem's sister and brother and her three year old nephew. Mats were laid on the floor for us to sleep on under our mozzie net and we gratefully had a refreshing bucket bath watched by the fattest frog ever. Sarem told us she'd been working for a Chinese family in Malaysia for three years, where she'd improved her spoken English and learnt Chinese, sending money home so her brother could build the family house. Yes, her job was hard work but the worst bit seemed to have been eating noodles three times a day! We spent the evening learning some Khmer phrases and looking through family wedding photos, chatting about bananas at weddings and personal details such as how much we both weighed – Sarem finding it amusing how a person could weigh over 60kgs but quickly backtracking and justifying it with “but you are very tall lady!”



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day Seven; Phnom Penh bound

We thought we were up nice and early on our first morning in Cambodia but everyone else had been up since 4.30am by the time we wiggled out from under our net at 5.30am. Washed, fed on sticky banana rice wrapped in a banana leaf, we exchanged numbers and said goodbye to the lovely family we were so privileged to spend the night with.

The road up to Phnom Penh was broken up by a stop for ice coffee south east Asian style – a couple of shots of coffee, an inch of condensed milk and a glass full of ice mixed, not stirred, with a straw. Incredible when hot and tired. We were then chased along the road (we've obviously become accustomed to raging horns as neither of us realised anyone was attempting to get our attention despite the fog horn!) by a guy on a long distance cycling trip with his wife – they are eventually heading to Spain but currently cycling through south east Asia. We enjoyed an hour of chat and top tips. Of course they have a blog so anyone interested check it out on:

<http://www.diaryofaworldtrip.com>

All roads into Phnom Penh, we have discovered, are hideous, congested, under construction, dust filled and a barrage on all your senses. After an hour of it we bailed into the first coffee shop we found. It turned out to be very upmarket and we felt decidedly out of place covered in dust and feeling frazzled, a few odd looks being thrown our way. That evening Tash enjoyed a surprise dinner of a foetus egg (joys of street food) opposite the Royal Palace before we packed ourselves off to bed ready for another 5am start.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Days Eight, Nine and Ten: Phnom Tamao and the Royal University of Phnom Penh

Our three days in Phnom Penh were spent in a whirlwind of activity.

On Saturday we were up at 0500hrs to cycle 45km to see FFI's Siamese crocodile breeding program at Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre. The ginger stuffed barbeque frogs on the way back saw Tash through the hideous bumpy, dusty, pothole ridden road into the city. Luckily, a swim dealt wonderfully with frayed nerves and hot bodies that evening! Extremely tired we only made it 20ms to the end of the road for dinner that night.

On Sunday we visited Wat Phnom before meeting Joey Rose, from Fauna and Flora International, for breakfast and more crocodile chat. He told us tales gleaned from chats with vets of crocodiles' incredible powers to live through staggering levels of septicaemia and organ illnesses – presumably due to their slow metabolism. We then moved in to our new residency with warm showers host, Bethy, and dedicated some time to much needed admin to get our schedule worked out for the coming week - alerting people to our imminent arrival! Bethy took us to a lovely roof top bar for a drink that evening with all of Phnom Penh spread below. This was followed by the Cambodian classic Amok curry.

On Monday we spent a fabulous morning at the Royal University of Phnom Penh meeting current and past students of the conservation MSc course and being shown round their herbarium and zoological collections. Rush hour that evening saw us wiggling our way across the city by bike to find the city's only flying fox roost in a tree to the east of the temple. Even before you saw or smelt the tree you could hear them, which above six lanes of traffic is no mean feat.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Days 11,12,13 and 14 - Temples and Festivals

Although we are cycling along the Mekong for our expedition we both felt, rather like the French Mekong Exploration Commission of 1866 -68, that we couldn't come to Cambodia and not see the Angkor temples. Luckily for us, this week was national Water Festival a three day holiday which culminates in boat races between all the provinces in Phnom Penh. These had been cancelled this year in the capital due to past crowd management problems. However, it was still running in Siem Reap – perfect we could combine festival, temples and conservation projects! So as everyone further up river was on holiday and not available for us to visit until the following week, we decided to head for Siem Reap.

We had organised to meet with Michael Meyerhoff at the Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity (ACCB) on Tuesday and had hoped to also visit WCS and their project in the Prek Toal wetlands but sadly due to the holidays this was not possible. However, we found a lovely butterfly centre to visit instead.

We arrived in Siem Reap at 5am Tuesday morning. Straight off the bus, we then cycled 50km north to Kbal Spean in Phnom Kulen National Park and had a great tour of ACCB's facilities with Mike. On Mike's suggestion we took the chance to walk up to Kbal Spean and see the ancient engravings of Buddha in the rocks of the stream bed - very beautiful and tranquil.





Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Days 11,12,13 and 14 - Temples and Festivals

That evening we headed out to see what evening entertainment was going on for the water festival, or 'Bonn Om Toeuk' in Khmer. A huge market had been set up and food stalls lined all the streets selling meat buns, pancakes, insects, fruit, smoothies, drinks and more substantial meals. The place was packed, everyone dressed up in their best clothes having come in from the surrounding areas to make the most of the festive mood. The festival is one of the biggest and most important in the Cambodian calendar and marks the reversal of the current on the Tonle Sap river. Boat races as well as fireworks displays are held on the rivers creating a carnival atmosphere which lasts the week.

The following morning we cycled 30km north to visit the Banteay Srey Butterfly Centre. Temple viewing occupied the rest of the day culminating at Angkor Wat to watch the sunset and the full moon rise behind Angkor. Being national holiday the grounds were packed with families out to enjoy themselves which created a lovely festival-like atmosphere.



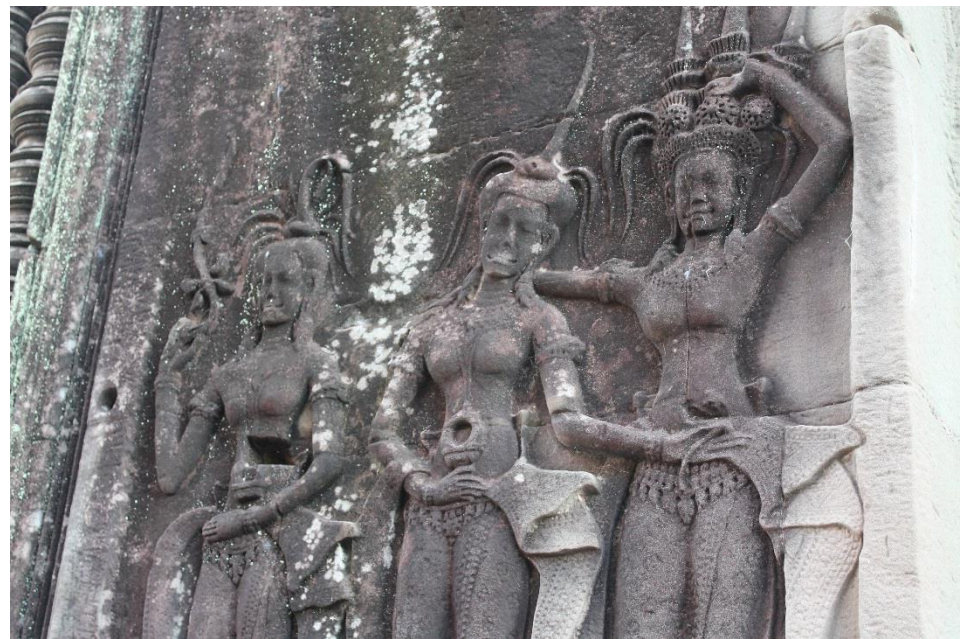
Days 11,12,13 and 14 - Temples and Festivals

Wednesday and we were back in the grounds of Angkor Wat at 5.30, monosyllabic and very sleepy, to see sunrise before cycling round the huge park to finish off our temple viewing. Flagging by 7am, we felt breakfast would be the ideal pick me up. So we sat under the trees looking out over Angkor Wat eating huge thick pancakes, chunks of fruit and omelettes washed down with ice coffee. All served from little cafes with fantastic names – Harry Potter cafe, Mr Rambo, Licence to Coffee, Lady Gaga and Number One Honey. We'd left the afternoon free to watch the boat race finals. These, to our horror, we found out had taken place the day before! So we explored town, had a \$2 massage and unsurprisingly an early night ready for the bus back to Phnom Penh the following morning.

Here are a selection of photos from the Angkor complex, rediscovered in 1860 by French naturalist Henri Mouhot, as words will fail to do it justice. Suffice to say the park is enormous, over 100 temples set in 160 sq. km. You can cycle (or go by bus, car and tuk tuk) round it visiting the various temple remains built by a succession of kings, from the 8th through to the 14th century, all within forested parkland of towering trees. Some temples nestle among the trees, vines and undergrowth others have been lovingly reconstructed. It's mind boggling the scale, beauty and fact each temple meant that a city of thousands also existed in that spot. Their houses being made of wood have long since disappeared.







Day 15: Phnom Penh to Kampong Cham

We left Phnom Penh on Sunday morning having seen the bats on Saturday evening. Bethy cycled with us for an hour up to a breakfast cafe before saying farewell.

We cycled 110km to Kampong Cham and it was one of the hardest days of the trip. We might have been less exhausted on arrival if the 40km of dirt road, heavily potted and dust filled, hadn't destroyed us. Our knees and elbows shook the whole way as we bounced over the rocky surface, never able to relax – on constant tender hooks waiting for the next hole to appear and send Lucy's panniers flying off the back of the bike. Oh and the five hours sleep the night before probably didn't help (we were up late trying to fix our website!).

We were so relieved to finally reach Kampong Cham. Lucy fell asleep at the table after lunch and the most we managed was a stagger down the waterfront in the evening. Here we met some of the local "learn English" school students out raising money for a big litter pick they were organising so we had a chat and donated what we could afford to their worthy cause. Litter is everywhere here and the river seems to be regarded as the number one rubbish dump so it was great to see students taking matters into their own hands.

It took a few washes in the shower that night to get rid of the layers of dirt that were caked all over us and then it was straight to sleep, dreaming of nicer roads that we hope will welcome us up the river!



Day 16: Kampong Cham to Chhlong

Kampong Cham to Chhlong was an easy 80km and to our delight was not the pot holed ridden dirt road we had experienced the previous day. It was also nicely broken up by a visit to Hamcheam Phnom; a wat complex on the regions highest hill, complete with a temple on the summit, gorgeous views over the Mekong and a plethora of giant concrete fruit and veg scattered around the grounds. People ask why we have few animal photos. Well the Mekong is not a national park and is heavily populated so what animals there are tend to be low in number, hard to find or restricted to areas that have some form of protection, and the sad truth is that much of it has been lost due to habitat loss or poaching. The statues at the temple showed the range that used to be more common in the region, certainly as described by the Mekong Exploration Commission – tigers, elephants, rhino and gaurs.

As we cycled along the smaller roads we could watch daily life unfold; the school run in the morning, bustling markets in the main town where the mobile shops on scooters stock up with fish, chickens, bread, boiled eggs, steam pork buns, doughnuts and brooms before heading up the road to the tiny villages to sell their wares. We passed one guy, or rather he passed us, late for market with a huge pig carcass flapping and bouncing behind him. By 11am the road is quieter as the heat builds and normal people retire to the shade and their hammocks. Things begin to pick up again around 2pm and by evening the road is in full swing.



Day 17 and 18: Chhlong to Kratie

Chlong is a little town with tree lined river front and very atmospheric French colonial buildings in various stages of collapse and neglect. We spent a nice evening strolling round the tree lined back roads. From here we cycled the short distance to Kratie where we spent two days meeting staff working for the Cambodian Rural Development Team (CRDT) and WWF (see separate web page for more details). Of course being in Kratie we couldn't not have a go at seeing the Irrawaddy River Dolphins a short distance up river at Kampi. There are 75 here that frequent the deep pools. The total number left in the wild doesn't reach 100. So we signed onto a kayaking tour and had a lovely morning drifting down the river through sandy islets and the flooded forest of towering trees with massive tangled roots all swept back by the current as well as stopping off for a swim. It's the coolest we were all trip!

Yes we saw the dolphins! It was brilliant just sitting quietly in the kayak waiting to hear a puff of expelled breath and see the silvery grey head back and fin cut the surface. One even popped up within 10m of us. Fantastic. We beached mid stream on an islet and sat watching them move around the river before heading in for a big lunch at our guides house. During lunch we did had to keep insisting we weren't going to pay a dollar to see the turtle he'd found in the marsh! That afternoon we cycled round the island opposite Kratie and watched local life unfold around us, at all of 2mph.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Day 19: Turtle Protectors

The next morning we cycled north along the river to Sambour to visit the Mekong Turtle Conservation Centre (MTCC), set amongst the idyllic grounds of the 100 pillar pagoda. Conservation International are working here alongside the monks to protect the Giant Cantors Soft-shelled Turtle, which really is a special creature. We then had a call from WWF to let us know they were in the area visiting a fishing community – as it was just a short boat ride away we headed straight over - very excited to get a chance to see their community outreach work at Koh Phdau. Sadly, a lot got lost in translation and the WWF guy (us not realising it was him) smiled at us from his bike as he passed us on the road before sending us a message half an hour later to say he'd left but seen us on the road! Great! Now we were on the island and had to get to get to our homestay on the west bank, the other side of the river.

The MTCC, who we'd visited earlier in the day kindly organised this and as the sun set we were sat on grass mats in the bottom of a long thin wooden boat cutting across an eddy filled river to our night's abode. The bikes tied to a shop on the other island.....



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day 19: Turtle Protectors

Our homestay was in the village of Yaev. The family is one of the area's soft shell turtle nest protectors who are employed by Conservation International. Mum is in charge. She finds the nests, keeps an eye on them and delivers the hatchlings to the Mekong Turtle Conservation Centre (MTCC) all for a decent wage. Their house is like all the others; up on stilts and made of wooden planks. A lovely breeze all night long meant the room was airy and cool. Sadly the house's four dogs don't get on so they snarled and wrangled below us most of the night! We had a delicious dinner then sat watching a Thai rom com on the DVD player linked up to a car battery with half the neighbourhood joining us.

Rural life started at 5am the next morning. The little boy was on buffalo duty, rounding the buffalo into the field behind the house before transforming into shirt and trousers, slicking down his hair and heading off to school. It felt a world away from Phnom Penh.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day 20: The longest island on the Mekong

Well, the start of our final three days in Cambodia were certainly eventful.

Feeling “exploratory” and in need of a challenge we decided to investigate the Mekong Discovery Trail. The information we had on it was sketchy to say the least. It seems to have been set up a few years back but has since slumped into obscurity – the only map we found was tacked to a bike hire shed and very faded. We were told we’d need a guide and that the last man to attempt the journey ended up running out of water and passed out in the middle of the forest, luckily found by a local passing by on his motorbike. However such guide would cost \$20 dollars, naturally we decided no, we were on an expedition after all. So armed with water and trepidation we returned to Koh Phdau and set off on paths unknown up the longest island in the Mekong, 45km, determined to tackle this head on by ourselves!

We soon discovered the route was marked by small signs and blue posts. Not always in useful spots such as junctions and at times upside down but still there. We also realised as we bounced, jolted and jerked along, our route generally followed the main path marked by tire and feet tracks. These tracks quite often looked like those made by a car which confused us somewhat until we came across a family out in their cart hauled by two panting, sweating buffalo. We felt their pain.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day 20: The longest island on the Mekong

So our navigation wasn't bad and we covered the distance (more than 45km as the path was less than direct...) but lord almighty did the sand make it hard work! Fully laden, bikes need a lot of pushing when you sink half way up your wheels in fine dust. They also skid out from under you and need to be leapt off. The path wended through dry scrubby woodland not a drop of water anywhere. As we got further north lots of birds could be seen flitting through the trees. We also came across a man making his evening snare.

Needless to say it was a tired, sweaty and thirsty duo that made it to the top shore of the island and persuaded a guy to take us back across to the mainland on his boat for the exorbitant price of 4 dollars. Sellers market sadly. It was definitely the toughest 45km+ we have done and, while we normally cover 45km in less than three hours, this journey took us the whole day!

As we arrived back onto the mainland, we found ourselves in a small Mekong town with no guesthouses in sight. Luckily, we had an offer of another nights stay in a families house which we gratefully accepted. The setting for this homestay was incredible. As we took our bags into the wooden house on stilts, we were treated to an incredible view out of the window across the Mekong, the sun was setting so blue and pink hues combined above the surface of the water to paint the most beautiful picture. The nights stay however was not so tranquil and proved eventful of course....



The Homestay on the Mekong; Koh Niai

After unpacking, we were summoned to eat dinner with the family – the usual rice, veg and fish – which we both greatly appreciated. While eating dinner sat cross legged on the floor, Tash glanced at the black cat who gave her a withering look. Next thing we know, something incredibly hot is running down Tash's back. We turn to see the cat sauntering off very pleased with itself! Lucy again enjoying the show....

We were then ushered down stairs for the long overdue wash, now required with the utmost urgency! This was to be conducted in the dark under the stars behind the house. A plastic saucepan dipper was employed to get water from the massive Ali baba clay pots onto us. We gathered our stuff and headed down stairs the family trooping along behind. Outside the family pig and chicken joined the entourage. As we laid out our shampoo and soap everyone else assumed their various positions. Dad showed us the dipper then after a few false starts did actually disappear. The youngest daughter climbed the water pot and perched up there used the phone torch to light up our ablutions so her teenage brother swinging in his hammock in the shadows could enjoy the sight of Lucy and I washing with piggy wig snuffling around our feet. It was all so ridiculous we gave up on modesty and laughed our way through the shower. We tried to tell the daughter to shine the torch elsewhere but obviously whatever bro was paying her was a greater incentive than our indignant squeals!



Day 21: Koh Niai to Stung Treng

The next day we left Koh Niai and cycled to Stung Treng. From Koh Niai we had rolling dirt roads for a while before meeting up with the main highway for a brief distance before we then turned off to take smaller roads again to Stung Treng. In contrast to Vietnam, the main highways are something akin to an English A road and their smooth surfaces were often welcomed (apart from when near to Phnom Penh where the highways were all under construction and were hideous!). We arrived in Stung Treng by lunch time and made use of the time to shop for vitals such as shampoo, sun cream, cycle gloves, a massage and money, with of course a quick bakery stop. We have discovered that shopping for sun cream in S.E Asia is a very difficult task due to the whitener they combine with it. We had been looking for the past few days but failed and had hoped that being a slightly bigger town, Stung Treng would come to our rescue. We did find one small tube of factor 45 which would cover just about both of our noses but every other option was full of whitening cream. We decided to wait and try our luck at our next destination.

We also decided to do another kayak through the floating forest up by the Laos border. A nice man at Xtreme Asia made the necessary phone calls, lightened our wadge of cash, gave us directions to find our guide Mr Pross in Osvay and waved us on our way the following morning.



Day 22: Stung Treng to Osvay

Osvay was a little village on the Mekong banks boasting a tiny restaurant overlooking the river and floating forest, run by Kika who had recently returned from being a maid in Malaysia and keen to set up her own restaurant and guesthouse. Give her a year and it will be bustling - a very determined lady on a mission.

The kayak was gorgeous amongst the towering trees of the flooded forests and we stopped half way to have a swim and explore the sand banks of the Mekong. Our one aim was to make Mr Pross smile. We achieved this by capsizing mid river – we hit a bush. Tash had her phone out at the time taking photos and had just tucked it back into her top when we turned turtle. A lot of squealing and panicked splashing to get it out before it became fully waterlogged. A night and day of drying later and Tash finally plucked up the courage to turn it back on. Still works like a charm....

We celebrated our kayak and last night in Cambodia by bringing a new meaning to the term “cricket and beer”. Along with our guide and his mates we sat drinking a beer and munching on freshly fried crickets that Tash helped granny de-wing and gut. Absolutely delicious – just like really juicy pork scratchings, bacon and crackling in one. Even veggie Lucy admitted they tasted good!



Day 23: Osvay to the four thousand islands, Laos

So on a lovely sunny Monday morning (yes quite the contrast to the dull rainy Monday mornings we all so dread back home), we were up with the birds at the crack of dawn and began our cycle to the Cambodian/ Laos border after a wonderful breakfast overlooking the Mekong (the biggest omelette ever with deep fried dough sticks and coffee). Fuelled for the day, we bounced our way along a small overgrown dirt path to the border which we crossed with ease (of course, after paying the obligatory 'processing fees' *cough cough*) and we were in Laos by 8.30am, very smug with our easy border crossing yet again. One of the big benefits of travelling by bike is that you can arrive at border posts, or anywhere else for that matter, at any time you like – you are not restricted by bus or train times and so can take great pleasure in avoiding the huge crowds and queues.

We then had a lovely touristy day stopping off at Khone Phapheng Falls. For those too lazy to walk 100m to see the falls, yes that would be us, you can get in an electric car and brrr down there. Absolutely unnecessary but also absolute bliss for those who have happened to cycle over 1000km to get there!

The falls are the largest in Southeast Asia in terms of their water volume and are the main reason that the Mekong is not navigable – we spent a lovely half hour admiring their full force and were impressed with the fishermen as they navigated the slippery rocks below. Our hearts however were back up the slope at the orchid bedecked cafe, complete with Christmas tree, fixated on strawberry and yogurt Frappuccinos. So back we went and indulged to our hearts' desire!



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day 23: Osvay to the four thousand islands, Laos

Next stop were the four thousand islands. As we headed to the ferry port to get across to the islands, crowds of backpacking tourists appeared; all dressed the same looking very hot and bothered. We rapidly decided to avoid party island Don Det and went straight to Don Som, a local island, with lots of interested locals asking us what we were doing and where we were going. Narrow dirt paths led us across the island past bathing buffaloes and dusty fields to the end of the island where we jumped on a boat across to Don Khong. Don Khong is the largest of the 4000 islands and had one of the loveliest guesthouses we stayed at; a wooden house on stilts with Japanese style matting and paper on the walls. We found out that yet again we'd just missed the week-long festival culminating in boat races so the town had an air of exhaustion and everyone had left; we therefore sat alone in the river side restaurant, eating fruit and pancakes and discussing our upcoming itinerary for Laos.





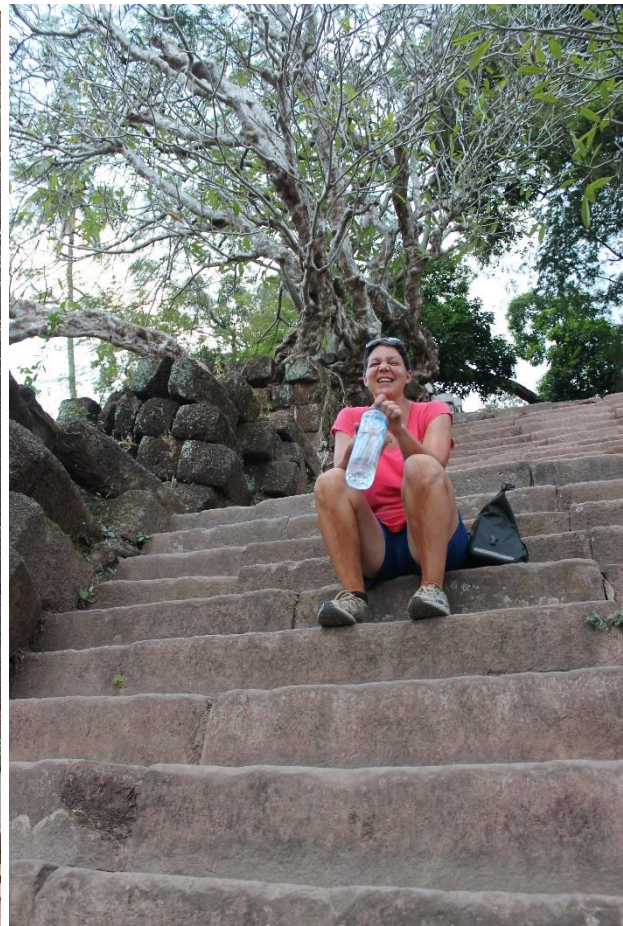
Day 24: Don Khong to Champasak

The next day we headed across the island and Lucy joined in with the boat women pulling us across the river to the mainland so we could cycle on the back routes via the UNESCO heritage site Wat Phu to Champasak. We had a quick sprint (much to our knees disgust) to get to Wat Phu after a much needed extended lunch stop and arrived just in time to beg the museum staff to let us in. Our smiles and pleading looks worked, or maybe it was pity, or perhaps fear at the sight of our sweaty dirty bodies but we were allowed a quick five minute dash around the museum.

Luckily, the Wat itself was open to visitors for another couple of hours so we could take our time marvelling at its beauty. It was incredible. Rediscovered by our friends – the French Mekong Commission – it amazingly formed part of the Khmer empire, dating back to the 11th century, and was designated as a world heritage site in 2001. It is built on a hill and merges into the landscape perfectly, consumed by nature with stunning views out across the Mekong. Frangipani trees line the staircase up to the temple and rock carvings of crocodiles and elephants are your reward for completing the steep climb. If only time travel were real, what an incredible thing it would be to see the Khmer empire in its full glory, you can only imagine what once covered the now crumbling stone temples and staircases but you can be sure it was a divine piece of intricate artistry going by the mammoth effort that must have gone into the design and construction of the Khmer temples.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Day 25: Champasak to Somewhere on route to Savanahket!

Champasak is a lovely town right on the Mekong with old colonial buildings that, unlike those in Cambodia, are in good condition. Sadly, Lucy's time was running out so, despite longing to stay longer, we had to press on in order to get as far up the country as possible before her departure. Lunch that afternoon was a hoot. Hot and bothered, Tash was withering away in the midday heat so we needed to find something to eat and fast. We stopped at the first noodle soup cafe we could find and ended up eating with a right old comical bunch. One of the old men was as tall as Tash's waist and his thighs were the size of our arms. His friends found the whole thing hilarious and were in stitches as Tash and him chatted away and he admired her biceps. Naturally, lots of photos were taken which amused his friends (and Lucy) even more.

That night we "hit the wall" outside a shop. Tash ate two whole packets of biscuits, a coffee and coke before Lucy decided it would be a better idea to try and find a place to pitch our tent that we had been carrying about with us. As has been the case everywhere else, the store owners wouldn't hear of it, apparently snakes take a fancy to unwary campers in back yards, so we were ushered into the garage to sleep in the shop owner's nephew's pad. Lucy on a sun lounger, Tash on the floor getting to use the roll mat she has also been lugging round! As always things became interesting....



Day 25: Champasak to Somewhere on route to Savanahket!

We discover 'Nephew', who will remain unnamed, is a wood trafficker. He buys wood from Thailand and ships it across the border into Laos and then across to the Vietnamese border where he can acquire double the price. And no! Of course he doesn't sell Laos trees – that is illegal and you can go to jail and get fined for it! His mate, ironically a ranger in the forestry department, agreed with this synopsis as we all sat eating fried rice and drinking beer. "This is why I live in the garage so I can look after the wood," he tells us. His actual house was in the nearby town, from the photos empty but for a huge chandelier and, naturally, wood panelled walls and staircase. His two cars sat outside. "Just like yours in England," we were told. Uh no, not quite, our Ford Focus and Toyota Yaris don't quite match up to your two plush Hyundai 4x4 pick-ups! Lucy discovered in her chat with him that he follows the Environmental Investigation Agency on Facebook and we watched in amazement at the irony of an illegal rosewood dealer scrolling down his news feed to keep abreast of the latest updates on the status of rosewood trafficking, remaining well well-informed of price changes or clamp downs..... He's making a great deal of cash and business is clearly booming; whilst we were tucked up in our sleeping bags, a Vietnamese couple popped in to seal a deal. His next plan is to go on to study for a master's in business studies



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day 26: Somewhere... to Thakhek

Following our night with Mr 'wheeler wood dealer', we continued north bypassing Savanahkhet and headed for Thakhek – a lovely town on the Mekong, looking across to Thailand. At this point we thought we'd be on a bus the next day in order to visit a national park and see some elephants. Sadly, a bit of research via the internet soon put paid to this idea as the elephants that used to roam the area have gone – interestingly hit by lightning.... so over a good old Pad Thai (we were on the Thai border after all) a fruit shake and skewer of liver (which Tash devoured in seconds) we made the decision to power through and cycle straight through to Vientiane in order to complete Ho Chi Minh to Vientiane using just pedal power. No more 80km days, oh no, this is serious. 120km was the minimum from here on; up at 5am, then 30km before breakfast, another 40km then coffee, another 20-30kms till 1300, then lunch till 14.30, and then attempt to cycle 30k after. It's had various levels of success i.e. we finish in various states of deadness... Tash also found drinking beer, offered by the Office for Environment football team, in mid-afternoon heat then cycling does weird things to your head....



Day 27: Thakhek to Vieng Kham

The next day we made it along the constantly but gently undulating roads to Vieng Kham, a junction town on the crossroads of route 13 and route 8, which was confusingly signposted as something completely different, not as picturesque as our normal Mekong town (the roads here meant we had to deviate away from the river slightly) but well equipped with numerous restaurants and guesthouses so not such a bad place to spend the night. Here we also met Vogel. A German cyclist who found us having dinner in the Lao Thai restaurant. We learnt about bike safety and a host of conspiracy theories from him.... traveling sure does broaden the mind! Apparently it is 'safer to not wear a helmet'. The theory behind this was explained to us, "drivers see you are not wearing a helmet and give you more space on the road." We were unconvinced that this really is the case and being scientists the sample size of one didn't alter our sceptical attitude! Therefore, while trucks hurtling past at 60mph remain on the roads, we will continue wearing our trusted helmets.

We've met a couple of other cyclists on our trip up Laos. One of whom we won't forget is Mr Ma from Xinjiang in China who introduced us to "coffee to go" Laos style. It gets poured into a huge plastic bag with ice, sugar, condensed milk and a straw. It's the size of a bucket, can be hung on handlebars and lasts all day.... a brilliant idea and you really do appreciate the ice until $\frac{3}{4}$ of a bag later when you begin feeling really sick!



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Day 28: Vieng Kham to Thabok

The next day we left for Paksan, caught up on route by Vogel who accompanied us for lunch before cycling through the evening to Thabok, putting us within touching distance – a lovely 60kms – of Vientiane. This made for a long 150km day but the beautiful Mekong views and exquisite sunset soon saw us forgetting our tiredness and we continued smug in the knowledge that the following day to Vientiane would be an easy ride.

That evening we returned to our guest house from dinner to find the place turned into something akin to a witch's kitchen. Squirrels had been disembowelled and were being stuffed, bags of frogs and toads lay on the floor awaiting liquidation, boxes of stiffened lizards and geckoes were stacked in piles, a snake squirmed in a net bag and people wielding syringes were happily injecting recently deceased toads. This coroner's office turned out to be a Korean led biology team making an inventory of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian fauna. Laos was their last country. Ten individuals of each species were to be collected, killed and preserved. Some specimens stay in the home country, others to go to South Korea. We got chatting of course. Apparently a lot of their specimens, especially the mammals, they buy from the local market! Amphibians and reptiles are collected along transects with the guy wading about at night in watery areas! They also had a whole range of fish laid out being peered at through what looked like a jewellers eye glass to decide if they were different species or just fry. We asked if it made a difference whether the species was endangered or not and were told no, they needed 10... We sat and watched for a couple of hours learning tricks of the trade of taxidermy and watching frogs helplessly hop to their deaths, somehow forgetting our tiredness and the fact we needed to be up at 5am the next morning!



Day 29: Thabok to Vientiane

So up early, we rolled the last 60 kilometres into Vientiane – the end of our cycle together. To celebrate our arrival we hit the fresh fruit shake joint before checking into a hostel with a pool to get a much needed cool down. That evening we wandered along the river front buying presents at the night market and indulged in a \$2 pedicure while watching the Mekong roll by and eating a 20 cent ice cream – a rather fitting end to our trip.

So a month of cycling, 2000km on the clock and 10 organisations visited – not a bad haul! We had one last walk along the promenade looking out across the Mekong and reflected on the past month; at the sites we had seen, the people we'd met, the great conservation work that is ongoing, but also the need to raise awareness on the importance of the Mekong and the need for more funding to address the issues that still face the biodiversity and people of the Mekong. We hope our trip has gone some way in doing this, if only to highlight the area, its importance and to put it on the map, on peoples radar. Now, the next stage begins, this trip has started the beginnings of our next plan, to come up with a way of pumping some much needed conservation funding into this region and to give conservation along the Mekong a voice. Everyone knows of the Amazon, now it's the Mekong's turn to face the spotlight.


So stay tuned. The adventure has not yet ended. In fact, it has only just begun...



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



“Storytellers, by the very act of telling, communicate a radical learning that changes lives and the world: telling stories is a universally accessible means through which people make meaning.”
Chris Cavanaugh



Conservation Stories

www.meanderingthemekong.wordpress.com/conservationstories

Over the year of our Conservation Masters course, we attended numerous lectures that terrified us with the picture painted for the future of our planet. This, coupled with the knowledge that bombarding people with horror stories does not encourage them to change their behaviour or take action but instead engenders a feeling of apathy and despair, drove us to approach the issue from another angle - inspire change through positive stories and examples. We hope that by bringing to light more positive stories of what normal people are doing in this region to tackle conservation issues will inspire others to action.

We hope that our reports provide proof that change is possible and everyone's contribution counts however small. By reversing how we look at the problems facing our planet and reporting what steps ordinary people and the smallest of organisations are taking to conserve their local resources we hope to inspire others to do the same and to illustrate to policy makers across the region just how important the Mekong is for its people and biodiversity.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Wildlife At Risk (WAR)



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Wildlife At Risk (WAR)

Before leaving Ho Chi Minh on Monday 16th we took an early morning ride across town to meet Mr Nguyen Vu Khoi, CEO of Wildlife at Risk (WAR).

Originally a forester and then working for various NGOs such as CARE & FFI, Mr Khoi has been working within the conservation sector in Vietnam for 20+ years and has been with WAR since Brit Dominic Scriven OBE set up the NGO in 2004 in Vietnam. From just a team of three people in 2004, WAR has grown to a 26 strong group of staff working across their Ho Chi Minh office and Wildlife Rescue centres in southern Vietnam

WAR work primarily to provide up to date biodiversity surveys, technical solutions for confiscated wildlife from the illegal trade through their rescue centres and try to release the wildlife back into the wild. In recent years, WAR have also increased their public awareness activities through wildlife education.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Wildlife At Risk (WAR)

WAR work with school groups in Ho Chi Minh city and involve students in a breed and release programme which releases Beta fish into Sai Gon rivers as a means of creating awareness of the environmental problems in the area.

WAR also assists the local forestry authority by operating two wildlife rescue centres which provide a home for rehabilitated wildlife that has been confiscated from the ever increasing and lucrative wildlife trade. 83% of all wildlife bought to the centres is released. Pangolins, Gibbons, Civets, Crocodiles, Otters and Bears are just a handful of the species that are rescued from the trade and bought to the centres. The wealthy elite still eat these species as a symbol of their wealth and with the huge profit available to traders selling these species it is not surprising people quickly become involved in it.

We were told that the bear bile trade is reducing due to availability of alternatives and the growing fear that the bile has been diluted with other products. But while this may be reducing the number of new bears being bought in to the trade, the situation for the bears already in captivity is still pretty dire. There are over 4700 bears in farms across Vietnam (2007-2008) so no one organisation can take them all in. Now that they are becoming of no use they are either left to starve or their paws removed for bear paw soup. The lucky ones make it to the rescue centres.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Wildlife At Risk (WAR)

In 2005, WAR was the first NGO to implement a micro chip programme in Vietnam to keep track of the bears in the bear farms to ensure no new bears are bought in. This has created a centralised database which records all the bears in captivity, the first of its kind in Vietnam. WAR have been working with the local government to hand over of their Cu Chi wildlife rescue centre to full government control later this month. It is hoped that its current success will be continued into the future.

We also asked Mr Khoi what he thought the main difficulties are that face Vietnam's biodiversity and he answered:

- Dams along the Mekong which reduce the flow of water down stream and make the delta increasingly saline.
- Law enforcement for conservation and a carefully considered transparent system is needed to tackle the wildlife trade.
- Lack of funding for practical conservation. For example, captive breeding for conservation is run over several years all on a non-profit model. Currently 80% of WARs funding comes from the founder and also the chairman of the foundation – Dominic Screven OBE.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tram Chim National Park



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tram Chim National Park

Located North of Cao Lanh in Dong Thap province, Tram Chim National Park is one of the last areas left of the Plain of Reeds ecosystem – once a vast wetland area which previously covered around 700,000 hectares of the Mekong Delta in southwestern Vietnam (spanning the provinces of Dong Thap, Tien Giang and Lang Sen).

Supporting over 20,000 waterbirds in the dry season and home to nine bird species and five fish species that are globally threatened, Tram Chim (7,313 hectares), is one of Vietnam's four Ramsar sites and was the first site to be designated in the Mekong Delta. Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance, designated under the Convention of Wetlands (the Ramsar Convention) with the aim to ensure “the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

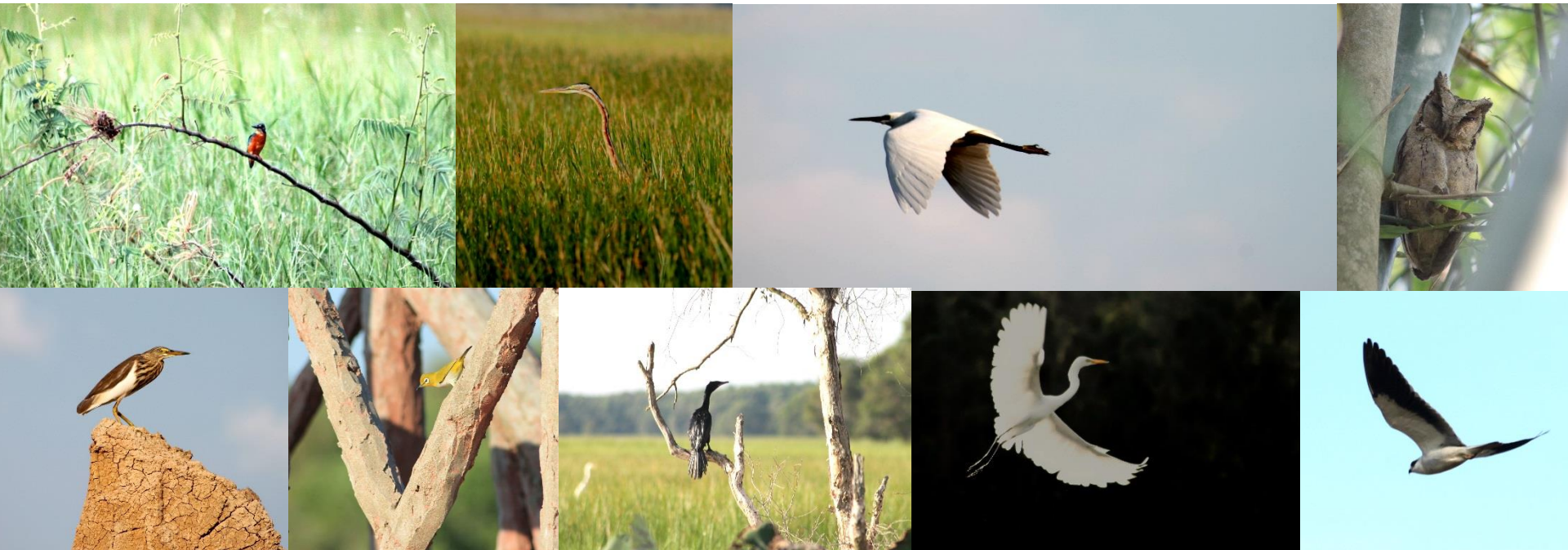
The wetland is most famous for its population of Sarus Cranes which occur at Tram Chim annually between January and May. Listed as Endangered on the IUCN red list, these birds were in decline at Tram Chim due to previous management strategies that stored water in the park in order to suppress fire. This management strategy however interfered with the natural cycle of the ecosystem which should see a six month dry season and a six month flood season and species began declining.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tram Chim National Park

WWF began working with the local authorities in 2008 to restore this natural cycle and the park now works with local communities, providing legal access to resources in the park to encourage the long term sustainable management of the wetlands. The site is of large importance for the surrounding local communities, wild rice is harvested and the wetlands provide an important source of fish. It is also of huge importance for people living downstream with the capacity to mitigate damage from floods and droughts.



Tram Chim National Park

According to the guide books, Tram Chim is difficult to get to and very expensive, so unless you are a committed birder, this place is not for you. Now, whilst we may be biased and perhaps enjoy a national park slightly more than the average tourist, we have to completely disagree with the above statement. You can stay in the nearby town of Tam Nom very easily and for just £6 each we had a beautiful trip through the national park, stopping for an hours bird watching with fantastic panoramic views from the watch tower some 30m above the surrounding canopy of trees. As we motored through the wetland (our only moan was that we did have to tell our boat driver to slow down on multiple occasions!) passing cajeput trees, water lilies and lotus flowers, we were treated to sightings of white rumped pygmy falcon, oriental darters, Indian rollers, pied king fishers, black capped king fishers, blue tailed bee eaters, herons, little egrets, bitterns, owls, cormorants and many jacana type waders. We would definitely recommend a visit.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

CBC: Commitment, Brains and Conservation



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

CBC: Commitment, Brains and Conservation

On Monday morning we took a cycle across Phnom Penh to meet Mr Saveng Ith and Miss Chhuoy Kaylan from the Centre for Biodiversity Conservation (CBC) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

Back in 2005, Fauna and Flora International (FFI) and the Royal University of Phnom Penh established Cambodia's first Master's degree course in Biodiversity Conservation and Mr Saveng was a student in the first cohort. He has since gone on to complete a PHD and is now a senior researcher and lecturer at the CBC and we were lucky enough to have him show us around, accompanied by one of this year's current students, Kaylan.

The university capacity building project has gone from strength to strength since its establishment in 2005. In 2007 a herbarium and zoological collection was founded, 2008, the country's first peer reviewed scientific journal was launched – the Cambodian Journal of Natural History. In 2009 a multidisciplinary conservation research group was created and in 2011, the Centre for Biodiversity Conservation (CBC) was established as a discrete unit within the faculty of science, recognising conservation as its own specialist entity. This year, as the centre celebrates 10 years of the MSc in Biodiversity Conservation, more than 100 Cambodians have been trained through the programme and vocational training delivered by 88 in-service professionals.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

CBC: Commitment, Brains and Conservation



We were shown around the herbarium and zoological collections by Saveng, Kaylan, Thi Sothearen and Ny Naiky and learnt about the various exciting projects being undertaken by the students, from research on vultures to bats to marine turtles and river dolphins. We looked in awe at herbarium specimens dating back to 1866, some of which have been sent to the CBC from Paris – specimens collected by French researchers during the colonial era. The team are doing a great job sifting through the piles of specimens and trying to translate and decipher the often incomprehensible handwriting. However, more funding is needed if they are ever to get through the endless piles that are sat on the shelves as it is a vast job that also requires the help of an experienced botanist. Funding for students however is available through grants and scholarships. This has ensured less students are likely to drop out – unable to earn enough money for fees and living costs while studying. The course itself is heavily oversubscribed with 70 applicants for around 20 places.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

CBC: Commitment, Brains and Conservation

The centre also has a collaborative monitoring project and applied research projects undertaken by 22 Cambodian scientists. Conservation actions include gibbon monitoring in Bokor national park, a hog deer conservation plan, investigating the masked finfoot (a bird) and fishing cat. New species have even been discovered in the Cardamons –the caecilian (*Ichthyophis cardamomensis*, 2015) and wolf snake (*Lycodon zoosvictoriae*, 2014).

When asked why he decided to study conservation, Mr Saveng told us of his worries about the rate of deforestation and illegal exploitation of natural resources – two huge threats that face Cambodia’s biodiversity. However, with an increase in technology he believes the conservation message is now reaching more and more people in even the most remote areas of Cambodia.

“Our parents in the villages only know of two jobs – doctor and business man. So when I came home and said I wanted to study conservation no one knew what I was talking about. They were worried there were no jobs for this. Luckily my mother had heard of health NGOs who had been in the area before. So I explained there were jobs with NGOs that do conservation. Now she understands more and is happy for me. It is hard being a girl to persuade your family to let you go away and study in the city. They worry a lot.” Naiky explains.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

CBC: Commitment, Brains and Conservation

Sothearen has a different tale to tell:

“My mother owned a roadside stall selling wild animals for food. Growing up I ate them all. Now she has stopped. It is difficult to find the animals around our village they are very rare. If people do find them they can sell them for a much higher price than before. It is against Buddhist teaching to take life so my mother likes what I am doing. It is a way to balance out her past.”

In terms of jobs, past MSc students have since gone on to work for various conservation projects and programmes, for example, for WWF, Conservation International, Forestry Administration, and have been involved in advocacy work and community based programmes. With 100s of students being trained through CBC, the future for conservation in Cambodia is certainly promising and from meeting some of the students there is definitely an exciting feel and buzz to it. Our visit made it abundantly clear that this enthusiastic and passionate group of people are eager to tackle and raise awareness of the threats that face their country's biodiversity.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Siamese crocodiles – the art of patience



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Siamese crocodiles – the art of patience

We stand looking over a chin high concrete wall, at a pond covered in thick green duckweed and algae, flecked with water hyacinth, the noon sun beating down on our necks. “Grandpa, grandpa”, Ratt calls softly. The pond remains dead. He repeats the call. A clump of hyacinth begins to drift slowly across the water surface but there is no wind or breeze. “Grandpa”. The hyacinth slowly changes direction and the green algae parts, as slow as treacle off a spoon, and we’re transported straight back to the primordial swamps through the eyes of our first Siamese crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*).

So what’s so special about Siamese crocodiles? Well to begin with they were only rediscovered in the wild in Cambodia in 2000 during an expedition into the Cardamon Mountains. There are just around 250 left in the wild and so they are on the IUCN critically endangered list. They used to occur throughout South East Asia but due to hunting for skins and rapid habitat loss are now only found in the remotest parts of the Cambodian Cardamon mountains. The larger salt water crocodile has already gone extinct in this region.

“Crocodiles can be trained to come when called,” Ratt tells us, “so we only name our breeders and never those we’re going to release because it could help poachers catch them.” The crocodile’s ability to hear Ratt’s soft call under water just increases our respect for them.



Siamese crocodiles – the art of patience

The Cambodian Crocodile Conservation Programme was set up in 2000 by the Cambodian Forestry Administration and Fauna and Flora International (FFI) – part of which is this ex situ breeding programme. Currently at Phnom Tamao there are three females of breeding age but only one male big enough to take them on! The project really requires another big male but they have to wait in the hope that a chance arrival of a rescued croc will be a big pure bred male as, for obvious reasons, wild ones can't be collected. We learn early on that many rescued crocodiles are usually hybrids so of no use to the programme.

A waiting game seems the best way to describe crocodile breeding where everything is slow. They take 15 years to reach breeding age, three months to hatch and another three years before they are big enough to be released. This all means long term logistical planning such as enough enclosures to house growing crocodiles, who only like other crocs from their own clutch, as well as feeding them and dealing with aggressive new arrivals. They live on a diet of live fish when small and dead chickens as they get bigger.

Once old enough the crocodiles are given a health check by the vet and taken to the Cardamon mountains for release into the wild. The day before we arrived this had just taken place with eleven deemed suitable for release next month. When stressed the crocodiles won't eat so after yesterday's health check which involved draining the ponds, capturing, weighing and examining each crocodile Ratt tells us they won't eat for up to two days now – another reason all handling is kept to a minimum.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Siamese crocodiles – the art of patience

Ratt shows us this year's three month old hatchlings seven of which are alive from a clutch of ten. Once the female lays her eggs they are removed, as the pens have concrete floors, and are hatched separately in sand at a temperature that ensures a mix of male and female crocs hatch. Ratt, who had to leave school early to support his family, has been working at Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Center for 13 years. He looks after the crocodiles and is hoping to accompany his charges to the release site this time round.

So what's the future for the crocodiles? Money for radio trackers is needed to monitor what happens to each individual post release and hopefully some big males of breeding age will come into the centre. In the meantime the slow work of breeding, releasing and watching crocs grow will continue. We say our farewells as Grandpa watches unmoving from his green pond – the true master of the art of patience.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Wildlife Alliance

While at the centre we had a fleeting catch up with Nick Marx, Director of Wildlife Alliance's Rescue and Care Programs, fresh from giving a possibly pregnant elephant her first ultrasound. He used to work in the UK with tigers, studied an MSc at the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology and has been at the centre for over six years. His main work has involved managing and improving the centre's image and overseeing a number of release programs, such as the release of gibbons into the Angkor Archaeological Park, as well as rescuing problem or injured elephants – one of which wears a prosthetic foot designed by Nick. The centre itself is run in a joint partnership between the Cambodian government and Wildlife Alliance. Both of which enable other independent NGOs such as Free the Bears and FFI to have projects on site.

We both thought the centre was great and worth a visit if you're in Phnom Penh. The animals are all rescued and come from various backgrounds. For example, from markets, some were caught in traps and snares, some were abandoned pets that were bought as babies when small and cute and are now unwanted, the store rooms of restaurants and even from farms. They arrive at the centre in a range of poor physical and mental conditions and with varying levels of habituation to humans. Those that can be, are released in various protected areas while others are brought back to a good state of health and remain in the centre.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Of Butterflies and Gibbons



Of Butterflies and Gibbons

Venture 30km north out of Siem Reap and you might just stumble across the BBC - the Banteay Srey Butterfly Centre.

Set on the road between Angkor and the Banteay Srey temple, the BBC is a lovely little project which is working with local communities in the area to breed butterflies. Farmers around Phnom Kulen receive training and equipment, breed the butterflies at their homes and bring the pupae to the centre where they receive payment for each undamaged pupae. Hopefully, this alternative source of income will reduce the likelihood of villagers engaging in environmentally damaging activities such as logging.

The project was set up by Ben Hayes, a bat specialist from Scotland, who worked in Vietnam for a number of years. Helped by co-founder Sharita Smith and her husband, Gary Smith (and of course the enthusiastic and dedicated staff at the centre), Ben has created a beautiful space where you can easily spend an hour or two in the peace and quiet of the garden, surrounded by over 100 different species of plants and butterflies, including the stunning yellow birdwing, giant atlas moth and beautiful lady butterflies, a real tropical paradise.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Of Butterflies and Gibbons

The staff will guide you through the centre, taking you step by step through every stage of the butterfly's life cycle, and you can compare the eggs, pupae and caterpillars of different species and marvel at how incredibly well they have evolved to repel predators through their camouflaged colourations, scary "faces" and gold flecked toxic shells.

The centre has been running for six years overcoming legal battles and corruption and is now on its way to becoming a self sustaining firmly educational centre that revolves around community involvement and collaboration.

You can visit the centre daily between 9am and 4pm for a \$5 entrance fee. This goes to pay the local butterfly farmers for their pupae as well as the staff salaries. We would also really recommend the cycle to get there – a beautiful, as usual flat, route out of the Angkor complex through small Cambodian towns and shaded avenues which will take you little more than an hour or two. You could then continue on to Banteay Srey Temple and ACCB which would make for a wonderful day. Take some time out from the temples and explore a little further!



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Of Butterflies and Gibbons

Having heard from Mike, ACCB, about the release of gibbons by Wildlife Alliance into the Angkor archaeological park we decided to see if the spot marked on our temple map as “Flight of the Gibbons” knew anything about it.

“Flight of the Gibbons” turned out to be an adventure experience set up to enable tourists to zip wire for 2km through the forest canopy for \$100. So after listening to the sales pitch we asked if there were any real gibbons here.

“Oh yes that tree over there is the five star hotel for this area’s gibbon pair.”

We soon established that two pairs had been released into the park. The pair whose territory encompassed the centre’s site had also bred this year and in the early morning and evening you can often see them in their tree. We were naturally there at midday! The other pair had a territory a few kilometers away. Due to the size of the archaeological park, around 160 sq km, the number of pairs that can be released has to be limited to ensure there is room for future offspring to set up territories.



Of Butterflies and Gibbons

There are two species of gibbon in Cambodia both Endangered on the IUCN red list. These are the yellow- cheeked crested gibbon and the pileated gibbon. Again they are threatened by loss of habitat and the rampant pet trade.

The released gibbons are those from the rescue centre and make ideal animals to release into an area that sees a lot of human traffic in the form of tourists as they are firmly arboreal.

The other thinking behind this release is that unlike national parks set aside for wildlife, usually in remote difficult to access and enforce locations, this park houses one of the seven wonders of the world and is therefore unlikely to be sold off as a logging concession or for nefarious development projects, providing a much safer and more easily monitored home for these threatened species.

We can only wait, see and hope that maybe one day it will be possible to hear gibbons calling and catch a glimpse of them swinging through the trees while strolling round Angkor's many temples.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks



Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks

Did you know you can tattoo a tortoise?” We stare at Mike our open mouths indicating a definite no. And so it turns out you can. Some turtle conservationists have perfected the technique in different countries as a means of identifying released tortoises. Chips are often prone to failure and move around in the body and notching living shell is no longer ethical. It also turns out that it is helpful to team up with local monks to tattoo appropriate religious symbols onto the tortoises next to their unique ID code. This hopefully makes people think twice about selling or eating a “religious” tortoise.

This was our second lesson of the day; monks are very, very important in community life here in Cambodia and across South East Asia, and in 2014, ACCB launched a project that aims to raise awareness within villages of the need to protect wildlife and not collect, sell, eat or keep endangered animals as pets. “The speed of loss and destruction is too fast to only educate children”, explains Mike, “by the time they grow up and are in positions to influence anything there will be nothing left. This is why we decided to work with the monks. Even if only one acts on what we advise it’s better than none.”

To illustrate this scale of destruction, in the last 15 years the forest leading up to Phnom Kulen National Park has all but gone, replaced by fields. A recent report by Global Witness states that 2000 sq km of forest is lost each year in Cambodia.



Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks

Leaving the next generation to sort out these problems is therefore likely to be too little too late. So, in an attempt to overcome this, every year the ACCB team tours the area presenting educational night shows, playing environmental games and promoting conservation.

In addition to their community awareness programmes, the centre also provides educational programmes for schools in the area- it's free for Cambodian schools while the international ones are encouraged to make a donation. The same applies for the twice daily tours round the facility. All in an effort to spread awareness and knowledge. As with all these initiatives funding is required and the monk program has had to be put on hold while further grants can be found to support it. The centre is funded by Munster Zoo, with matched funding from private funders and support from GOETZ.

As we go round we meet a variety of animals. The centre currently holds around 350 individuals, 250 of which are turtles and tortoises. The animals are here because they were rescued from the pet trade, had been shot or injured, confiscated from homes or traditional medicine suppliers, restaurants and temples. Many are threatened by loss of habitat.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks

Mike came to the centre two years ago as an intern and is now in charge of the animal department. His incredible enthusiasm, energy and deep faith in what he is doing came across during the three hours he spent showing us round the centre. It soon became clear that the work here is a 24/7 balancing, juggling and tightrope act involving sudden unexpected appearances of rescued animals, not enough space, the odd technical glitch, yet another macaque being handed in, dealing with paperwork and emergencies at all hours. All this set against a backdrop of staggering biodiversity loss. I asked the inevitable question – how do you keep positive? “Ah some days things just go right, animals breed or a monk brings in his first confiscated animal. All these small steps make me feel it’s worth it.”

Caring for rescued animals is not easy. Many have specific dietary requirements, are very sick on arrival and find captivity very stressful. One inmate we met was an Indochinese silver langur who had arrived sprayed bright pink. When babies they make cute pets being orange balls of baby monkey fluff only going silvery grey as they age – sound familiar? They are leaf eaters so their digestive system can’t cope with the usual diet of bananas and milk that they’re usually fed on. Many die and those that are rescued have to be carefully nursed back to health and, if still babies, a special formula is required. Pangolins are also difficult to keep in captivity and nurse back to health. There’s currently only one at the centre, he was asleep, and Mike believes there are pretty much none left in the wild in that particular part of Cambodia, shipped in vast numbers and terrible conditions to feed Chinese and Vietnamese demand.



Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks

So what are Mike's ambitions for the centre? "I'd like to fight for the ignored and neglected animal groups." By this he means storks, turtles and tortoises. "They are just as threatened as pandas and tigers but receive very little attention." The centre has a number of Greater and Lesser Adjutant storks, Woolly Necked storks, Black-necked Storks and Green Peafowl (not a stork but a really beautiful bird similar to the peacock but this time the female is also brightly coloured – just lacks the big tail) and ACCB is attempting to breed them all with varying levels of success.

Storks are not easy to breed and it often takes a lot of effort to establish a matching pair. They can easily kill each other with their long pointed bills so mating is a delicate business. The Greater Adjutant male has got the idea – he's been practising hard on the bucket and even built a nest. The female on the other hand has enjoyed ripping the nest apart and withholding all favours. A couple of pairs of Lesser Adjutants have it all figured out so Mike thinks he'll move them to a neighbouring enclosure to show the Greater ones how it's done. The green peafowl has got a stage further. She lays eggs but refuses to incubate them. Mike's team aware of this, found a chicken to be surrogate mum but she laid and hatched her eggs before Mrs Peafowl got round to laying hers.... Captive breeding is a fascinating if not exasperating game of trial and error, at least in the early stages.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks

On the other side of the site, the Box turtles and Elongated tortoises are breeding away. Numerous tiny ones marching about their pens. Mike has grand plans to build more pens so there's space to house hundreds as they wait for them to grow big enough to be released into the wild. Like the crocodiles this is slow. The Cambodian turtle or "Royal" turtle gets up to 35kg in weight and only breeds after at least 20 years. He has two of these in a big enclosure which has just been refurbished, thanks to support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), to provide a suitable sandy beach for nesting. Sadly we didn't see them as again it was midday so they were deep underwater.

The best thing about breeding these is your money can go a long way. Enclosures can be well built with easily available local materials and small scale donors can see something concrete for their cash – excuse the pun!

The centre also carries a number of conservation projects on the ground. For example, vulture counts -in cooperation with other conservation organizations- each month using a dead cow as a lure and so creating a "Vulture Restaurant". ACCB also conducts waterbird surveys in the Tonlé Sap Floodplains.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Tattooing tortoises and breeding storks

Our tour leaves us with an overall impression of a small, flexible unit with a clear vision and goal for the future currently getting their facility and team operating in such a manner that they can begin to work efficiently and effectively towards this goal. Of course unexpected things will continue to happen, but Mike believes “if things are set up so we are less reactionary and more proactive these random events will be less disruptive.”

A little money could go a long way here, and with a little help, who knows, we could be seeing the start of Cambodia’s largest turtle and tortoise reintroduction programme. If you are in the area, we urge you to stop by and support ACCB, or if you are reading from afar, take a little time to keep up to date with and or support this forward thinking project.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Conservation
through
development
- introducing
CRDT



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Conservation through development – introducing CRDT

The Cambodian Rural Development Team (CRDT) are a local Cambodian NGO based in Kratie province. Whilst not primarily a conservation NGO, they partner with organisations such as WWF and WCS to achieve sustainable development and conservation goals through programmes on sustainable livelihoods, natural resource management and community development.

Since they began in 2001, they have been working to improve sustainable agriculture in the region, with the dual objectives of lifting people out of poverty whilst at the same time protecting natural resources from over exploitation.

CRDT's work on sustainable livelihoods covers five main areas: Food security, Income generation, Water and Sanitation, Renewable Energy and Environmental Education and Waste Management. However, as is the case for smaller NGOs the world over, securing funding is tricky and they have had to be smart and entrepreneurial, developing new and long term ways to secure funding for their projects. The way CRDT has done this is particularly neat; developing social enterprise projects which not only improve the lives of many in the province but also generate enough of an income to provide funds for their work.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Conservation through development – introducing CRDT

For example, CRDT have taken over the running of “Le Tonle” from a Swiss organisation. This is a guest house complete with restaurant which offers local youths from poor backgrounds the opportunity to learn skills in the tourism and hospitality sector. We had a lovely meal there and since leaving we’ve met a number of Le Tonle graduates putting their training to good use within the tourism sector.

Profits from the guest house fees, meals and drinks are all pumped back into the development project. CRDT also runs a ‘conversation with foreigners’ programme which offers conversational English classes to local students (run by English speaking volunteers) for a fraction of the price they would find elsewhere, again all profits help CRDT to fund their development programmes.

We caught up with Tola who is the business programme manager for CRDT tours and he told us all about its establishment. Since 2009, CRDT have been training communities to provide them with leadership, book keeping, guiding skills, and the skills needed to host tourists. Although the communities soon mastered these skills there were not enough tourists to host, hence CRDT tours was born to connect tourists and communities. In 2011, CRDT Tours was established as a separate enterprise but whose profits all go back to CRDT.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Conservation through development – introducing CRDT

Tola told us that feasibility studies are first conducted for each interested community with the assistance of the local authorities, NGOs and local villages. Then villagers are given the training needed to provide homestays, chefs and transport options. Once set up, the homestays work on a rotational system, ensuring that benefits are shared between the community equally. For example, households will take it in turns to host tourists and as you pass through the villages you will see 'my turn' signs outside the next in-line household.

CRDT currently work with three communities Koh Phdao, Koh Dambang and Koh Preah with around 500 tourists visiting per year. Each village has its own committee and all tourist income is split so that 50% is spent on salaries, 30% is directed to conservation projects, 10% is spent on administration and the remaining 10% is put into a village development fund for community projects or infrastructure development. For the conservation projects, money is spent on helping rangers patrol the river, checking for illegal fishing activities and working to promote sustainable fisheries and protect the Irrawaddy river dolphin.

We loved this NGO; the enthusiasm, passion and drive exhibited by all its staff was immediately apparent. Their willingness to take on new projects and challenges to help people and nature against huge odds is truly inspiring and we wish them all the success for the future.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

What price for wildlife?



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

What price for wildlife?

“Biodiversity encourages tourism and generates income.” This was written on a banner wrapped around a building on the island opposite Kratie. It was also a sentiment expressed by the VSO representative, Mr Smith, who had been working with WWF for the past year. “The more tourists we have in the area coming here to see the wildlife, forests and river full of fish the more chance there is the government will see that tourism can generate money just as well as illegal loggers and fishers”. Sadly everything boils down to the dollar – wildlife is not worth saving for itself but only if it can turn a profit.

So we’ve all heard about illegal logging. Tracts of land sold off as concessions, the money pocketed, tales of secret shipments of logs exported across borders in ambulances and fuel tankers and people being killed if they try to expose what’s going on. But how many of us have heard anything about the illegal mass extraction of fish from the Mekong? We met up with Nich from the WWF Kratie office. Nich and the WWF team have been working with communities along the stretch of Mekong from Kratie north to the Laos border, setting up ten community fisheries and improving law enforcement through patrol teams. It involves a nine step process, beginning with the establishment of a committee who appoint river guards to monitor activities along that stretch of river and decide which areas can be fished and which are closed to fishing, either fully or part time, through to developing good relations with the Fisheries Authority.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

What price for wildlife?

This scheme began in 2006 and there are now 529 river guards each paid \$5 a night to patrol their section of river. Gill net, dynamite and electric fishing are all illegal and bad news for fish populations. At the small local scale the guards are highly effective, confiscating nets and educating people about new laws and regulations and the value of the local wildlife, and the system works well. However, such community protection without backing or legal support is sadly unable to take on “the big guys”.

So who are the big guys? Vietnamese fishers. Here is where it gets twisted, a case of selling snow to eskimos or in this case fish to Cambodians. The Vietnamese bring in truck loads of farmed fish which is generally sold for a dollar a kilo less than fresh fish caught in the Cambodian Mekong. The now empty vans or trucks are then filled with fresh Mekong river fish and trucked to Saigon where it fetches an incredibly high price.

The fresh fish is caught using illegal methods at night by teams of small, two man craft using electrodes to stun the fish making them easy to the scoop abroad in greater quantities than is possible using traditional fishing methods. These are offloaded at various points along the river taken to Vietnam or sold off for in the local markets for a higher price than the farmed fish. “Just go up the road to the market here in Kratie in the morning and you’ll see them. Fish caught this way are easily identifiable because the electric current causes massive internal bleeding so they’ve haemorrhaged heavily.” And indeed we did. Many a nice chunky catfish were selling for 20,000 Cambodian Riel a kilo – about \$5.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

What price for wildlife?

Everyone knows it's going on but palms have been greased and so Cambodia's biodiversity continues to cross borders unabated and the river guards are left high and dry. The guards, we're told, recently plucked up courage to confiscate a boat and its load of illegally caught fish only to then find themselves arrested and in court on the charge of stealing said boat! And who can blame the local fishermen who seize the chance to earn \$500 a night. It's the same mentality that results in cutting a tree down because you can buy a tractor with the money from the sale.

So perhaps tourism will be able to incite the government to protect the nation's fish as seems to be the case with the Irrawaddy River dolphin. These used to be prolific before being hunted for food and oil during the Khmer Rouge. Today there are less than 100 left in Cambodia. WWF carry out regular monitoring of them and boats take tourists out twice a day to see them, or like us, you can take a kayak down the river and float silently across the deep pools watching the dolphins swim around you. The tourist boats are captained by local fishermen as part of WWF's livelihood improvement schemes. During tourist season they can earn up to \$7.50 a day. Bird nest protectors, wood carvers and homestays also fall under this scheme as further means to raise awareness of the value dolphins have for tourism in the area.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

What price for wildlife?

However, this education doesn't always go to plan. Locals see tourists paying to visit wildlife attractions such as the dolphins or turtle centre and see an opportunity to get on the band wagon. So they catch a turtle keep it in a bucket and charge tourists a dollar to see it. The tourists themselves also cause problems. There is often an ethos amongst some travellers that everything should be free. The entrance fee to sit for as long as you like on the jetty and watch three quarters of the world's last river dolphins in their natural habitat is a measly \$7. This money goes to pay the wages of the river guards and boatmen. Yet we found two tourists arguing with the ticket officer about the expense. It's less than the cost of two coffees in the UK. You won't find them arguing with a Costa Coffee barista about the price of their skinny lattes.

A bit of a mixed bag this story... while WWF and their team on the ground are doing great things within the communities, as well as working with the Fisheries Authority and facilitating communication and cooperation between the various interested parties, until the government decides to value its natural capital above the means to "get rich quick" the situation remains an uphill battle. The good news is that when this does happen, all WWFs schemes will already be in place and ready to go, able to function effectively in the manner intended. But as to when this will happen... who knows.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Mud turtles of the Mekong



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Mud turtles of the Mekong

On arrival in Stung Treng we headed straight to the Mekong Turtle Conservation Project – a place I was extremely excited about visiting. Those who know me will know of my love for turtles, but these turtles are particularly special. The Cantor's Giant Softshell Turtle, *Pelochelys cantorii*, to most is probably not the prettiest creature on the planet, but with its soft shell, wrinkly neck, flat packed body and odd pig like tubular face, it instantly had my affection. As a mud lover, this turtle spends most of its time burrowed in the muddy banks of the river.

But what is so special about this mud dweller and why the excitement? Well, it was thought to be extinct in the Cambodian section of the Mekong river until it was rediscovered in 2007 by Conservation International (CI) and it is currently known to survive only on one particular stretch of the Mekong River - the area extending from Stung Treng through to Kratie province in Cambodia. This reach of the Mekong is also critically important for one of the last viable populations of the critically endangered Irrawaddy river dolphin. Classified as Endangered, the pig faced mud dweller is also one of the rarest fresh water turtles and one of the largest: reaching over four feet (1.5m) in length. Female turtles lay eggs once a year between November to June, laying around 50 eggs at a time.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Mud turtles of the Mekong

In the wild, turtle eggs and hatchlings have a naturally high mortality rate due to consumption by predators but this species also faces additional external threats from invasive tree species, *Mimosa pigra*, and of course, us humans, due to the trade and consumption of turtle meat and eggs which we were told is very tasty.

The Mekong Turtle Conservation Center (MTCC) was opened in June 2011 by CI with the cooperation of the Cambodia Fisheries Administration, the Monks and Committee of the Historical 100 Pillar Pagoda (Wat Sor Sor Mouy Roy) and the Association of Buddhists for the Environment. Monks have been trained to look after the turtles at the centre and work with the community to spread the conservation message. Since the project began, many pet or captive turtles have been handed over to the centre, another great example of how religious influence can lead to positive conservation outcomes.

The centre was established with two main objectives to headstart turtle hatchlings and to raise awareness of turtle conservation. 'Headstarting' is the captive care of turtle hatchlings in their initial stages of life to reduce predation risks once they are released into the wild. In the wild, hatchling mortality rates are highest in the first 10 months, so by enabling hatchlings to successfully see through this period, the hope is that more turtles will make it to adulthood and the population will have a better chance of increasing.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Mud turtles of the Mekong

After headstarting, the turtles are released into their natural habitats along the Mekong River. Since the rediscovery of *P.cantorii* in 2007, the MTCC has been working with local communities in the area and have created 'turtle nest protectors' who have been trained on how to protect the turtle nests and new hatchlings.

We went to stay with one such family involved with the project as 'turtle nest protectors'. Once upon a time, Mum and brother in law used to collect eggs for everyone to eat, then MTCC team came along and the family instead began working to protect the nests in exchange for a monthly salary. As ex hunters, they know where the turtles might nest and how to locate the nests once tracks or signs are found. They now patrol the local area for turtle tracks and work with MTCC to protect the nests and hand over hatchlings to the centre to headstart, with a financial reward for each hatchling. Additional benefits, for example, us being directed to their house to stay the night, work as extra money making schemes which provides a further incentive for people to work with conservation organisations such as CI. We were warned that the family speak no English so were expecting an evening full of sign language and us trying to pronounce Khmer with little avail..



Mud turtles of the Mekong

Instead, we were greeted by the daughter of the family who was a Le Tonle graduate (the training centre run by CRDT in Kratie), trained in hospitality skills with a great level of English. We therefore had a great evening wandering around the village, chatting to the family (despite an English speaker being present we were determined to practice more Khmer which had the family in stitches with puzzled looks on their faces) and were treated to a Thai rom-com on a portable DVD player which the whole extended family joined us to watch.

The next morning we had a scrumptious plate of pancakes for breakfast which were devoured far too quickly. The training by CRDT is clearly working and it is great to see the benefits of one project having knock on benefits for another.

Anyway, back to turtles. When the hatchlings reach 10 months, the centre organises a special Turtle Release which sees tourists and local communities come together to release the turtles, raising awareness of their need for conservation and also how funds from tourism fees support the project. With limited funding for these kinds of projects and conservation in general, diversifying and sourcing an income through tourism can be very important and we saw various forms of turtle merchandise at the centre, from t-shirts to postcards, to handmade turtle toys.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Mud turtles of the Mekong

It is clear that conservationists can no longer be pure biologists to have a successful NGO, business skills and innovative thinking is essential. It is evident, both from this project and elsewhere in Cambodia, that by increasing these skills it can certainly benefit conservation.

The MTCC is a great example of a project that is working on various levels to achieve its goals with tourists, local communities, monks and religious associations. Collaboration at all levels is key and through this multi level partnership, this project offers a new pillar of hope for the mud turtles of the Mekong.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

A Ray of Hope: Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in Laos



© Chris Hallam / WCS

A Ray of Hope – WCS in Laos

After chasing Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Site Co-ordinator, Ben Swanepoel, along the Mekong from Pakxan, we finally ran him to ground for a quick coffee in Vientiane. Naturally, we squashed the chat in between packing Lucy's bike into a box and her catching the bus to Bangkok.

Ben, is a South African who moved here 6 years ago to work for WWF before switching to WCS, bringing with him his knowledge of protected area management, psychology and personnel training. A bright, positive and very energetic guy his genuine love for his job comes across loud and clear.

WCS, working in close partnership with the Provincial, District and Local authorities, we are told, has three main roles in protected area management – building capacity within the Government of Laos agencies responsible for protected area management at all levels, assisting with community resource use, planning and livelihoods development and providing technical assistance and funding for local agency enforcement operations. Ben then led us through the process that takes place after the declaration of a new park by the government.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

A Ray of Hope – WCS in Laos

The Government of Laos has limited capacity, both financial and technical, to provide effective protected area management so once government declares a new park, organisations such as WCS campaign or are invited to get involved. “We have a long term process that can take up to three or more years to fully implement,” he explains. “In the first year we approach the villagers in and around the park. Find out what resources they use, how reliant they are on them and which areas they rarely if ever use and would not mind relinquishing access to.” This is a very important first step as these parks are usually in remote, hard to access areas and the villagers rely heavily on the natural environment for their daily needs. 70% of what they collect is used for their own subsistence and if possible 30% sold to generate income. This initial consultation process usually results in certain sections of the park becoming a true protected area and other sections falling under some form of controlled community use. It also ensures everyone is aware of and agrees with the new boundaries.

Assisting communities with the development or sustainable management of resources is key to relieving pressure on the protected area, and so, as a means to develop and encourage resource management, Fish Conservation Zones are often established early on in the process. They are apparently easy to set up, regulate and yield positive results within a year so are much appreciated by communities heavily reliant on fish as a source of protein.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

A Ray of Hope – WCS in Laos

The next step involves facilitating the local communities to create their own local legislation for the management of the park. The legislation is then presented to the district government for ratification. This helps enormously to create buy in from the communities and is coupled with steadily increasing levels of enforcement as fines and other penalties are introduced. Ranger teams are formed whose responsibilities begin with the collection of traps and snares, can be as many as 5-7000 in the first six months, confiscation of illegal weapons, breaking of hunting camps and finally the implementation of fines or arrests in more serious cases.

As Ben points out, 70% of the protection National Parks enjoy is through community buy in rather than enforcement. To this end WCS is beginning to explore new ways to incentivise ongoing successful protection. They've looked at the nest protection schemes in Cambodia and the night safaris in Nam Et Phou Louey where communities are paid varying amounts, depending on rarity, if certain species of wildlife are seen by tourists and have come up with a new scheme.

To begin with communities are encouraged to sign up to conservation agreements which are coupled to a village incentive fund. As part of this agreement communities hold quarterly meetings and physical inspections involving WCS and the elected committees. These meetings and inspections are for the most part to provide communities with the opportunity for active participation in protected area (PA) management processes and for PA staff to provide relevant feedback. The community committees formed as part of the conservation agreement's 'village incentive fund' facilitate this.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

A Ray of Hope – WCS in Laos

The new scheme is to link these inspections to development projects the community has agreed it would like. So for example, \$10 000 is made available to the village and they can then decide how they would like to spend this money – school, hospital, roads etc. Their decision is agreed by the district authority and the funds released according to how well the community follow the land use and protected area legislation.

“We are still working out the details and trialing the process,” says Ben. “One issue we’ve come up against is that people are not used to making these type of decisions. Societies in these villages are very traditional and “discussion” across genders and social levels very much a western concept. So we are now thinking of conducting needs assessments in each village and providing villages with relevant suggestions of projects that can be supported through this fund. It will then be up to the community to select what they want from these options”.

Throughout the process outreach programs are run to raise awareness and build capacity. “We have an amazing outreach team led by Sameng, who puts together and runs all our campaigns making full use of drama.” Ben also feels that generally everyone in the WCS sphere of influence now understands the importance of a healthy environment to provide continued high quality water and resources, and clear in roads have been made to reduce small scale illegal activities.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

A Ray of Hope – WCS in Laos

As we have heard everywhere on our trip, higher forces continue to threaten South East Asia's remaining biodiversity and wild places. Capacity around the management of large infrastructure developments and concessions is still weak and can result in serious threats to the country's current and future protected areas. However, not all development companies are the enemy. For example, companies are supposed to offset the damage they cause and some, such as THBC, want this to be managed ethically. They recently approached WCS directly to implement a conservation project with the offset money. WCS are now trying to encourage the Laos government to use this as a chance to establish a template that all such companies have to follow in order to put together model offset projects.

Again it is the people he works with, trains, supports and encourages that keeps Ben's enthusiasm alive. "The technical guys on the ground are terrific" he tells us "overworked, underpaid and no guarantee of advancement yet so hungry to learn, improve and do their jobs well that it keeps hope for the future alive." And his ideal solution? "Ha, easy. Choose two areas in Laos to protect, ignore everywhere else and pool all the resources, funding and expertise from the dozens of conservation NGO's working in Laos into these two areas. If that happened we could do amazing things and they could be world leading parks." Stranger things have been known to happen so we can but hope....



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The Poor Mans Fridge



The Poor Man's Fridge.

“Which is more valuable rice or the snails, frogs, other animals and plants that live in the rice paddies?” Nick Innes-Taylor asks when I meet up with him in Vientiane. Surely the rice. He grins, “Nope the fish and aquatic resources are actually MORE economically valuable to the farmers than the actual rice crop – the rice field is the poor man’s fridge.” Such is the latest findings from a team of 250 people working across five provinces with the Lao Government’s Department of Livestock and Fisheries. This is part of a regional project instigated by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) which also includes the Philippines and Indonesia.

The implications are huge. Land is valued for sale or compensation based on rice yield so including these other resources would increase the value dramatically. Also, times they are always a changing, and in this region at a rapid rate. Migration to the cities coupled with national drives to intensify production and easy access to cheap pesticides and herbicides from China and Thailand, means chemicals are an appealing labour saving device for the dwindling rural population.

Sadly, results are disastrous. Yes, yields rise in the first year as the rice seedlings are pest and weed free, but the soil’s organic matter breaks down rapidly. Because it is no longer replenished the very structure of the soil is lost and in the following years it turns to sand.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The Poor Man's Fridge.

And it's not just the pests that die – the fish, crabs and snails also perish causing a loss of crucial protein to the farmers as well as upsetting the food chain. That's even before looking at what the chemicals actually do to humans when used with scant attention to safety measures and correct dosages.

So what to do? “Everyone here intuitively knows the problem but not how to address it,” Nick tells me. “We need to work out how to manage these paddies and their non-rice yields just a little better so that, for example, instead of 10kg of snails people can harvest 20kg. At the same time the management needs to be low in terms of effort and resources as the farmers don't have much of either.”

The aim is to improve food security. Malnutrition amongst children and pregnant women is a chronic problem in Laos. A new strategy for nutrition security has just been drawn up by the Lao government and it is hoped the results of the rice paddy study may get incorporated within it. As Nick says, a cross-sectoral action plan with everyone working together would be fantastic, but incredibly hard to achieve. He hopes funding from the EU can be made available to support the implementation of this new strategy and run trials testing different ideas and methods to help farmers increase yields using environmentally sound practises. He laughs, “This work is not just about food security, it also has huge conservation potential – snails, crabs, fish, water plants, insects, – all would benefit.”



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The Poor Man's Fridge.

To highlight the value of these aquatic animals and weeds to poor communities, local Lao government extension workers have been encouraged to take photos of what people are eating while they survey the villages. It's been a great success with everyone keen to take and share the photos on social media with their colleagues. The photos show quickly and clearly the huge range of animals and plants that are sourced, used and eaten from paddy fields. Fantastic when pitching a request for money to potential donors!

Nick worked with the Asian Institute for Technology (AIT) before becoming an Advisor for FAO projects in Laos two years ago. He came to South East Asia shortly after finishing university in the UK with a degree in agriculture, fell in love with the area, got involved in fisheries then went back to the UK to do a Masters, before returning to the region to stay. In the 80's Nick helped AIT develop a fisheries outreach program, when fish farming had just begun in Thailand, funded by British, Swedish and Danish money. In the 90's the work spread into Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Initially heavily research based the need to apply what was being tested and trialled slowly led to much more community involvement and more focus on building the capacity of local authorities and development organizations



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The Poor Man's Fridge.

Often foreign projects come in to a country for three years, deliver training specific to their own requirements and then leave. The result is that government personnel repeatedly receive training in the same or highly specialised areas and their actual needs and shortfalls are never met.

Nick explained how important it is to develop a comprehensive program to ensure local development workers receive the training they need to respond to the needs of their local communities. “So often government extension workers are trained in what other people think they need”. Interestingly, local in-country NGOs, are much more on top of this than government – probably aided by the fact they are smaller, less bureaucratic and directly in charge of the money they receive – once they have it of course....

Lastly Nick tells me about a second project FAO is involved in to facilitate the development of a national strategic implementation plan for fisheries and aquaculture in Laos. As of 2006 and the Paris Declaration every government sector is encouraged to develop their own strategies detailing what is needed and wanted within their sector. A round table process should then take place between donors and government to generate consultation and help improve how aid is carried out by donors and make sure it actually addresses the needs of the country.

Laos has a strategy for the development of the fisheries sector, but it is quite general and offers no clear guidance, especially for development workers at the community level. So with FAO support, and for the first time in their history, the provincial and district levels of government are now working to develop this broad strategy into their own implementation plan. Previously, many of these types of plans had been drafted by foreign consultants flown in from abroad.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

The Poor Man's Fridge.

“Yes it's slower this way round, but the result is a strategic plan written in Laos, intelligible to all, and everyone involved has learnt a great deal and are able to reflect on and learn from the process. Also the sense of ownership and achievement everyone feels from doing it themselves is huge, making it much more likely that the plan is used and adhered to,” says Nick.

It's being seen as a great step that will hopefully begin to equip people with the skills necessary to meet the new challenges to fisheries, agriculture and biodiversity that are blossoming in the region as well as develop pride in their own abilities and style of working. As Nick points out, “Adopting “modern western” methods of best practice may not necessarily be right for Laos. If people are given the chance to develop their own strategies, some traditional ways of doing things have a greater chance of being maintained.”

I leave Nick a happy man, after three long months of hard work, the strategy is fully compiled and he is set to return the following day to his home across the Mekong in Thailand to celebrate Christmas with his family.



Finances



Finances:

Expedition Costs

Expedition Costs	
Total Expenditure (day to day spending)	£969.94
Visa Fees	£125.28
Total	£1,095.22
(Total Per Person)	£547.61
Pre - expedition expenditure	
Panniers	£35.00
Brooks saddle	£55.00
Books	£15.00
Maps	£15.00
Handlebar bag	£30.00
Dry Bags	£15.00
Vaccinations	£250.00
Bike Service	£30.00
Bike Computer	£20.00
Flights	£1,000.00
First Aid Items (to compliment donated kit)	£20.00
Malaria Prophylaxis	£83.00
Total	£1,568.00

Finances:

savings

Borrowed or Donated Items	Unit Cost	Collective Cost
Stove - MSR burns all fuels	£70.00	£70.00
Cooking Pots x 1 set	£20.00	£20.00
Fuel	£20.00	£20.00
Tent - 2 man	£150.00	£150.00
Bikes x 2	£500.00	£1,000.00
Panniers front and back	£100.00	£200.00
Front Rack	£100.00	£200.00
Back Rack	£100.00	£200.00
Puncture Repair, tyres, Tool Kit	£100.00	£100.00
Sleeping Bag x 2	£100.00	£200.00
Sleeping Mats x 2	£50.00	£100.00
Torches and batteries x 4	£60.00	£60.00
Go Pro Hero HD	£150.00	£150.00
HD memory card x 2	£25.00	£50.00
Satellite phone rental	£100.00	£100.00
Water Filter	£70.00	£70.00
Gloves x 2	£20.00	£40.00
Lights x 2	£60.00	£120.00
Bike Locks x 2	£30.00	£60.00
Cycle Clothing x 2	£100.00	£100.00
First Aid Kit	£100.00	£100.00
Bivy Bag	£10.00	£20.00
Total Savings		£3,130.00

Finances: total costs

Total Cost		£5,793.22
Total cost minus donated Items		£2,663.22

Covered Costs		
Imperial Exploration Board		£1,700.00
Crowd Funder Campaign		£540.00
Total Costs Covered		£2,240.00

Total Spent on Expedition		£423.22
Total Spent Per Person		£211.61



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Practical Advice



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Practical advice for future expeditions and lessons learnt

The following is based on our specific experience in S.E Asia (not to be followed for every cycling trip where the local context may vary considerably).

Kit and equipment:

Tents are not needed! The surrounding areas of the Mekong basin, from the delta in Vietnam through Cambodia and up to Vientiane in Laos are heavily populated and all open space is being used for agriculture or aquaculture, camping is not really a done 'thing'. Thus, there is little room to pitch a tent and camping directly on the side of the road wouldn't be recommended. When we did ask people if it would be possible to pitch our tent in their gardens or under houses, we were told no and instead welcomed into their homes with open arms – the people are so generous and kind. Furthermore, small guesthouses are abundant, cheap and pretty much everywhere, you won't have to cycle far to the next town to find one.

The same is the case for the stove. Food is so cheap and restaurants and small eateries line the roads where you can pick up all sorts of tasty snacks and drinks to keep you well fuelled. This allows you to fully emerge yourself in the local delicacies, support local businesses and practice the local lingo at the same time. What's more it saves on vital pannier space and gets rid of the need to carry fuel – a win-win! Some of our favourite moments were stumbling across wonderful little cafes, drinking jelly drinks and coffee, and chatting to the people who ran them.



Practical advice for future expeditions and lessons learnt

Before leaving, we tried to gain sponsorship to enable us to invest in trekking bikes. Whilst we are sure these would have been brilliant, they really were not vital in order to carry out the expedition. People tried to worry us into buying expensive equipment but you really do not need it, a bike with a good set of gears if you are going into the mountains will do just fine, but make sure it is treated to a good service before you leave. Certainly no need to splash out on a "Trekking" bike. Bikes can be repaired everywhere and there is always someone willing to give you a hand, so just take your puncture repair kit, a couple of spare inner tubes and some oil.

The same goes for panniers, you can get by with a cheap set and some bungee cords but it has to be said, the waterproof panniers and ones that stay attached when you hit bumps (Ortlieb) make life much easier and are worth the money if you can afford them (but if you can't then the cheap ones will be fine).

We took a satellite phone but did not need to use it as Wi-Fi is readily available in all three countries and in-country sim cards can be bought very cheaply and used on a pay as you go basis. Unlike the UK, the rates are fantastic! That said, it is sensible to carry one just in case. Similarly, you can also get by without a Garmin - just download the maps.me phone application which allows you to download specific country maps, combine this with google maps and you will know exactly where you are.

We took very few sets of clothes but could have taken even fewer clothes to lighten the load. Take less than you think. Two sets of cycle gear and one set of clothes for the evening will do just fine. And as Tash found, surprisingly swimming goggles never get used....



Practical advice for future expeditions and lessons learnt

Flights and Travelling with bikes:

If taking a bike make sure you check the airline policy before booking any flights. Often the cheapest flight has the worst policy for carrying a bike so ends up eventually being the most expensive option. We dedicated a whole afternoon phoning all the different airlines which was definitely worth it. Be warned though, many of the airline phone staff didn't know their airline's policy which often became rather frustrating and resulted in a lot of internet research.

We found Emirates to be one of the best options, as long as your total luggage weight (including the bike) came to 30kg or less there were no extra costs and it didn't matter that the bike was the main luggage item. Vietnamese airlines also had a similar policy and a generous luggage allowance. It is definitely possible to have everything you need, including a bike and be under 30kg. Take the heaviest items in your hand luggage and as Tash demonstrated, you can get away with quite a few hand luggage bags! Also, you can buy everything you need in country if required, however, this takes time when you arrive so it is a case of balancing priorities.

Visas

When entering Vietnam on the new 15 day visa, you need proof of the date of exit. This is a problem if you are cycling with no such proof of onward travel! To overcome this issue, get creative with Microsoft office and generate a bus itinerary or ticket that says you are leaving the country on a date within the 15 days. Border control don't care when you leave but will want to see an official looking piece of paper with a date on it.



Practical advice for future expeditions and lessons learnt

Sponsorship

Start very early on this one. It takes time to make contacts and for people to agree to commit money or goods in kind. As we found out, a month or so before leaving is too late and many funders have already committed their annual budgets. We were offered bikes at cost price but they were still too expensive so we couldn't make use of this offer.

We set up a Crowdfunding site which worked well due to generous friends and family. If you want to do this, make sure you have good social media streams to publicise it. This can be done early, but also could be done whilst you are on the expedition, encouraging people to pledge their support for you cycling 100s of kms! It helps for people to see you out there to get the donations flowing.

We also borrowed lots of equipment from friends, family, friends of friends and of course, Imperial's Exploration Board. This saved us vast amounts of money. You don't need to spend the earth on brand new equipment. The same goes for bike servicing and bike maintenance lessons. We were lucky enough to have friends and friends of friends who were willing to help us get our bikes up to scratch before we left and even gave us free lessons in bike maintenance in exchange for dinner and chocolate. Save money, smile nicely and ask around. People were mostly really interested in the expedition and very happy to help.



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Practical advice for future expeditions and lessons learnt

Budgeting

You can quite easily survive in S.E Asia on £15 per day, for all food, visa fees and accommodation if needed. This amount also included entrance fees to temples and national parks. Also, the delta in Vietnam is of course full of tributaries to cross so you need to ensure you have some spare change to pay for boat crossings.

Website and Social Media

A good website and social media set up is important if you want to attract sponsorship and publicise your trip. It is also a great one-stop shop to share your stories with friends and family. For us, one of our primary objectives was to raise awareness on the region so our website and social media streams were vital in order to do this. We developed a whole section on conservation reports which people can read whenever they wish. This also gave us some sense of legitimacy when approaching conservation organisations and asking them if we could visit and interview them. Seeing a website gave us a more professional look and organisations were happy to be sharing their story knowing it would be publicised on the website. Setting up your own website is in fact really easy to do and can be completely free. We used WordPress and didn't spend a penny. Just pick a free template and away you go!

But the most important advice...get out there and just have fun! Don't worry about having the newest top of the range equipment, whilst it would be lovely, it really is not essential. Basic but fully functioning equipment will do just fine.

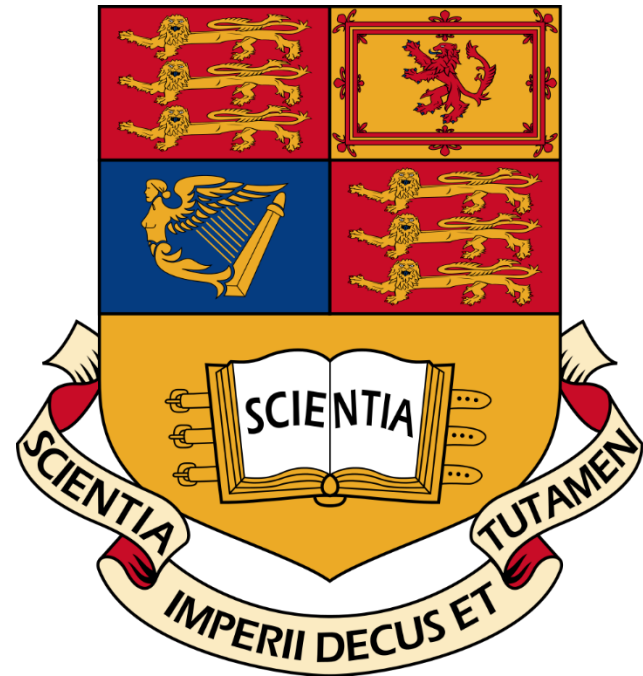


Four Wheels. Two Women. One River

Acknowledgements

The biggest thank you must go to Imperial College Exploration Board for giving us the initial and main source of funding for this expedition. But, in addition to the funding we would like to thank Lorraine and Phil for their support, encouragement and advice which was invaluable.

We must also thank our supporters who donated through our crowd funding campaign and our friends and families who gave or lent us equipment – it was greatly appreciated. We hope you enjoyed our stories & reports and have a new found love for this incredible region and its biodiversity.



crowdfunder



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River



Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do, so throw off the bowlines, sail away from safe harbour, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore, Dream, Discover. —Mark Twain



Four Wheels. Two Women. One River