Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia

Permaculture in Cambodia

Rosemary Morrow and Rob Allsop (Australia)

[Presentation Report]

Rosemary Morrow gave an overview of the situation in Cambodia in regards to living standards and the after-effects of war on the people.

The average family has between five and ten children while it is not unknown for a woman to bear up to twenty children. There is no contraception in Cambodia. Around 35 percent of households have no adult male because of the war.

Rob Allsop is a member of the Jesuit Refugee Service and has spent two years in Cambodia. On his arrival, he discovered he had an affinity with the people. He was posted to a vocational training school which was an education centre and home for eighty men who had been injured by land mines. Most were amputees with the loss of one leg below the knee being the most common injury. These men were still quite capable of working though they needed training to be able to function with their injuries. Most wanted to learn carpentry, electrical work or welding and the like but back in their home village, their skills in these trades may not have been of much use since most have no power, no equipment or tools.

Though these skills were still taught to the men, Rob also added classes in permaculture. There was plenty of land around the school and especially behind the men's dormitory huts. Because Cambodia has only two seasons, hot-wet and hot-dry, the decision was made that the future gardens were to be created around a system of connected canals.

There were many reasons for this. Firstly, the monsoon rains flooded the land where the gardens were to go which would have defeated the purpose. Also, because there are no tools such as hoses, sprinklers or even wheelbarrows, it was also easier for the men to walk the few paces to the edge of the canals to collect water in buckets then hand water each plant in the dry season.

The canals were dug to three metres down so that they are unlikely to dry out in the six months when the rain does not fall. This also added about 30cm extra height to the spits of land which were about 15 metres wide. With the design of the canals, it was possible to isolate the gardens, which measure about 60m x 60m from the

marauding farm animals by simply fencing off a few short metres of open ground facing the men's accommodation because the canals themselves act as a barrier.

Around the entire garden/canal network, the men planted fodder and nitrogen-fixing trees to act as a windbreak as well as supply the gardens with mulch and later, building materials. They were planted three rows thick on three sides.

The gardens themselves soon contained thirty different crops which gave the men and the locals a much more varied diet than they had ever had before. Lemon grass and taro stabilise the banks of the canals and native fish soon found the canals. The density of planting and the easy availability of water also shortened the dry season considerably in regards to water availability for the plants.

The gardens are now open to visitors from other districts as a demonstration garden and the men at the school are returning to their own villages fully trained to pass on the knowledge of a self-sustaining permaculture system.