



# BUOYANCY WORLD

by AYESHA CANTRELL



Following in the footsteps of the previous BioRock project, the Save Koh Tao Group have initiated a new project called Buoyancy World. The idea behind the enterprise is simply to create an alternative dive site to take pressure off the most popular training dive sites. By creating structures that will act as coral and reef nurseries, and offering student divers a playground in which to practice buoyancy skills, Save Koh Tao hopes to limit damage to the existing natural reef structures.

The project is an ambitious one, but with the many dive centres on Koh Tao actively involved it's certainly a case of many hands making light work. However, not all dive centres are on board and the project has certainly divided opinions both on and off the island. Following forum discussions, some critics have commented that the project is simply dumping more rubbish into the ocean. Given the unsuccessful project in Phuket that saw a huge amount of time and money spent on sinking helicopters and airplanes with similar aims in mind, it's easy to see why people are dubious. The programme in Phuket appears to have been poorly located and the structures have been missing for some time now, relocated by the ocean forces. The flip side and the positive aspect is the inspiration for active involvement in the island's future, as well as the level of awareness created by the project. There are similar projects in place all over the world; the ultimate success of these endeavours will only be proved over time by the sites sustainability and usage.

Whatever your point of view, it's an interesting project to see develop. Planned to be in the water by September last year, the projects deployment has been hampered by weather, and the structures waited silently in a field to fulfil their purpose. Guidelines for the structures were well laid out with consideration given to both training and habitat requirements, as well as their structural stability and ecological impact on the underwater environment. The actual site itself is very close to an existing and popular dive site, which offers easy access.

Some fantastic structures have been fabricated, and will function as either nurseries or aids to diver training that can be used without fear of damaging the fragile reef by the inexperience of novice divers. There are fish sculptures and marine animals, bamboo forests in addition to other interesting sights to tour. An effort has also been made to recycle while building the structures, and reusable materials such as glass bottles are featured in a few of the designs. These are perfect hidey-holes for tiny fish and critters seeking refuge and shelter.

The project's budget has been estimated at half a million Baht, which the local community raised through sponsorship and adoption of structures, as well as from fund raising events and donations.

Just a few weeks ago, teams of divers and on-land volunteers worked in unison over 2 days to move the installations from their peaceful field into their novel underwater home. Trucks, cranes, and lots of enthusiasm transported the structures to the night boat, whose crane lowered the structures onto the seabed. The larger pieces were prepared in smaller sections and were assembled on site beneath the ocean's waves. Many divers were used to co-ordinate this effort, using lift bags attached to float the smaller sections into place.

A few days later I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to dive the site, and while not yet fully completed, I was impressed by the life that had already moved in. Juveniles hid in the ropes, Anemones and other fish had already discovered the safety offered by the nooks and crevices created. Coral had also been transplanted to one structure in particular, and time will tell how it cultivates. Instructors were already using the site for dive tours. The location is perfect for navigation practice and some structures offer buoyancy options for training. It ultimately offers instructors a place to take their students while they master control underwater, without fear of harming the actual reef. While it will probably be a curiosity for experienced fun divers, it will free more space on the actual reefs in this area for those knowledgeable in their skills.

If this new world is used, it will relieve stress as it was designed to, and only time will tell as to the structures integrity underwater and therefore the sites longevity. Whatever your point of view, this will be an interesting project to watch mature. When teaching I will certainly have a peek at Buoyancy World, and will without doubt, venture out to take more photographs to capture the site's evolution. At the very least, the initiative will create a discussion point for instructors with their new divers, which will help highlight the danger humankind poses to the oceans of our planet.



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