



A view of the bay - Rudi Hermes, left, and Chris O'Brien with Ao Makham in the background.

Saving Bay of Bengal

In a modest, wooden Thai-style building overlooking Makham Bay, two biologists and two support staff have spent the last two years trying to help save the marine environment of the entire Bay of Bengal from human depredations.

At the same time, they are trying to ensure that the millions of people who make a living from the sea along the fringes of the Bay can still continue to do so.

A bit of a tall order, really. Dr Chris O'Brien is the Regional Coordinator of the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Environment project, known more affectionately as BOBLME. Working alongside him is his Chief Technical Advisor, Dr Rudolf Hermes.

They started work on the project almost two years ago; there are three more years yet to go before they pull back, leaving, it is hoped, the countries around the Bay to manage things themselves.

Those countries are (from

west to east) the Maldives, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The idea of BOBLME is to help assist these countries in getting together to identify challenges, gather accurate information, formulate solutions that everyone can live with, and enact legislation, enforcing it where necessary.

An essential part of the project is a major discussion document, the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis, the first draft of which is now complete. It is labelled, "This TDA document is for use in national consultations. A penultimate version will be drafted after consideration of the comments from the national consultations ... in early 2011." Those consultations are now under way.

It is a huge undertaking, considering, for example, that it is not just the fringes of the bay that are involved. Major rivers such as the Irrawaddy and the Ganges empty into



The BOBLME project covers the entire Bay of Bengal.

the bay, carrying soil set free by deforestation, industrial and human pollution, and a variety of other pollutants. Twenty per cent of the world's poor live in the countries bordering the bay. Food today is more of a priority than sustainability tomorrow.

The middle of the bay is international water, out of the control of any nation, and the target of factory fishing that is steadily depleting the top predators. Closer inshore, sharks are still being killed off to feed the insatiable Chi-

nese hunger for shark-fin soup — a market that is thousands of kilometres from the bay, yet still has a critical impact.

Then there are political problems. In the southwest corner, Indians and Sri Lankans occasionally open fire on one another in the Palk Strait, as both sides chase the same fish.

India wants to dredge a channel through the muddy seabed of the strait so that its ships no longer have to go south of Sri Lanka, yet the Sri Lankans are unlikely to approve such a massive project.

Quite apart from the potential environmental impact of the continual dredging that will be required to keep the channel clear, Sri Lanka has just opened a new port at Hambantota on the south side of the island to try to capture some of that trade currently taking the long way round.

But Dr O'Brien and Dr Hermes don't seem at all fazed by the size of the mountain they have to climb. In fact, they point out, they have already scored one significant goal, securing the signing of an agreement between the governments of Thailand and Myanmar to co-manage the Mergui Archipelago and surrounding waters, an area that Dr Hermes describes as a "critical habitat."

As scientists, they take a broad, analytical, unemotional view, but it is hard to dismiss the urgency of the project. At present, three groups of fish are under critical pressure in the Bay: Bangladesh's national fish, the

Hilsa, the Indian mackerel, and sharks in general.

"The project belongs to the countries. Essentially our role is guiding and shepherding," says Dr O'Brien. "We're quite optimistic that we'll achieve the outcomes we want."

"We hope to demonstrate that [these] countries are working together and harmonising legislation and actions."

The countries are learning from one another. For example, the Maldives recently instituted a ban on shark fishing. Such action could provide an example to other nations fishing in the Bay of Bengal.

The BOBLME project is still at the stage when processes are being measured, research is being gathered, and "human capacity" is being built. The next crucial phase will be when actions are measured.

For the sake of all the countries around the Bay - including Phuket, of course - the hope is that the eight countries involved will get high marks for their actions.