

SAVING NEMO

Koh Chang's divers are helping bring about the return of the clownfish



The striking clown anemone fish is famous across the globe

SINCE LENDING ITS NAME TO THE famous Disney movie *Finding Nemo* in 2003, the clown anemone fish has gained iconic status around the world. In Koh Chang, this distinctive little orange fish with its bright, white stripes has always been a familiar reef dweller, and an integral part of marine life. That is, until climate change and increased fishing – to meet the demand for supplies by aquarium owners around the world – caused near extinction. Sadly, finding clownfish in the waters of the archipelago's 52 islands became virtually impossible.

To combat this rapid decline, the Mu Ko Chang National Park authority initiated an ambitious project supported by the Designated Area for Sustainable Tourism Authority (DASTA), to seek help from the local diving community and return clownfish to the area.

One of the first dive schools to get involved in the venture was BB Divers. The Belgian-owned organisation donates its large dive boats, equipment, time, expertise and staff to the project. "It's just a nice thing to do," says Kristel Golsteyn, founder and director of BB Divers.

Returning captive-bred clownfish to the coral reefs of Koh Chang was not as simple as it might sound and numerous meetings were held in the hope of finding a solution before Plan Nemo was finally unveiled.

"You can't just release thousands of baby Nemos over the side of a boat and expect them to survive," explains Hanna Weerkump, who was one of the first volunteer divers to sign up for the project.

The experts from the National Parks Office knew only too well that as anemone fish, clownfish depend on anemone for survival: the two have a unique symbiotic



relationship whereby the orange fish cleans and nourishes the anemone, and in return the anemone's stinging tentacles provide protection.

The little clownfish may look adorable and friendly, but as a species anemone fish are fiercely territorial and don't like sharing their homes with anyone except their own mate. For the project to succeed, new anemones needed to be introduced.

"One of the early challenges was to figure out where to get anemones without fish," admits Golsteyn. The solution was to harvest vacant anemones from a nearby reef and carefully relocate them in purpose-built cages to the designated 'Nemo' areas near the island of Koh Rang. The special cages are covered with wire netting, which protects the colony of juvenile fish as they become more accustomed to their new underwater environment.

An enthusiastic team of 30 volunteer divers from several diving schools on Koh Chang placed approximately 100 steel cages on the seabed. Each cage contained one or two anemones and an average of 20 fish; altogether around 2,000 fish were released into the protective environment, with the hope that at least 25 per cent might survive.

Today, the colonies are still thriving and the sites are monitored most days by BB Divers. "Now a few of the fish have moved on to the reefs together with their anemone but most are still in their original spots," Golsteyn is happy to report.



Clockwise from top left: A diver places a cage with anemone and baby clownfish on the ocean bed; the clownfish and anemone share an intimate coexistence; designated dive sites are assigned to help Nemo survive in the waters around Koh Chang

The warm waters of the Koh Chang archipelago are fast gaining a reputation as an international destination for sports divers so concerted conservation efforts like these are as vital to the local economy as they are to the local environment.

"It is good for the environment but it also protects our livelihood," admits Golsteyn. That can only be good news for those who are keen on Finding Nemo in Koh Chang.

Visitors can enquire about diving to see the clownfish colony in Koh Chang at www.bbdivers.com