

Wilderness Man

By Mary Walsh

World-renowned naturalist Thom Henley has often shared his knowledge of Thailand's natural environment with *Phuket Magazine*. Here we offer an insight into the man and what started him on his own global journey of discovery

From his earliest years Thom Henley has been at home in the natural world. As a child along the shores of Lake Superior near his birthplace in Michigan ("American by birth, Canadian by choice"), he would gather so many rocks and pebbles his shorts were dragged down by the weight of them in the pockets. His fascination with all things natural continued as he was growing up and he collected butterflies and seashells while other boys his age were tearing apart cars. But it wasn't until he went to Alaska, just for a summer, in his early 20s that "I really began to understand what wilderness was, what true nature was."

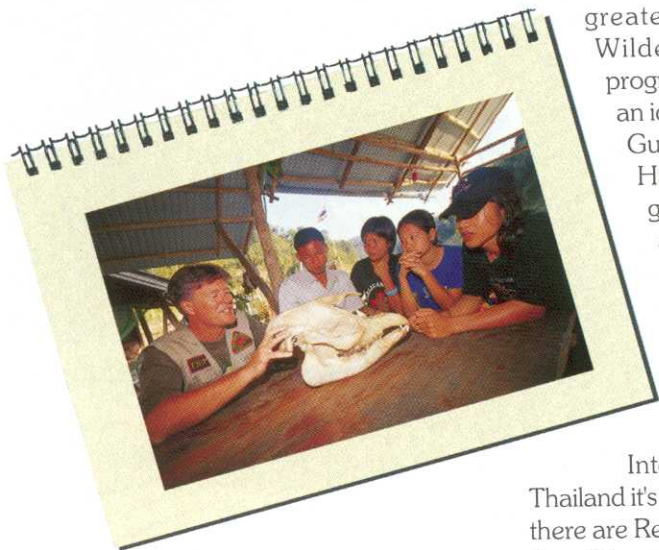
He ended up having a deep, powerful experience while spending three months alone on the west coast of the Queen Charlotte Islands just south of the

Alaska panhandle. "The interesting thing about it was that while I never saw a human for those three months I was never lonely and the loneliest place I have ever been is Times Square on New Year's Eve pressed in by humanity on every side."

It was also here on the Queen Charlotte Islands, that he met his 'other family', the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest. Although Thom doesn't believe in reincarnation he does take the view that matter is transformed, and in that sense we're all part of everything and everyone else. The Haida believe differently and recognize in him a reincarnated brother. He was given the name Raven Walks Around the World when he was adopted into the tribe, an old, old name, unused for a long time. The Raven, in Haida mythology, brings light to the world.







Among all of these accomplishments, Thom considers the Rediscovery program to be his greatest achievement. The Wilderness Adventure-type program began in 1978 as an idea conceived by Thom and Guujaaw, friend and eventually Haida Elder, as a means of getting the local kids, native and non-native alike, away from the TV and video games and back on the land. By 1985 the program had spread globally and Thom founded the Rediscovery International Foundation. (In Thailand it's Pai Tiao Rediscovery). Today there are Rediscovery programs in more than 70 countries worldwide, all using the guidelines formulated by Thom with Guujaaw so many years ago in a Haida village in Canada. His book, *Rediscovery — Ancient Pathways, New Directions* is

— the incredible wilderness area known as Khao Sok National Park. By demonstrating the value of keeping the park inhabitants alive, Thom hopes that at least some of the kids might grow up to be protectors rather than poachers.

There are those few who point to Thom's lack of academic credentials and say it could reflect poorly on Thom's credibility. But as he sees it, if he went that route, that route being an honorary PhD in anthropology currently on offer from at least one major US university, he negates everything he's trying to say, which is that "we are all teachers and we are all students; and everybody has something of worth to teach everyone else. And I honestly have to say that the best teachers I've had in my life have been fully illiterate peoples. I learned some time ago that equating illiteracy with ignorance is a huge mistake. Only the ignorant would equate illiteracy with ignorance and there are a lot of people doing that.

"The United Nations wants to end

Thom feels strongly that the only way to effect change is by reaching young people.

In the course of his walk around the world, Thom has visited more than 80 countries, lecturing at universities, colleges, and being keynote speaker at professional workshops in 20 of them. He has received numerous environmental and human rights awards including the prestigious Sol Feinstone award for the South Moresby campaign and for the founding of the Rediscovery program. Thom launched the largest conservation campaign in Canada — the 13-year struggle to save South Moresby, known to the Haida as Haida Gwaii. A vast wilderness rainforest on the British Columbia coast. South Moresby was designated a Natural Park Reserve/Haida Heritage Site in 1987.

Thom has also authored 8 books including *Waterfalls & Gibbon Calls — Exploring Khao Sok National Park, Reefs to Rainforests, Mangroves to Mountains — A Guide to South Thailand's Natural Wonders, Rediscovery — Ancient Pathways, New Directions*, and his eighth book, to be released in 2003, is *Krabi — Caught in the Spell*. He is also the author of numerous articles, many of which have appeared within the pages of *Phuket Magazine*.

the teaching manual for educators wanting to include an environmental component in their curriculum.

Rediscovery is based on the sound teachings of the First Nation peoples of North America, primarily those of the Haida and the Lakota Sioux. The First Nations believe humans are only one of the many inhabitants of the earth, no better, no worse than any other, and are bound to the land as is every other life form. Sever that bond and humans are left adrift.

Thom feels strongly that the only way to effect change is by reaching the young people. The program is designed to help kids know and respect the world around them, the cultural worlds between us all, and the natural world around them. Games are used to demonstrate the interconnectedness as well as the importance of each member of the web of life, no matter size or ranking, including humans.

A recent example of this philosophy in action occurred in Surat Thani province in late 2002 (see *Phuket Magazine* Vol 14 No 1). Thom and his trained assistants worked with educators and students, introducing them to their own backyard

illiteracy in 10 years and what that means for oral history societies like the Mentawai, like the Penan, is the obliteration of their culture. Because they can no longer pass on their language, their concepts, their stories, their religion or anything to their young people, an instant generation gap is created.

"I really push this when I speak to educators, about respecting those that don't read or write. Yes, I think it's a huge disadvantage in a society where everybody does (read or write). It's really going to keep you down and poor forever (illiteracy) but I think maybe making that opportunity available to everybody should be the goal, not ending illiteracy." Perhaps we should include respecting all those who don't read or write — the whole rest of the inhabitants of this earth.

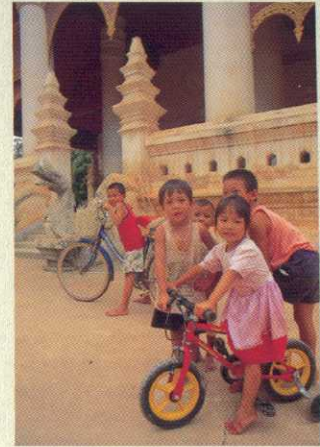
Thom Henley continues his work, sandwiching this interview between returning from a speaking engagement in Vietnam and checking the galley proofs for his *Krabi* book and greeting his next group of international students who would soon be arriving from Bangkok for their great outdoor adventure. Somehow I think they'll get more than they expected from a trip into the jungle with the Raven.

Snap Shots

Thom's Favourite Places



" Baan Rim Pa Restaurant, Patong "



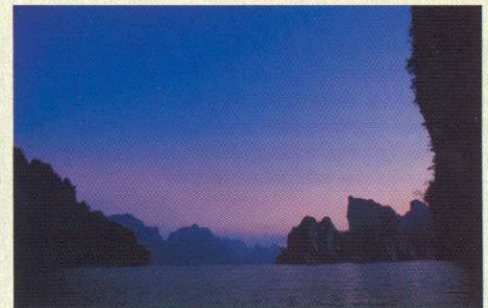
" Kids in Laos "



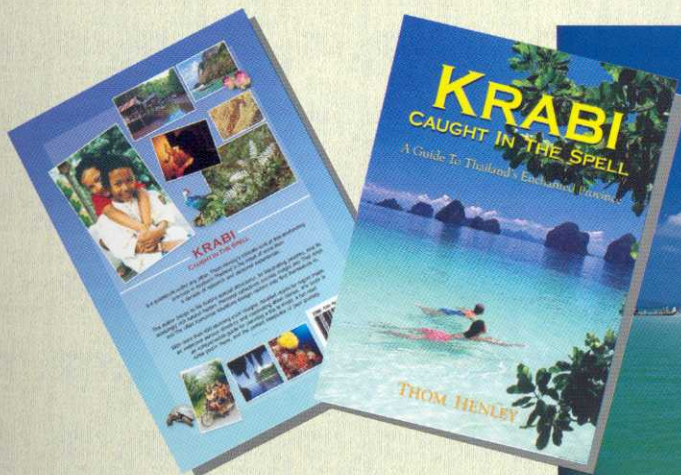
" Temple Fair, Laos "



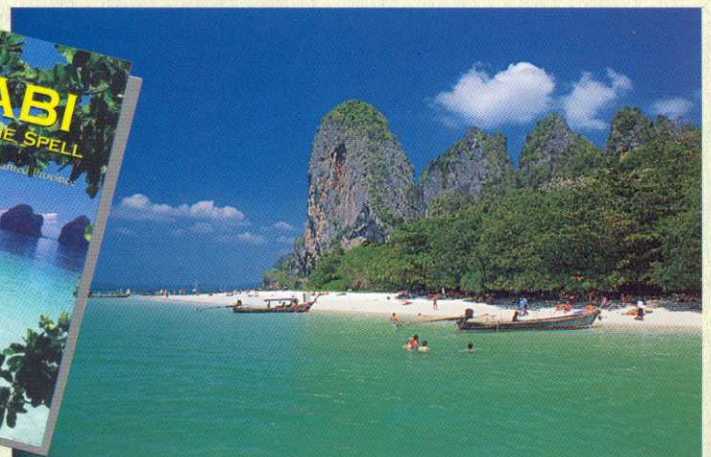
" Kata Noi Beach, Phuket "



" Khao Sok National Park "



" My New Book "



" Krabi "