

WE FREEDIVE - PHUKET

Freediving as part of a sustainable lifestyle

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The world is facing multiple crises. It is urgent for the humanity to adopt some more sustainable ways of living. How to combine my passion for freediving with a sustainable lifestyle? An investigation that led me to find some answers both at individual and community level.

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Introduction

It is no breaking news, the world is facing today several major crises: Overpopulation, water depletion, pollution, collapsing fish stocks, vanishing coral reef, massive extinction of species, diminishing primary resources, soil degradation, global warming, etc. The political world has failed so far to answer these questions and sticks to a short term vision favoring mainly the wealthiest part of the society. The fracture between rich and poor has never been this huge: The world's eight richest men are now as wealthy as the poorest half of the world population¹. All around the world, we can observe the rise of extremism, fundamentalism, populism and identitarian closure.

At a global scale, the world seems to head each day a little faster towards a breaking point. The globalized economic system appears all set to collapse in a domino effect, just waiting for

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-davos-meeting-inequality-idUSKBN150009>

a trigger strong enough to initiate a chain reaction. At an individual level, we are facing the emptiness of a life based on production and consumption. Is it what we were born for? To work, consume and die? We have reached such a high technological development level, but where are we on the consciousness scale, have we really evolved on that perspective? Are we ready to handle so much power without destroying ourselves?

It has become urgent to understand what kind of lifestyle can help us answer these questions, what kind of lifestyle can help us live a meaningful life and ensure a proper future for our children. It is time to embrace a more sustainable lifestyle where we take care of ourselves, of others and of our environment. If we fail to change our way of living, we will have to face consequences of the imbalance we generate on the system that hosts us, and human existence may become dire or seriously compromised.

For my part, on one hand I have been willing to integrate a more sustainable lifestyle for a while. I followed an agro-ecological workshop in France and went to work as a volunteer in some permaculture (“permanent-culture”) projects and others eco-villages in Colombia. I almost opened a project on my own based on bio-construction and permaculture but finally things turned out another way and I am now living in Thailand.

On the other hand, I started practicing freediving four years ago and I have been hooked since then. Somehow, the practice of freediving brought me something deep at the spiritual level. It helps me connect to the wholeness, to the present moment, to nature. It improves my health, both physically and mentally and it provides support to my meditation practice. I eventually decided to integrate the practice of freediving more deeply into my life by working as a freediving instructor. Therefore, the question that popped up now is: How to integrate the practice of freediving as part of a sustainable lifestyle?

To answer that question, I will first clarify and define the concept and the necessity of a sustainable lifestyle. Then, I will investigate how we can live a sustainable lifestyle both at individual and community level. After that, I will analyze some examples of traditional cultures having lived a sustainable lifestyle centered on the practice of freediving. Finally, I will examine different ways of connecting the practice of freediving with the principles of sustainable way of living in the present days.

What is a sustainable lifestyle?

Living a sustainable lifestyle is taking no more than the environment can supply and renew, it is living in balance with nature in a symbiotic relationship without harming the earth's ecology, and it is meeting our needs in the present without compromising the needs of future generations.

Why live a sustainable lifestyle?

Some key facts : (April 2015) ²

- 60% of ecosystem services are degrading.
- We have exceeded three 'planetary limits' (extinction, climate, nitrate pollution).
- The Earth's ecological footprint is more than 1.5 Earths.
- The Living Planet Index has dropped by 58 percent since 1970³.
- Extinction is at least 1,000-fold above the normal levels in the fossil record; by 2100, two thirds of all life on Earth may be extinct if we continue on the same pace.
- Since 1960, population has grown by a factor of 2.2, while consumption has gone up six fold.
- According to an MIT analysis on the limit of growth ordered by the club of Rome in 1972 and updated in 2004 and 2014 (last revision by the University of Melbourne⁴), the economical system based on exponential economic and population growth will reach its limit and collapse around 2030 if we continue with the same model.

⇒ We urgently need to switch to a more sustainable system.

How to live a sustainable lifestyle?

When we hear about the state of the world, we can quickly feel sad, overwhelmed and powerless. Lots of people still believe that the environmental issues are far beyond their control and continue consuming as before while others are realizing that change must begin at home with personal lifestyle choices. Others decided to go a step further and start setting up sustainable projects or living in sustainable communities.

At an individual level, we can adopt a series of measures that would have a positive footprint on the environment, for instance refusing to use dispensable plastic bags, recycling the food waste into compost, deciding to buy less and to live a simpler life, using the public transports, generating our own electricity, driving a bicycle, trying to repair what is broken, eating vegetarian, etc. These measures have a limited global impact but give a coherent example and might motivate others to do the same.

Living a more sustainable lifestyle at an individual level also implies an integration of a more meaningful and healthy lifestyle. The discoveries from the field of positive psychology in the last decades show us that to be happy, we need to be connected. It has been scientifically established that the number and quality of our interactions has a direct influence our level of happiness.⁵ It suggests for us to leave the superfluous and concentrate on the essentials, to

2 According the Australian scientist and author Haydn Washington,

<http://www.gaiadiscovery.com/latest-people/sustainability-or-just-sustainababble.html>

3 [http://www.livingplanetindex.org/projects?](http://www.livingplanetindex.org/projects?main_page_project=AboutTheIndex&home_flag=1)

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4 <http://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/MSSI-ResearchPaper->

[4 Turner 2014.pdf](http://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/MSSI-ResearchPaper-)

5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3150158/>

stop accumulating goods and start acting good, to cherish our interconnections and interdependency with others.

At the local community scale, we see an emergence of eco-villages everywhere in the world. I have been visiting and working as a volunteer in some permaculture projects and other eco-village in Colombia, and I know there are numerous projects here in Thailand. People in these projects are looking for a more meaningful life integrated in the permanent cycle of nature. They adopt a type of sustainable lifestyle like permaculture, which is a way of living in harmony with nature and the world that surrounds us, in a permanent cycle of regeneration and interdependency, in a (auto-) sustainable way. More technically, it is an agricultural system that aims at improving the quality of the environment and at the same time a cultural system that aims at improving the quality of our interactions. It is a way to copy and apply nature's intelligence that has been accumulating for three billion years in its own research and development process to create balanced, stable and resilient systems.

From here on, is it possible to imagine a life based on freediving as a sustainable lifestyle? There have been numerous examples in history of traditional cultures living in such a way.

Freediving cultures in History

For thousands of years, numerous traditional communities have been living a sustainable lifestyle based on the practice of freediving. Archaeological evidence of freediving cultures goes back as far as ten thousands of years. Written account of freedivers date to 2500 B.C. and span the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea.

Before the industrial revolution and the discovery and usage of fossil energy, humanity has mainly been living in a sustainable way with little harmful impact on its environment. These cultures were using less energy to hunt, collect or harvest food than the food they were consuming. When you rely on human or animal power to produce food, you have to spend less than one calorie of efforts to get one calorie of food, or else you are going to starve sooner than later. Once the energy is coming from an external source, like it is the case today, you can use more energy to produce food. As an example, Michael Pollan estimated that today in the US, ten calories of fossil fuel are used to generate one calorie of food⁶. If we continue to waste this finite source of energy that way, we will quickly reach the limits of this far-from-sustainable system.

Traditional freediving cultures are no exception to that rule. Breath-hold fishing and gathering techniques provide them more energy than the energy they consume to get the food out of the water.

Yet nowadays these cultures tend to slowly vanish. It is the case for the Ama ("Sea Women") divers in Japan or the Koh Surin Moken in Thailand and Myanmar. The Ama divers have been for centuries the largest existing freedivers community in the world, extending from the coasts of Japan to the coasts of Korea, but this community is now almost gone. Regarding the Moken, their conversion from the use of sail boats to engine boats generated a dependency

⁶ <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/plugged-in/10-calories-in-1-calorie-out-the-energy-we-spend-on-food>

on money for spare parts and fuel, which pushed them to start working to generate income, and led them to slowly abandon the practice of freediving. *“Because their lifestyle is now reliant on income, some of the men still freedive but much less than they used to and so the knowledge is not being passed on to the young”*.⁷ The lack of recognition from part of the Thai and Burmese authorities doesn't help them keep their traditional way of living either.

However, other tribes, for instance the Bajau Laut living in Indonesia and the Philippines, managed to maintain so far their traditional lifestyle and continue relying mainly on freediving activities as a self-sustained mean of existence. *“Many of the Bajau Laut in the Philippines and Indonesia still make a living completely from breath-hold diving activities for spearfishing and gathering , with very little equipment.”*⁸

Nevertheless, the question remains: Is it still possible today to integrate the practice of freediving as a part of a sustainable lifestyle in a modern way of living?

Freediving and sustainable lifestyle today

It has not been that easy for me to come across links between a sustainable way of living and a living based on the practice of freediving. Both activities are transversal and, with the notable exception of the traditional cultures living from it, they do not directly relate to each other. We can live a life based on freediving and not living a sustainable lifestyle, while of course the opposite is also true.

But I eventually found some leads and ideas on how to connect these two worlds. At an individual level, we can use freediving as a sustainable fishing practice (spearfishing), or to ensure a proper and sustainable health (both physical and mental). At a broader scale, we can use freediving as an environmental restoration technique, or integrate it as an ecotourism practice. At last, I also imagine what could be a community-based sustainable lifestyle with the integration of some freediving activities.

- **Freediving as part of a sustainable fishing practice (spearfishing):**

Compared with traditional fishing techniques, spearfishing is a more respectful and sustainable hunting practice where humans are a natural part of the food chain.

- Spearfishers are limited in the quantity of fish they can catch in a day, allowing the stocks of fish to replenish.
- They do not (or do little) damage (to) the surrounding environment and habitat.
- They only kill what they hunt and do not kill in an indiscriminate way.
- They can choose their prey according to their size (are they mature enough?), their species (is it an endangered species?) or some particular circumstances (is it the mating season?).
- Natural grown sea animals are healthier to eat than farm-grown ones that are fed with food that contains pesticides, antibiotics and other toxic chemical substances. Nevertheless, nowadays, the bigger fish high in the food chain (tuna, salmon, sharks), are increasingly contaminated with heavy metals, and shouldn't be eaten to avoid heavy metal intoxication.

⁷ <https://wefreedive.com/blog/16-richard-marsh-the-history-and-future-of-freediving-for-the-koh-surin-moken>

⁸ <http://miun.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:681694/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

- **Freediving as part of a healthy lifestyle**

Living a sustainable lifestyle demands first of all to take care of ourselves and of our health. The practice of freediving can greatly help us in improving our health, both physically and psychologically.

- At the physical level, the regular practice of freediving can help us:
 - Gaining in strength, especially legs and core strength; increasing general fitness level and improving muscle oxygenation.
 - Gaining in flexibility; lengthening muscles, tendons and ligaments; improving the state of the joints.
 - Improving breathing capacity; strengthening lungs; reducing mucus build up and can help with existing conditions such as asthma.⁹
 - Lowering blood pressure.
 - Increasing the level of vitamin D through a good exposure to sunlight. Of course too much sun or not enough protection can be damaging too.
- At the psychological level:¹⁰
 - Lowers the state anxiety, stress level and negative affect
 - Improves self control and self confidence.
 - Improves focus, self awareness, and empathy.
 - Can bring the benefits of a regular meditation practice: Several studies¹¹ have demonstrated that the regular practice of meditation can transform the brain by creating new synaptic connections, increasing grey matter in some high conscious zones of the brain (anterior cingulate cortex, prefrontal cortex, hippocampus), and by reducing the amygdala size (automatic stress response, fight or flight zone). As a result, the regular practice of freediving can additionally improve the memory, increase serenity and well being level, and help strengthen the immune system¹¹.

- **Freediving as part of an environmental research and restoration practice:**

The global warming, high level of pollution and lack of sustainable fishing practices in the last decades led to a huge degradation of the coral reefs and sea habitats all over the world. According to a research published by the (US) National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2010, at least 19 percent of the world's coral reefs are already gone, and an additional 15 percent could be dead within the next two decades. The coral reefs are at the base of the food chain in the ocean and many living species are dependent on it. Its depletion, and worse, its extinction, would lead to catastrophic consequences for the entire life chain in the oceans.

The practice of freediving presents some advantages in comparison with scuba diving to realize some underwater research or maintain and replenish natural and artificial corals reefs. Guillaume Chieze conducted a research on the subject for his Aida instructor course with We Freedive, "Freediving and Scuba diving in coral reef research and restoration"¹². Here are his conclusions:

9 <https://www.breatheology.com/articles/asthma-natural-cure/>

10 Neşe Alkan and Tolga Akis, "[Psychological characteristics of freediving athletes, a comparative study](#)", by Atılım University, Ankara, Turkey

11 <http://liveanddare.com/benefits-of-meditation/>

12 <https://wefreedive.com/blog/50-guillaume-chieze-freediving-and-scuba-diving-in-coral-reef-research-and-restoration>

- In order to conduct an environmental assessment, freediving is the best method to get a broad view of the ecosystem, while scuba diving allows a more precise measurement.
 - In order to sink and fill artificial structures, freediving offers a clear advantage compared to scuba diving since the activity requires many depth changes.
 - Grabbing and fixing corals on artificial structures is a delicate process involving spending some time underwater; scuba diving is therefore more appropriate here than freediving, although the latter can be used too.
 - To monitor natural and artificial reef, freediving is highly cost effective and efficient compared to scuba diving, although the latter allows taking the time to remove the competition for the coral that we can find on artificial structures.
- **Freediving as an eco tourism practice.**
Freediving as a recreational practice attracts more and more people. One of the best moments to discover freediving or to deepen our knowledge of the discipline is during the holidays, for instance in a tourist place such as Phuket.

According to the definition of Ecotourism as stated in the Cape Town declaration of 2002, Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism; it is an environmental responsible tourism (what freediving is by essence); with the visitation to relatively undisturbed areas (the practice of freediving demands some relatively quiet zone with little boat activity); in order to enjoy , study and appreciate nature (freediving is by essence an activity where we connect deeply with nature); and any accompanying cultural features (might be the case if visiting a wreck or flooded archeological ruins, but more rarely); that promotes conservation (possibility to focus the activity on coral conservation); has low visitor impact (freediving has basically no impact on marine life and environment); and provides for beneficial socio-economic involvement of local populations (has to be intentionally integrated in a freediving program).

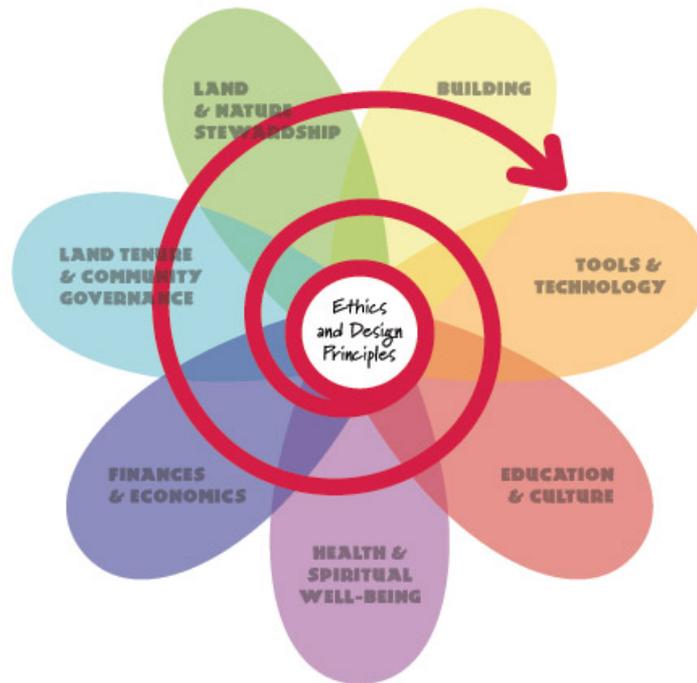
- **Freediving as part of a community-based sustainable lifestyle: An imaginary example.**
Let's imagine how we could design a community living a sustainable lifestyle while integrating the practice of freediving in its activities. We will start from the principles of permaculture ethics and design that will guides us to mimic the patterns and relationships we can find in nature and which can be applied to all aspects of human lives and human habitat.

“Permaculture is the conscious design of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems.” - Bill Mollison ¹³

These principles can be explored through seven different domains, the seven petals of the permaculture flower. The evolutionary spiral path connects these domains, initially at a personal and local level, and then proceeds to the collective and global level.

The permaculture flower

13 Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, . Permaculture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements, Melbourne.



Let's consider this sustainable community would be set up on the shore of the sea in a tropical environment like Phuket. The community would be composed of around twenty to thirty family units living in a one hectare area of land, with an access to the sea, and would have a full energetic autonomy and a ninety percent food autonomy thanks to the permaculture green garden, the fruit trees plantation, the seaweed production and the gathering of sea food through spearfishing. Some community-based projects would generate the incomes to buy the food that cannot be gathered and to pay the rest of the community expenses.

- Building:

The infrastructures are supposed to enhance our way of life while minimizing long-term impact.

- Simple and small traditional house units (20m²-25m²/person).
- Tropical climate: Large openings for good ventilation. Ventilated double roof, extended to ensure a permanent shading of the walls.
- Thin walls from traditional material + mud + lime finishing or wood or bamboo, depending on what is locally available. Roof made with a reflective surface. => Traditional tropical construction. Cheap, easy to build and easy to maintain.
- Built on strong pillars for ventilation and to be protected against floods and typhoons.
- Community based construction process.
- Interconnection with the local communities to promote the exchange of knowledge and workforce for the construction process.

- Tools and Technology:

Human ingenuity is used to generate renewable energy and transform it into some more useful resources.

- Solar panels, windmills and small scale tidal/wave power generation to generate renewable electricity.

- Battery banks and pumped hydroelectric storage on higher grounds to store electricity.
 - Solar heated panels for hot water and solar stoves for cooking.
 - Renewable energy used to generate fresh water from sea water, through distillation process (sun powered) or reverse osmosis filters (electricity powered).
 - Electrical boat engine, sail boats and Stand Up Paddles for movements.
 - Use of open source industrial machinery, like for instance the Global Village Construction Set¹⁴
 - Possibility to transform seaweed into biofuel.
 - Methane and compost production from food scrap.
- Education & Culture:
Redefining how we learn by becoming more active and encouraging creativity and personal development.
 - Home/community schooling based on alternative education as for instance Montessori, Steiner-Waldorf or Freinet pedagogy, encouraging self-development and inter-dependency rather than productivity and competition.
 - Learning of self-awareness and meditation techniques from early childhood.
 - Learning of breathing techniques, stretching and yoga, to support the development of freediving skills and meditation.
 - Participatory arts & music: Reclaiming our place as actors/musicians rather than spectators.
- Health and spiritual well-being:
Taking more personal responsibility for our own well-being, trying to prevent rather than to cure.
 - Maintaining a physical and mental health through the practice of freediving, Yoga, Tai Chi and other body/mind/spirit disciplines.
 - Nutrition based on the “Okinawa diet” (Okinawa has the greatest proportion of centenarians in the world): Small portions; plant-based diet with fresh vegetables, fruits and sea weed; use of fermented vegetables and fermented soya; use of colorful sweet potatoes rather than grains i.e. rice, wheat; a bit of seafood and limited intake of meat; reduced intake of salt, dairy and saturated fat; avoid sugar and alcohol.
 - Complementary & holistic medicine: A wide spectrum of approaches to health care outside of conventional allopathic medicine.
 - Reconnection of spiritual and cultural values and traditions of the indigenous cultures historically living in the area.
- Finance and Economy:
Alternative exchange systems reduce reliance on the fragile monetary economy.
 - Community-based project to create collective incomes and generate jobs within the project. For instance: Production of seaweed; gathering and selling of specific seafood (respecting the renewal of living stocks); pearls production and gathering in a traditional way (through freediving); freediving school and centre; ecotourism programs development; etc.

¹⁴ <http://opensourceecology.org/gvcs/>

- Community supported agriculture and sea food production, and direct market selling method to reduce or get rid of the intermediaries between the producer and the consumer in a fair-trade logic.
 - Community currency based on an exchange of services platform (1h = 1h).
 - Possibility to introduce a local currency with a network of other participating projects/communities; the idea is to create an interest-free money to boost the local commercial exchanges and avoid speculation (money speculation accelerates the centralization of wealth).
 - Crowdfunding platform for the funding and development of community projects.
 - Voluntary exchange of work for food, accommodation and experience of ecological living and freediving on the project.
- Land tenure & community governance:
How do we ensure access to land and ownership within the project and how do we govern the community?
- The community is based on some degree of shared ownership of the land and commodities to generate scale savings (internet access, centralized workshop, food buying, transport, education)
 - Negotiation with the authorities for the definition of a sea reserve and/or no fishing zone next to the community, a protected zone that will allow replenishing the stock of fish and ensuring a sustainable fishing practice on the border of the zone, profiting the local fishing industry.
 - Legal structure to be defined for a collective ownership and the management of land, buildings, sea reserve and other assets.
 - Consensus decision making system: E.g. Sociocracy or dynamic governance: Effective method of organizing, valuing the equality of the members in the decision making process.
 - Definition of a community chart and a conflict resolution tool.
- Land/Sea and nature stewardship:
Understanding and respecting nature, working with her rather than against her.
- Coral reef research and restoration program.
 - Sea-life saving: Collecting and gathering of endangered species in some protected area inside the reserve.
 - Seed saving: Collecting and storing seeds, with the aim of maintaining certain strains.
 - Set up of an integrated aquaculture system for an accelerate replenishment of fish and crustacean stocks.
 - Processing of human wastes through phytoremediation (waste water treatment through plants and microorganisms); vermicomposting (waste water treatment through worms) and/or dry toilets (human wastes transformed into compost).
 - Sustainable rubbish disposal: Collection, selection and recycling of the rubbish into compost, recyclable material and non recyclable one.
 - Bio-intensive gardening: Use of compost, companion planting, crop rotation, mulch and natural pest control to produce the maximum amount of food in the minimum area (yield above any agro industrial solution per square meter and less than one calorie of energy used to produce one calorie of food).
 - Fruit trees zone providing fruits to the community.

- Nature-based forestry: Sustainable forestry that uses mixed species, long rotations, minimal impact harvesting and natural regeneration in wild and planted timber forests.

Conclusion

The practice of freediving does not relate directly and automatically to a sustainable way of living. Although the practice of freediving helps us to reconnect with nature, the decision of living a sustainable lifestyle belongs eventually to each and every one of us.

We can find many examples in history of traditional cultures having lived a sustainable lifestyle through the practice of freediving to gather food and other sea treasures. However, we observe lately a general tendency for this singular way of living to slowly disappear, sacrificed on the altar of modern life.

Therefore, how can we link the practice of freediving with a sustainable way of living in the modern days? At the individual level, we can practice spearfishing as a sustainable manner to gather sea-food; the practice of freediving also allows us to improve and maintain a good physical and mental health state. At a broader scale, we can integrate the practice of freediving to some research and restoration programs on coral reefs, with some significant advantages in comparison with scuba diving; we can also use freediving as a tool for a sustainable ecotourism practice.

At last, we imagined how we could design a community based on a sustainable way of living and integrating the practice of freediving in its activities. Through the definition of the seven domains of activities defined by the permaculture flower, we have designed a community hosting several projects generating jobs and incomes; able to build its own infrastructures through the use of traditional techniques, local material and community workforce; that is self-autonomous in energy and almost self-autonomous in food; that is safe-guarding the surrounding environment in the ocean and on land; where the children learn to be inter-dependent and to collaborate rather than to be productive and competitive; where the practice of freediving is used to gather food, restore coral reefs, stay healthy and attract people willing to learn how to freedive... A sustainable community I dream to live in!

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