



Andy Schroeter, the founder of Sunlabob, receiving congrats from Prince of Wales

Let There Be Light...

By Katie Winning

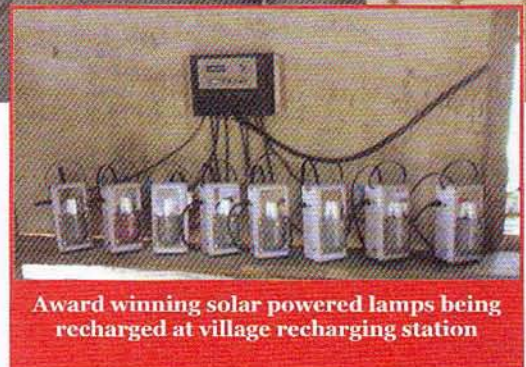
These days I bear a hefty burden of guilt for the size of my carbon footprint, so when it was suggested that I take a look at solar energy use in Laos, it seemed like a good opportunity to learn what more I could do to reduce my own plundering of the planet. First stop, since it had caught my eye, was the website of WIG World advertiser and renewable energy specialists Sunlabob. But at risk of promoting one company's concerns over another, there my attention remained, because I found myself enthralled by a story of ground breaking ingenuity. One which is not only changing lives here in Laos, but which has been recognized internationally as having the potential to change those of outlying rural communities everywhere. So I had to pass it on.

It began in the early 1990s when engineer Andy Schroeter found himself in northern Laos with an unreliable generator providing barely four hours of electricity per day. Then as now, the majority of the population living in rural areas were without access to grid-electricity and reliant on kerosene and candles. Andy used his professional knowledge to source and install solar panels to provide for his own energy needs, which led to a wider interest in renewable energy and the

challenge of supplying electricity to remote communities. In 2001 he joined forces with Lao businessman Saleumphone Vongsakhamphoui and set up Sunlabob in Vientiane, a company offering the expertise needed to install solar energy systems for business and home use, but also looking to supply commercially viable energy to the rural poor.

I spoke to Business Manager Simon Henschel, who explained that while Laos already has an enviable record in generating green energy through its expanding hydro-electric programme, it would be some years before a national grid could extend to every town and village in the regions. "People in rural areas know how important electricity can be to their livelihoods, but many are dependent on diesel generators - and we all know how expensive the cost of fuel has become. Others will have access to decentralized systems using solar or mini-hydro generation, but these are expensive and unreliable, and with long-term credit unavailable most villagers just can't afford them."

So how can Sunlabob overcome these difficulties? "In the first instance, we've devised a rental service for Solar



Award winning solar powered lamps being recharged at village recharging station

Home Systems. This allows us to provide equipment using money from an Investment Fund, then rent it out in affordable installments which over time repays our investors. We retain ownership of the hardware and are responsible for maintaining it. The householder pays a monthly fee for his electricity which also covers servicing costs, but only so long as the supply is there. No electricity for the villager means no rent for us, so it's in our interest to make sure the system continues to work!" I wondered how it was possible for Sunlabob to maintain the units in so many poorly accessible areas. "We've trained a network of franchised agents," answered Simon. "These are local entrepreneurs who provide fast and reliable technical servicing, and who also act as salesman for our systems. We're continually upgrading their skills as the technology changes."

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