

## Host Organisation Profile

Host Organisation Green Gecko Project

# An ancient art helping street children

Anticipation in the air. Teenage girls, dressed as Khmer warriors. The large crowd was rowdy, there was laughter; "Oh even girls can do Labokator." That atmosphere all changed with the first whack of the long wooden stick on the ground. Shock. Then excitement. Ahhh.... Wahh....impressive! These girls need to be taken seriously!

This was the Gecko teenagers' second Labokator performance and the first alongside their teachers. They were performing to over 200 people at a Bonn (religious festival) at the Kings Palace, inside of Angkor Thom. The festival called 'Preah Bu Snokgar' was attended by the highest spiritual leaders in Cambodia as well as many high military and government officials. Offerings were made to ask the spirits of the old Khmer kings and warriors to help protect Cambodia in the year of the tiger. A traditional Hindu ceremony with sand mountains (Phnom Syke), spirit dances and offerings of banana trees, palm leaves, flowers, candles, incense and even a pig's head and tail!

The Labokator performance was an exciting finale for all in attendance and the teachers and Gecko kids impressed all with their skill. Not only was this experience fun and exciting for the Gecko kids and their teachers but also plays an important part in promoting Labokator within the community. This festival was an opportunity to allow some of the countries' top leaders to be exposed to a traditional Khmer martial art which was once used by the Khmer kings and warriors throughout the Khmer Empire. Being a festival making offerings to the old Khmer Kings and warriors, it was a perfect platform to demonstrate the skills which the younger Khmer generation are learning from their own culture and history.

### What is The Green Gecko Project?

Five years ago, the children who are now at Green Gecko had little reason to hold their heads up high. They were living and begging on the streets – alone and defenceless. This began to change when, in 2005, they met a Khmer man and an Australian woman who began to feed them every night, rather than give them money. A full belly was not enough, these children needed an education. The problem was no school would take them.

"They are dirty, bad children."

"If we let them study the other parents will take their children out of this school."

So they rented a building and a teacher for one hour a day and invited the local street children to come and learn English and have a play. Over time it has evolved, through the needs of the children and families, into a drop in centre and eventually a home and school for sixty-nine children and, in July 2007, was officially registered as a local non-government organisation. The Green Gecko Project also works to help support the families of the children at Green Gecko and people within their communities.

### VIDA volunteer role at Green Gecko

Pouv Pich is a Khmer Australian who grew up in Siem Reap, Cambodia until 2003 when he emigrated to Australia with his Australian wife and son. Pouv returned to Cambodia in 2009 with his two children and wife Melissa who was a VIDA volunteer with the Green Gecko Project as Social Work Development Officer. Pouv was soon helping Gecko out with their football program and played a key role in introducing Labokator to the children at Green Gecko. A proud Khmer man, with a background in tour guiding and having studied personal training and fitness in Australia, Green Gecko requested to VIDA to enlist Pouv as a VIDA volunteer to help to develop and promote Labokator at Green Gecko and within the community.

Pouv's pride in his history and culture and love of the art of Labokator has been transferred to the children at Green Gecko. The few who were unsure in the beginning, and those who just don't like sport and exercise, are now dedicated and focused on their Labokator study and performance. The pride and respect the children have for themselves and their culture when they put on their performance clothes and the focus in their faces reflects the importance of this part of the program at Green Gecko.



Sixty nine children at Green Gecko, both boys and girls ranging in age from 4 to 19 years, now study Labokator three times per week as well as learn the traditional music that is used in Labokator performance. Labokator is a part of the Green Gecko way of life now, and is important on so many levels. Labokator's principles of self discipline, respect, breathing, meditation, natural medicine and spirit power not only teach the children how to protect themselves, but also build the children's resilience, self-esteem and appreciation of their Khmer culture and history.

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### What is Boxkator?

Labokator (which means 'fight with a lion') is most commonly known as Boxkator or Bokator. It is an ancient Khmer martial art which was used on the battlefield by the old Khmer kings and warriors. It is thought that the superior skill of these warriors using this close quarter combat system allowed the Khmer Empire to dominate southeast Asia for over 800 years. Carvings of Labokator have been recorded and can still be seen on some of the temples of Angkor such a Bayon in Angkor Thom.

The art form was lost for centuries with only a few teachers and students practising this traditional martial art. Labokator teachers and students were targeted and killed by the Khmer Rouge along with other traditional arts practitioners such as dance, music and singing and the practice of Labokator was disallowed.

Like other martial arts Labokator has grades or levels. Each represented by the colour of the person's krama (traditional Khmer

scarf), which is tied at the waist. Beginning with white krama, then green, blue, red and brown the students must master 100 moves for each of these levels. To obtain the black krama the student must learn another 500, for a total of 1000 moves. From here there are 10 levels of black belt each level requires the mastering of another 1,000 moves giving Boxkator a total of 10,000 moves.

### Future goals

Green Gecko's long term goal is that their involvement with Labokator will contribute to its revival into modern day Cambodia and will instill a sense of national pride within the children and to those they perform for.

We plan to compete again in mid 2010 at the national championships where we are sure our children will lead in their example of Labokator performance. We hope that in the future some of our children will be Labokator teachers and pass their love of this art onto other people.

Pouv has a dream of taking Labokator back to Australia and sharing his culture and skills with his community there. Another option for people who are looking to keep fit and healthy while learning an ancient art form.... A dream of people practicing Labokator animal moves on the grass at the water front in Geelong...

**Words by Pouv Pich**

[www.greengeckoproject.org](http://www.greengeckoproject.org)

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Teenage girls focusing on their moves

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Above: Gecko's youngest Labokator students