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THE SURVIVAL OF VIETNAM'S FORESTS

by Jennifer Pepall

The struggle to counter deforestation in Vietnam had first to face the damage of war and then address today's development pressures.

The blackened, leafless trees stood like skeletons along the Ho Chi Minh Trail -- casualties of the 18-year Vietnam War. The North Vietnamese supply route had suffered repeated attacks aimed at stripping away natural camouflage. The devastation turned Prof Vo Quy into an environmental activist. In 1971, the biologist followed the trail south to assess damage to the trees. "I saw with my own eyes the destruction. I thought 'I have to do something to save the nature of the country.'"

Prof Vo Quy is director of the Centre for Natural Resources Management and Environmental Studies (CRES) at the University of Hanoi and vice-chairman of the Vietnam Association for Protection of Natural Resources and Environment. IDRC supports his efforts to fight deforestation through a project that will contribute to the development of policy and technological solutions. The project is led by Dr Rodolphe de Koninck of Université Laval in Quebec and involves CRES and the Université d'agriculture et de foresterie in Ho Chi Minh City. During the war, bombs and defoliation agents such as Agent Orange destroyed more than 2 million ha of forest. With 73 million people and a population growth rate of 1.7% a year, forest resources continue to be strained. Fuelwood consumption has risen, as has the demand for cleared land for agriculture. Natural forests now cover only 20% of the country, compared with 23% in 1982 and 43% in 1943. Facing one of the highest rates of deforestation in Asia, Vietnam could lose all its forests in less than 50 years. Apart from losing a valuable natural resource, deforestation causes soil erosion, water loss, the extinction of plants and animals, flooding, and siltation of waterways. One government report called deforestation "the most serious challenge since reunification."

After the war, natural regeneration was impossible. The source of seedlings -- the big trees -- had been destroyed. Scientists tried to replant the denuded land with indigenous tree species. But with the loss of the protective forest cover, areas that were once cool, moist, and fertile were replaced by compacted, leached earth and a dry, blazing climate. The seedlings were burned by the hot sun. Eventually, enough tree cover was provided to shelter the growth of indigenous species by fast-growing exotic trees such as *Acacia* and *Eucalyptus*.

However, for every tree planted, more were cut down. Between 1976 and 1985, about 6 million people were moved to underpopulated areas in marginal territory with fragile environments. Forests were cleared to grow commercial crops on state-owned farms.

HUNGER FOR FARMLAND

"You cannot eat the trees, you eat rice, so people cut the trees," said Prof Vo Tong Xuan, a leading agricultural researcher. "It is very difficult to safeguard the environment when people are hungry."

The liberalization of Vietnam's economy has also raised demands for timber. Domestic demand is strong and there is a big export market for Vietnamese wood, particularly in Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, and Singapore. The harvest -- both legal and illegal -- has been proceeding so rapidly that the government recently introduced forest protection legislation. The problem persisted, however, due to widespread corruption. In 1993, a temporary ban on all timber product exports allowed the forestry minister to determine what could be exported.

As part of a larger effort against deforestation, a National Conservation Strategy, drawn up by Quy and his CRES colleagues and adopted by the government in 1985, calls for more tree planting. Today, between 120,000 and 200,000 ha of trees are planted each year. But 85,000 ha a year are cleared for agriculture, 65,000 are logged, and 50,000 are burned. The total loss is 200,000 ha. Quy says Vietnam's goal is to plant 300,000 ha of trees each year so that by the twenty-first century, 40% to 50% of the country will be forested. For this goal to be reached, "we must have the support of the local people," he adds.

Public support is raised through awareness campaigns and agro-forestry training in villages and schools. People celebrate the new year with a tree planting festival. Beginning at primary school, students plant trees. Encouraged by a government policy of land reform, villagers are establishing growing numbers of tree nurseries. Under this policy, the government gives people parcels of denuded land, ranging from 20 to 50 ha, for 50 years. They are then asked to plant trees, first exotic species and then indigenous varieties. When they harvest the timber, they give 10% to 20% of profits to the government and keep the rest. They may also use the forest for fuelwood, fodder, and food. This sense of ownership strengthens local commitment to ensuring the forests' survival.

The need to provide an incentive to invest in trees is echoed in CRES's own experience at promoting reforestation. "We learned many lessons from the experience," said Quy. "The last one was very simple: people must decide what to do for themselves."

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DIVERSITY AT RISK

It took 20 years for Prof Vo Quy to be credited with the discovery of a new species of pheasant that now bears his name. "Ornithologists didn't believe that there could be a new species," he said.

Quy found the pheasant in 1966 in Ha Tinh Province, near the border with Laos. In the last 2 years, the same province has yielded two more new species -- the giant Muntjac deer and the Vu Quang ox, discovered by two of Quy's associates.

"Vietnam has not yet been studied systematically," said Quy. Parts of Ha Tinh Province, for example, are covered in dense, wet tropical forest, making exploration difficult. Such areas, however, make Vietnam one of the most biologically diverse countries in Asia.

That diversity is currently at risk. "Our people are overexploiting and wasting this endowment in the name of economic development," said Quy. He adds that 365 animal species and 350 plant species are endangered and in need of protection. The government has designated 87 sites as national parks and protected areas but managing these resources is costly and difficult.

Quy regards the need to reconcile growth with sustainable development as the most important challenge facing Vietnam. "Without a healthy environment and a sound agricultural base, we cannot have a healthy economy."

Quy sees education as key to meeting this challenge; if people are made aware of the potential impact of rampant development, he believes they will manage resources responsibly. In 1991, the government launched a national plan for the environment and sustainable development, making it the only such program in South East Asia. It also introduced an environmental protection law. However, both initiatives have yet to be enforced.

Still, Quy prefers optimism. "We think on a grand scale, but we begin small and work step by step. We believe we can achieve our sustainable development aim."

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