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# Poverty, People and Forest Policy: Alternatives for Vietnam's Mekong Delta

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Tropical forest protection is an area fraught with difficulty. Many approaches backfire because they go against the needs of local people who, rather than get actively involved in forest conservation, exploit the resource because they have no vested interest in doing otherwise. To investigate this problem, and to decide what the best protection strategies might be, a new study from Vietnam has examined five forest management approaches in the melaleuca forests of the Mekong River Delta (or Me Kong Delta: MKD). →

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A summary of EEPSEA Research Report 2001-RR12, *Forest Management Systems in the Mekong River Delta, Vietnam*, by Mai Van Nam, Nguyen Tan Nhan, Bui Van Trinh and Pham Le Thong (School of Economics and Business Administration, Can Tho University, Can Tho, Vietnam; contact: Mai Van Nam, [mvnam@yahoo.com](mailto:mvnamm@yahoo.com)).



# Without benefits *farmers won't invest in forests*

## → The Mekong River Delta

The study, led by Mai Van Nam from the School of Economics and Business Administration at Can Tho University, found that a current logging ban has actually exacerbated forest exploitation and that, to gain the greatest conservation benefit, local people should be allowed to use the forest to a limited extent.

With 4 million ha of natural forest and 2 million ha of agricultural land, the MKD is the main food-producing region of Vietnam. It is composed mainly of wetland mangrove and inland wetland melaleuca forests. Growing pressure on forests for firewood, construction material, and food production has led to a rapid decline in melaleuca forest area in the Delta. In the early 1970s, the natural forest area was 241,000 ha, but by 1984 this had decreased to only 115,333 ha. The biodiversity of the forests has declined since the

1970s and some rare and economically valuable species may soon be lost.

In response to this problem, re-planting of melaleuca forests was initiated in the early 1980s. A number of forest protection policies were implemented, including a shift from centrally managed forestry to more community participation in forestry protection. Despite reforms, the deforestation problem continued and worsened in some places. This led to a ban on logging in 1995.

### Finding the Best Conservation Strategy

To study the effectiveness of forest conservation policies in the MKD, the research team visited four study sites and undertook socio-economic surveys of 415 local households. The study sites were the Song Trem Agroforestry/fishery Farm, the Tram Chim Wetland and Reservation, the Vo Doi Special Use

Forest and the Giong Rieng Commercial Private Forest Farm. These sites represent the five main management strategies. These strategies were evaluated not just in terms of effectiveness, but also in terms of the local community's role in forest protection and economic dependence on the forests. Information obtained was corroborated through observations and field interviews with farmers and other local residents. Secondary data from a World Bank-funded study of the total economic value of melaleuca forests was also analyzed.

### Contracts and Joint Ventures

Founded in 1982, the Song Trem Agroforestry/fishery Farm was one of the first schemes in Vietnam to call for people's participation in forest management. It covers about 10,000 ha, including 6,500 ha of forest. Since early 1991, the State Forest Farm has allocated 7,115 ha to

1,142 contract households. In addition, the Farm has allocated 930 ha to form joint ventures (JV) with 37 partners. Under the contract household management scheme, farmers are allocated agricultural lands and forestlands for 20 years. Farmers can grow and harvest non-timber products like fish and honey; in return they take charge of safeguarding the forests in their contracted land. Under the JV scheme, the Farm allocates plots to farmers with the financial capability to invest in planting melaleuca and in improving land conditions. The researchers found that the contract

farmers (who have a low average annual income of VND 12,600,000 per farm) – have become impoverished since their source of livelihood from timber products was stopped by the logging ban. 70% of households now live in poverty. Because of these problems, destruction of the melaleuca is widespread. In some areas, an estimated 1,000–2,000 melaleuca trees (worth about VND 10,000,000) are taken every day. The low level of fines imposed on illegal loggers exacerbates this problem.

### A Special Reservation

The Tram Chim Wetland and Reservation was given "strictly protected area" status in 1992 to re-establish the natural environment and help preserve endangered animals and birds such as the red-necked crane. About 31,000 people live in villages around the reserve. Farmers are allocated land in a buffer zone surrounding the reserve's guarded perimeter. In return, they are expected to create a protection boundary for the reserve. Rice and other crops and fishing are the main contributors to the relatively high annual income of VND 18,806,720 per farm. The researchers found that, despite this strategy, an increase in local population in recent years has put pressure on the land and resulted in an indiscriminate exploitation of the melaleuca resource.

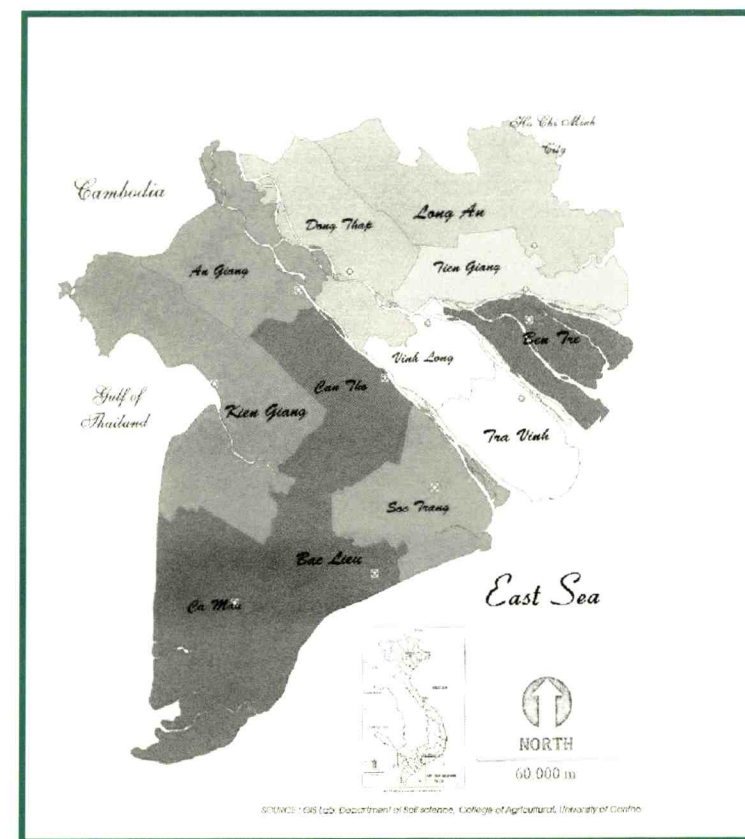
### Strict Protection

The Vo Doi Special Use forest is operated under the "strict protection" forest management system and encompasses 3,700 ha. The area was created to conserve a forest landscape for tourism and research and to maintain water resources for surrounding agriculture. Contract land serves as a buffer zone around the strictly protected forest area. The researchers found that the forest protection team in the area involves

Farmers' Participation in Forest Replanting

Indicators	Contract HH	Joint venture	Buffer zone	Strict protection	Commercial private w/forest
a) % of participants	37	90	10	95	93
b) Forest density (1,000 trees/ha) - Buffer zone/HH level - Forest farm	12	21	3 2	10 7	5
c) % of area planted to melaleuca (HH level)	76	94	26	52	47

Source: From the 1999 survey



Map of Vietnam and Location of the Mekong Delta





and mobilizes the local people who show a high awareness of the importance of forest conservation issues. Despite this, they also found that poverty in the area (due in part to very low rice yields), plus a low level of education, was causing some forest destruction. Families living under the strict protection management system had the lowest net revenue of all the farms studied (VND 11,089,480 per year).

### Private Forest Farms

The Gieng Rieng Commercial Private Forest Farm measures 64,000 ha which includes 1,300 ha of melaleuca and 42,600 ha of rice. All forest land is household-managed and not affected by the logging ban. Since melaleuca forest's value is nearly triple that of paddy rice, the tendency is for farmers to convert part of their rice lands to forest. The researchers found that farmers in this system had the highest annual income (VND 41,473,150 per farm) and that they

obtained high profits from rice farming and forestry. The researchers also found that forest destruction is uncommon. Only poor households without melaleuca forests of their own cut protected forests to obtain materials.

### Poverty, People and Policies

Overall, the researchers found that the logging ban removed an important source of income for households in areas affected by it, resulting in a higher level of poverty there. This also meant there was very little incentive for households to be involved in forest management, since they gain little from the effort they put into this activity. In general, the researchers found that a related series of factors – poverty, low education levels and awareness of environmental protection issues, coupled with a lack of economic incentives for forest protection – are the main causes of forest destruction in the MKD.

The researchers therefore recommended that the current logging ban should be relaxed so that farmers will have an incentive to invest in and protect forests. They also found that there was higher participation in forest conservation programs only where there was better training, education and leadership and that these aspects should be better developed in all management systems. The researchers also advise that better access to credit and agricultural extension services would improve agricultural yields and so take pressure off the melaleuca reserves. It is clear from this study that conservation in the MKD can only succeed if local living standards are improved; for this to happen, local people must be allowed to sustainably use the forests around them.

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