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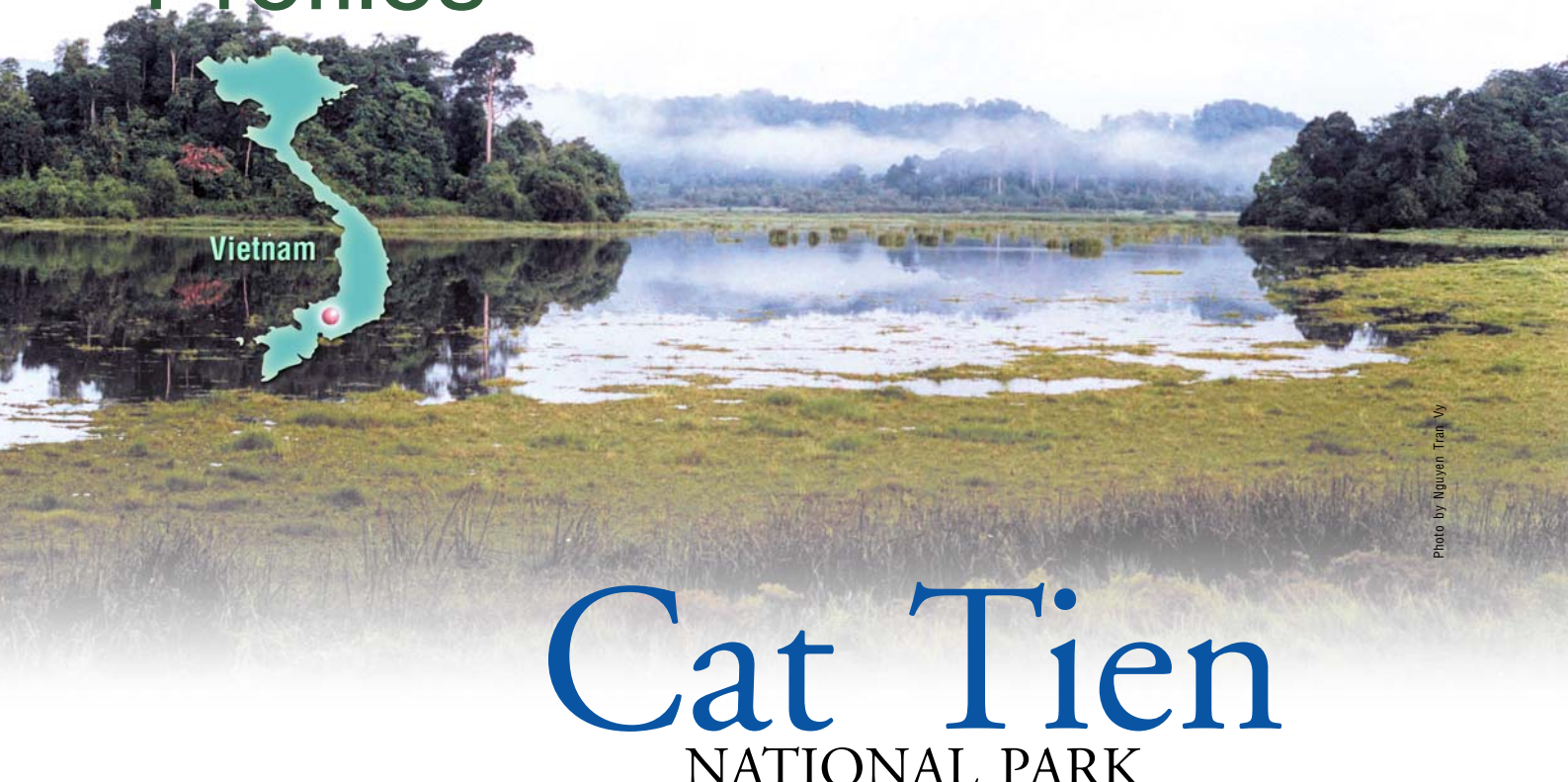


Photo by Nguyen Tran Vy

Cat Tien NATIONAL PARK

DONG NAI, LAM DONG AND BINH PHUOC PROVINCES OF VIETNAM

General Information

Cat Tien became a National Park in 1998 with the merging of the Nam Cat Tien National Park, Tay Cat Tien and the Cat Loc Rhino Protected Area. The Park covers a total area of 73, 878 hectares in three provinces: 38,000 ha in Dong Nai; 30, 635 ha in Lam Dong; and 5,143 ha in Binh Phuoc. Several streams from the park drain into the Dong Nai River, the second largest river in South Vietnam; the river also forms the 90-km long boundary in the north, west and east of the park. Legend says Cat Tien, meaning “fairy-sand”, got its name from the yellow sandbanks and large rocks along the river where fairies played with wild animals and plants.

The Park is the watershed of the Tri An reservoir, a very important source of water for hydropower, domestic and industrial use in Ho Chi Minh City. It likewise supports a variety of habitat types: the primary and secondary lowland evergreen forest dominated by dipterocarps; the lowland semi-deciduous forest, dominated by *Lagerstroemia* species; freshwater wetlands with open lakes and seasonally inundated grasslands, containing *Saccharum*

spontaneum, *S. arundinaceum* and *Neyraudia arundinacea*; flooded forest which has a mix of *Hydnocarpus anthelmintica*, the major species, and *Ficus benjamina*; and a range of secondary habitat types, including grassland and areas dominated by bamboo.

During the rainy season, vast areas are underwater but in the dry season, only the Ca (fish), Chim (bird) and Sau (crocodile) lakes in the center of southern Cat Tien have water.

These habitats are home to about 1,300 identified plants, of which 34 are listed in the country's Red Data Book, and many valuable timber trees such as *Azelia xylocarpa*, *Dialium cochinchinensis*, *Dalbergia oliveri* and *Pterocarpus macrocarpus*. Other known plants with economic value include 440 timber trees, 310 medicinal, and 200 ornamental plants, 24 wild fruit trees and 20 wild vegetables.

Recent researches confirm the existence of about 64 mammal, 304 bird, 47 reptile, 23 amphibian and 130 fish species in the park. Of these, 18 mammal, 15 bird, 5 reptile and 1 fish species are included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN-SSC, 2000). Javan

Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus annamiticus*), White-shouldered Ibis (*Pseudibis davisoni*) and Siamese Crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*) are classified as critically endangered species.

Notably, the Park is one of the most important sites in Vietnam for the conservation of large mammals, especially the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), Javan Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus annamiticus*), Gaur (*Bos gaurus*), Sun Bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) and Sambar (*Cervus unicolor*). The Javan Rhinoceros is the only known sub-species of this kind in Vietnam and in the world. A different sub-species of Javan Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus sondaicus*) exists in Ujong Kulon National Park, Java – Indonesia. *Rhinoceros sondaicus annamiticus* is endemic to Cat Tien National Park and in critical danger of extinction. Its population and habitat range have declined over the years; only seven to eight individuals are believed to survive in the park.

The national park also supports several primates needing special conservation. Some of these are: Black-shanked Douc Langur (*Pygathrix nigripes nigripes*), Silvered Langur (*Trachypitecus cristatus*), Pig-tailed Macaque (*Macaca nemstrina*) and Yellow-checked Crested Gibbon (*Hylobates gabriellae*).

Situated within the South Vietnamese Lowlands Endemic Bird Area (EBA), Cat Tien National Park is home to several rare birds: the Orange-necked Partridge (*Arborophila davidi*), Germain's Peacock Pheasant (*Polyplectron germaini*), Green Peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) and Grey-faced Tit Babbler (*Macronus kelleyi*). The Orange-necked Partridge, which was considered extinct, was re-discovered in the Park in 1991.

Among the globally threatened waterbirds are the White-shouldered Ibis, (*Pseudibis davisoni*) White-winged Duck (*Cairina scutulata*) and Lesser Adjutant (*Leptoptilos javanicus*).

The Siamese Crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*) and the Burmese Python (*Python molurus*), Black or Smiling Terrapin (*Siebenrockiella crassicollis*) and Southeast Asian Soft-shelled Turtle (*Amyda cartilaginea*) are some of the rare reptiles found while

the endangered Asian Bonytongue (*Scleropages formosus*) is among the fish species in need of protection.

Two distinct seasons occur in the area: wet from May to October with the highest rainfall in July, August, and September, and dry from November to April. February and March are the driest.

People in the Buffer Zone

Around 170, 000 people live in the buffer zone that encompasses 32 Communes (lowest administrative level) and one town. They depend mostly on agricultural production. Within the Park's boundaries where about 10,000 live, a minority still depends on forest products from the Park. Although now on a smaller scale, exploitation of the forest by these people continues to this day.

In Cat Loc, Lam Dong, six groups representing 650 families live within the Park's boundaries, most of them along the banks of Dong Nai River and most of them are new settlers from elsewhere in Vietnam. Deeper inside the protected area, several small villages of Chau Ma and S'Tieng ethnic people can be found. These two groups are indigenous to the wider Cat Tien National Park area and used to rely on shifting cultivation and hunting. Today their livelihood patterns have stabilized; they rely on subsistence farming and growing cashew nuts for cash albeit they also collect forest products from the protected area.

The Dang Ha village in the Bu Dang District of Binh Phuoc is home to about 232 (1,110 individuals) Tay, Nung, and Dao families who migrated illegally into the park in 1990 and 1991. The Tay, the largest ethnic group, are known as good hunters and for their skillful farming of wet rice, tobacco, fruit, herbs and spices.

The Ta Lai settlement in Southern Cat Tien National Park (Dong Nai province) includes 292 S'Tieng and Chau Ma families while the Dac Luc Village inside the park has 38 Kinh families.

Park Administration

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development through the Cat Tien National Park Management Board has overall respon-



Calotes mystaceus Photo by Ina Becker

sibility over the park and works closely with the local authorities and communities. Its headquarters is located inside the Park in Tan Phu District, Dong Nai, which is about 150 km from Ho Chi Minh City.

Best time to visit

The best time to visit Cat Tien National Park is from February to April, when chances of rain are slimmest, leeches in the forest are at minimal levels and breeding birds (especially Phasianidae) are most vocal. December and January are also good months to visit from a climatological point of view, although bird life tends to be rather quiet at that time. After April, chances of rain increase rapidly and when it starts raining, the forest gets very muddy and leeches come out in thousands. Also, people are encouraged to come in small groups only so that the staff can provide appropriate guidance and disturbance to sensitive fauna and flora can be kept at a minimum.

How to get there

Cat Tien National Park is located halfway between Ho Chi Minh City and Dalat, about 24 km West of Highway 20. Both from Ho Chi Minh City and Dalat, it takes about 3 to 4 hours to reach the Park by car. If using public transport, one should disembark at Tan Phu town, along Highway 20, and cover the last 24 km inland by motorbike towards the Park. The road leading to the Park is in a good condition (asphalt) and the direction to the Park is sign-posted. Visitor accommodation is available at the Park's headquarters (see Map 2), which can be reached by crossing the Dong Nai river by boat. Detailed directions and more background information on the Park can be accessed at www.blakup.demon.nl/cat_tien.

A few travel agencies in Saigon offer customized tours to the park.

Eco-tourism and cultural activities

Apart from its rich biodiversity and tropical forests typical of southeastern Vietnam, the park offers many beautiful landscapes and interesting historical and cultural places. What is now Cat Tien National Park was a stronghold of the

revolutionary forces during the war. Relics of the Oc Eo civilization, dating to the 2nd century up to the 7th century AD, are located outside the park in Lam Dong Province. Going on a boat ride, or just walking into the depths of the forest are the main attractions of the Park.

Here are some of the exciting nature trips or tours you can take.

- Bang Lang forest: The 1-km long trail in "Bang Lang" closed evergreen semi-deciduous forest starts about 400 meters from the park's headquarters. On the trip, you can see numerous prominent trees such as the: Thien Tue, an ancient Cycas that is 3 m high and hundreds of years old; and *Lagerstroemia calyculata*, with its six distinct crowns. Be amazed also by the giant, ancient Tung tree (*Tetrameles nudiflora*), which base is so huge that it would take dozens of people to link hands around it.
- Ben Cu rapids: The Ben Cu rapids are located behind the Ranger Station, about five hundred meters away from the park's headquarters. Along the Dong Nai river, you can sit on large rocks and view the beautiful Tien islands with their thick evergreen forests, ancient trees, a waterfall and songbirds.
- "Uncle Dong's Go" tree: On this trail, which starts about 1.5 km from the park headquarters, you will walk inside the closed evergreen forest with its many ancient timber species like Cycas sp. and medicinal plants such as *Amomum vilosum*, *Millettia* sp., and *Drynaria fortunci*. The trip ends with a visit to two ancient rare and precious "Go Do" trees (*Azelia xylocarpa*) with diameters ranging from 3 to 3.7 m and which are believed to be more than 500 years old. The tree was named after Mr. Phan Van Dong or Uncle Dong, who worked in the park in 1987, to signify his working commitment and send a message to future generations about conservation. Apart from these rare trees, you may encounter some large animals. This itinerary is also suitable for scientific research.
- Bau Sau (Crocodile) Lake trip. This is a 6-km walking tour passing through closed evergreen deciduous and semi-



Photo by Gert Polet

Amyda cartilaginea

deciduous forests. The lake is about 8 km from headquarters. As you move closer to Sau Lake, many huge and ancient trees will tower over you and, if you're lucky, a Gaur and other ungulates may cross your path. Around the tree-lined lake, you can watch rare water and forest birds such as the Great Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*), Barbellied Pitta (*Pitta ellioti*), Germain's Peacock Pheasant (*Polyplectron germaini*), and the Siamese Fireback Pheasant (*Lophura diardi*). You can even stay a night at Sau Lake Ranger Station. The park regulates the number of visitors to this area to ensure the safety of wildlife.

- Chim (Bird) Lake: The Chim Lake trip is a 1-km walking tour. You will walk pass many large ancient trees such as *Hopea odorata*, and *Dipterocarpus alatus* before reaching the lookout tower at the end of the walk. From this tower, you can watch water birds, as well as winter visitors.
- "Si" Tree: About 16 km away from headquarters is the semi-deciduous forest. There you will see the one-kilometer long stand of Si trees (*Ficus retusa*). These large odd Si trees border a stream. Surrounding the Si tree stand is the *Colona* species – a type of forest bush that is adjacent to a grassplot for ungulates to graze.
- Troi rapids and Dung rapids: These two rapids are located 6 km from the park's headquarters. Along the Dong Nai River, you can sit on yellow sandbanks and large rocks to relax and watch the waterfalls.
- Oc Eo relics: From the park's headquarters, you will have to hire a jeep to be driven for 23 km to Dac Lua village, then board a ferry to get to Quang Ngai village (Cat Tien District, Lam Dong Province). Go back in history as you visit the ancient temple, which houses relics of the Oc Eo civilization. The temple is located on a hill along the Dong Nai River. Its origin remains unknown.
- Ta Lai village: The village is located about 12 km from the park's headquarters. You can get there by hired car or motorboat. The S'Tieng and Chau

Ma minority people are settled there. This area is closely related to the "D-Resistance Base" from the time of the resistance. In this village, you can join in or just enjoy watching their traditional dances and festivals, and see how they make their traditional crafts.



Common Palm Civet

Photo by Gert Polet

Where to stay and eat

Facilities in the Park are basic. Accommodation includes air-conditioned and fan rooms and cost about US\$10 per room per night. Electrical power occasionally fails and water supply can be erratic at times. The Park's canteen staff serves simple but good meals. The Park hires out jeeps to reach farther places but transportation is not always available. During weekends in the dry season and during public holidays, the Park tends to receive an increasing large number of Vietnamese visitors. Accommodation is then fully booked and around the headquarters, things can get quite noisy. It is best to make an advance reservation through your travel agent or directly with the Park (telephone ++84-(0)61-791228, fax ++84-(0)61-791227). ●

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