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ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

Building Sustainability into a Training Programme

► By **VU THI QUYEN**

Like many other developing countries, Vietnam is facing serious environmental dilemmas. Forest cover over the past fifty years has decreased due to war and human encroachment. Biodiversity now remains in isolated islands that are still under serious threat due to agricultural expansion, forest clearance and hunting of wildlife.

Early government recognition of the problems has resulted in the establishment of a network of national parks and protected areas in the 1960s. The government has also issued laws and policies on nature conservation and environmental

protection. However, the capacity of various agencies to respond to the vast destruction of Vietnam's natural heritage lags behind the upward curve of exploitation.

In addition, Vietnam must address human needs. The country must begin the process of building greater appreciation and awareness among its people to ensure their commitment to the preservation of the environment.

Education at Cuc Phuong National Park

Cuc Phuong was established in 1962 as Vietnam's first national park. The park is located 120 km southwest of Hanoi and covers an

area of 220 sq km with rich evergreen forest on limestone mountains. Cuc Phuong is home to 2000 species of flowering plants, 88 mammal species and many endangered species that include the Delacour langur, Asiatic black bear, and Owston's palm civet.

There are about 50,000 people living along the border of the park, 90% of whom are members of the Muong ethnic group, and depend upon the park's resources for their livelihood. Firewood collection, timber harvesting, livestock grazing, hunting, and shifting cultivation remain serious threats to Cuc Phuong's forest ecosystem and its wildlife.

Although protection efforts of the park continue to be strengthened, these alone cannot address the conservation and protection needs of the park.

In 1996 Fauna and Flora International (FFI), in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, established the Cuc Phuong Conservation Project (CPCP) to address these issues. The project involved social, economic and biological field research, as well as a major environmental education initiative focusing on local communities and visitors of the park.

The Cuc Phuong Conservation Awareness Program (CAP) aims at raising the level of awareness and understanding about nature, and the need to protect the park through activities carried out in local schools, within villages, and for visitors of the Park.

The Program has focused on students at the primary, middle and high schools in communities bordering the Park. The students may have limited impacts on natural resources, but these efforts represent a long-term investment in changing attitudes and behaviour necessary for the Park's sustainable conservation. Today's students are tomorrow's decision-makers. At their age, the students' minds are fresh, their atti-

tudes are just beginning to form, and are willing to learn new things. Students are also natural links between local communities and the Program. They share their knowledge and other educational resources with their parents, friends and other people in their communities. In this way the Program's impact goes beyond just the participating schools.

Currently, over 15,000 students from 43 schools in the four districts surrounding the park voluntarily participate in the school-based Conservation Club programme. The Conservation Club leaders include specially trained staff of the national park, graduates of area teacher training colleges, and members of the local Youth Union. Each day, five or six teams organise Club meetings, and work in cooperation with a counterpart teacher from each school. They hold sessions between school hours, and administer roughly 25 sessions each week. Club meetings follow prepared lesson plans focusing on a relevant theme (e.g. Endangered Species or Tropical Forests). Lesson plans are made up of discussions, stories, games, and other activities that reinforce the main message of the lesson. In addition, the Conservation Clubs hold a variety of special events to encourage greater student interest and partici-

pation in conservation, including puppet shows, visits to the park, tree-planting activities, and other organised events.

Students are very active and play a central role in the programme. Every day, Conservation Club leaders receive many letters where students either ask questions about the park or express their feelings about wildlife, nature and the environment. They can also share their thoughts through the *Green Forest* student newsletters, which are distributed to students at Cuc Phuong. In addition, they can get involved in environmental education programmes at other parks and protected areas.

Feedback from parents, teachers, and other members of the community suggest that the Conservation Clubs have not only increased environmental awareness, but have also encouraged greater interest in school, as evidenced by reported increases in attendance, and improved grades. The Conservation Clubs may have also influenced changes in the quality of education at the local level. The programme has exposed local teachers to a participatory style of teaching, which is new to the educational system in Vietnam. District education departments have subsequently used the programme to showcase the participatory teaching approach, bringing teachers from district schools to observe the Clubs in action.

Local participation by teachers is essential to the programme's sustainability and success. Education staff regularly organise teacher training workshops where participants discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, provide input to improve its content and management, as well as plan for the coming months. The teachers are also provided with knowledge and understanding about nature and the environment.



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The programme at Cuc Phuong has so far focused on adults through Participatory Rural Appraisal-style meetings in local communities. In co-operation with village leaders and key local organisations (e.g. Women's Union, Farmer's Union, etc.), a "Village Programme" is carried out from one community to another community within the park's buffer zone. Since late 1998, around 25,000 participants have attended the 82 village-level meetings organised.

Two meeting plans have been developed: the first includes a slide show introduction to the park's values, followed by a presentation of the environment-focused play "A Kitchen God Comes Late", written and performed by local Conservation Club members.

The second programme revolves around a video filmed within the Cuc Phuong communities featuring local residents talking about the values of and also the threats to the Park, as well as some economic alternatives that have been applied successfully (e.g. bee farming, improved rice agriculture, fish raising). The video is followed by a 40-minute discussion about changes in the park, its benefits, as well as suggestions on how residents can get involved in its protection. The programme ends with a comedy about a man who became rich by cutting and selling timber, but was arrested by rangers. He has since learned a very important lesson and never destroyed the forest again.

Park visitors represent a lower risk to the park and its environment, but their activities and impacts are often more visible, such as littering, carving on trees, and collecting plants and flowers. To increase visitor awareness, the Conservation Awareness Programme has developed Vietnam's first nature interpretation centre. The visitor centre, completed in August 2000, provides a place for more than 40,000 annual visitors to learn about the values of the



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Bat and moth game

Park, as well as key national issues relating to conservation and biodiversity. It is also an important resource for local educational programmes and activities for school children, teachers, and members of the communities bordering the Park.

With its success, the Conservation Awareness Programme at Cuc Phuong has earned national recognition as a model for community-based environmental education in Vietnam. The Programme has also set standards of excellence and motivated other individuals and organisations to improve their educational programmes. In essence, it has provided a benchmark for the country's future environmental programmes.

Vietnamese Efforts

One of the notable successes of FFI's efforts at Cuc Phuong has been the transfer of the education programme's leadership to Vietnamese hands, the development of the capacity of its national staff and local partners to sustain the Programme, as well as the utilization of local knowledge and experiences to improve environmental education initiatives.

In late 1999, the Cuc Phuong Education Programme carried out its

first training initiative for staff of the Pu Mat National Park education programme in Nghe An Province (Central Vietnam). It was a hands-on eight-week intensive training where the trainees were given the opportunity to develop and manage a successful environmental education programme.

Trainees were paired with project staff to organise conservation club meetings, prepare lesson plans, and discuss issues with local counterpart teachers. In addition to teaching at schools, they organised teacher workshops, student visits and other special events. Moreover, the trainees were provided with knowledge on the important concepts in biology and ecology. All this had prepared the trainees on the different aspects of running an education programme.

After their training at Cuc Phuong, they started their own environmental education programme in Pu Mat, which now covers over 40 schools bordering the National Park.

The success of the Pu Mat training programme resulted in the establishment of a local non-government organization that provides greater sustainability to environmental education efforts at parks and protected areas in Vietnam. Built

upon the success and experience of the Cuc Phuong effort, Education for Nature - Vietnam (ENV) has become the country's first environment-focused NGO in 2001. ENV provides experience-focused training, technical assistance, and other support to community-based programmes.

While ENV continues to support education efforts at Cuc Phuong, it also develops educational resources, distributes a national student newsletter (Green Forest), and helps to train, develop, and support programmes at five national parks and four protected areas. ENV also plays a central role in an informal network of environmental education programmes in Vietnam that are made available to other projects through cooperation and support.

A Change in Perceptions

In 1996 when the programme was initiated at Cuc Phuong, education was not considered an important method in strategic conservation and protection of national parks and protected areas in Vietnam. Traditional enforcement was believed to be the only way to protect forests, so buying more equipment for rangers was a priority, despite the rangers' inadequate training. In addition, park management did not recognise the relationship between local communities and natural resources, and thus did not realise that strong community involvement would translate into better park protection.

Six months after the education programme was initiated, the park managers began receiving feedback from students and local community members. They asked questions about the park, determined the responsibilities of the rangers, and even reported cases of forest destruction. The education programme has evolved as an important link between local communities and the park. Moreover, this has helped the park managers to understand the importance of community involve-

ment as well as the role of education in protecting the park.

This new perception has grown and expanded quickly among managers of other parks and protected areas in Vietnam. During a workshop in February 2001, many park directors expressed the need to carry out environmental education at parks and protected areas.

The Secret Keys to Success Setting a Precedent

Setting a precedent on a particular way of working is absolutely essential, but this can sometimes lead to loss of cooperation. For instance, the Cuc Phuong Conservation Awareness Programme in 1996 started in five schools. After a couple of months, the programme was only active in two schools because the other three would not cooperate unless the programme agreed to their requests, such as a library and sofas for teachers. A year later, the programme had expanded into many other schools. The three schools that initially rejected the project have renewed their interest in it. Setting a precedent is one way of identifying the level of cooperation of counterparts to avoid any misunderstanding about the programme and its objectives.

Taking Pride

For a project to succeed, making the staffs and counterparts feel their importance to the job as well as to the project would motivate them. Instilling pride helps make up for the difficulties of breaking new ground in environmental education.

Focus on Training

Training is crucial to the success of any education programme. The level of knowledge and understanding of any staff is a major factor in the outcome of a program. Usually, very little is accomplished during the first year. The programme only truly works when the staff have had more experience. Training is essential to a long-

term investment. It helps the staff improve themselves; the more they understand, the more the programme benefits. If the staff cease to improve, so will the Programme.

Striving for Excellence

The programme needs to be updated and regularly reviewed. New teaching methods, topics and materials would ensure the programme's popularity and success, while monitoring and evaluation would highlight necessary improvements.

Prospects for Environmental Education in Vietnam

Various methods are being employed to look at the sustainability of environmental education in Vietnam. The government has just signed an important document to integrate environmental education into all the levels of the school system. Today, a growing number of young Vietnamese has the capability to carry out quality environmental education. Cuc Phuong is just one of many environmental education programmes that focus on specific protected areas and target groups, and will remain an important effort to protect the country's natural heritage well into the future.

ENV also seeks to broaden its activities through coordination with teacher training colleges and a partnership with Hanoi National University to develop an Environmental Education degree programme.

Environmental education in Vietnam is gaining recognition and legitimacy as a valuable tool in protected area conservation and management. While many obstacles remain to be overcome, the growing interest among young professionals in the field of environmental education is an encouraging sign for the future of the country's natural heritage. ■

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