

**Confronting Illegal Wildlife Trade in Vietnam:
The Experience of Education for Nature-Vietnam**

By

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ABSTRACT:

Illegal wildlife trade threatens the biodiversity of many nations in the world, including Vietnam. There are currently several non-governmental organizations at work in the country, trying to end the trade. This report details a project undertaken in 2008 to evaluate the wildlife crime data collection activities of Education for Nature-Vietnam, a national NGO engaged in awareness and educational activities.

Vietnam is currently struggling with growing pressure on its natural resources as a result of population growth in the region and increasing middle classes in the country and its neighbors. Great demand exists for forest products, legally and illegally collected, for uses ranging from decorative to medicinal.

The work of some organizations in Vietnam focuses mainly on ways to reduce the pressure on the country's natural resources, in particular endangered fauna. The most serious challenge to the survival of species like tigers and bears in Vietnam is hunting. This practicum undertaken at the organization Education for Nature-Vietnam endeavors to evaluate some of the methods which the organization uses to reach the public, and provides suggestions as to how it might better achieve those aims.

Recommendations include cultivating a relationship with the press, treating all informants with the same level of priority, and working with practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine to convince the public that its health needs do not require animal parts.

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I. Introduction to the Practicum

I first traveled to Vietnam in 1997 as an undergraduate on a semester study abroad program. I returned for work and research, residing in Hanoi for over six years between 1999 and 2008. In 2003, seeking a career change from English teaching and newspaper editing, I began volunteering with Fauna & Flora International (FFI) where I became involved in the organization's efforts to end illegal wildlife trafficking in Vietnam.

I became aware very quickly that the problem of wildlife trade in Vietnam was extremely complex. Different entities- NGOs, Vietnamese government branches, local law enforcement, and foreign and Vietnamese staff of multiple organizations, do not agree specifically on what the problem is or how to solve it (Nguyễn S. V., 2003), (Weitzel, 1998), (Kaeslin, 2007). Some see wildlife trade primarily as a poverty issue, others as a law enforcement problem, still others cite a lack of awareness, and a few blame overpopulation.

Of all the environmental organizations working in Vietnam, the only one based within the country is Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV). The author first worked with ENV in a consulting capacity, providing editorial assistance to a number of publications but most significantly in a report following a citywide survey of Hanoi residents about their consumption of bear bile, a well-known medicinal use of an animal in eastern Asia.

When designing a practicum project I wanted to expand on what I had already learned and accomplished at ENV. Together with ENV's senior technical advisor a

project designed to evaluate ENV's activities was created with the end result expected to be an advisory report to the organization. Through careful analysis of an intricate data collection initiative undertaken by ENV from 2005 to the present, I extracted valuable information and insight as to the way in which wildlife trade is carried out and the way wildlife law is (or is not) enforced. My observations, followed by evaluations of ENV's activities and advice for the organization, follow.

II. Illegal Wildlife Trade Worldwide

As populations and fortunes grow throughout the world, so does the industry that provides animals and specimens to people who desire exotic pets, like parrots or monkeys; unusual souvenirs, like crocodile teeth; traditional medicines made from bears and tigers; and jungle meats such as clouded leopard. Advertisements have appeared on the internet for endangered primates like gorillas, indicating the ease with which illegal trafficking takes place (Vidal, 2005). Experts suggest that illegal wildlife trade is globally worth between ten and twenty billion dollars (McMurray, 2008). This puts it among the top three most lucrative illegal activities in the world: drug trafficking, arms trade, and wildlife trade (Vince, 2002).

Compared to drugs and guns, trafficking endangered species is relatively easy and carries fewer penalties when perpetrators are caught. This relative ease and low risk makes it extremely tempting for illegal traders because it translates to far greater returns for the same efforts. Experts disagree about the level to which organized drug or weapon traffickers are also involved in the illegal wildlife trade, but it is a fact that there are

established trade routes and little enough enforcement that the activity can proceed without much interference. (WWF, 2007).

One of the greatest challenges to controlling wildlife trade is differing priorities of those countries and agencies in a position to tackle it. Drugs and guns trafficking are nearly universally banned, and national governments invest significant resources in enforcing those laws. For example, sources claim as much as \$16 billion is spent by the US annually to fight illegal drugs (Youngers & Rosin, 2004). In contrast, little information is available on expenditures earmarked for the fight against wildlife trade. For example, the entire 2009 budget for the United States Fish & Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for investigating and prosecuting wildlife trade in the US, is just \$3.4 billion, with a fraction of that- \$57 million- designated for law enforcement (USFWS, 2009).

Whereas drug traders are universally seen as criminals, wildlife traders are commonly perceived as ordinary men and women simply trying to feed their families (Venkataraman, 2008). As a result wildlife crime generally occupies low-priority ranking for law enforcement, even in countries where it is a major problem.

To conservationists, what makes wildlife trade a problem is simple and obvious. A market exists for exotic animals alive and dead, and consequently a system exists to feed that market. The more people get involved supplying the market, the more animals are hunted, resulting in the species becoming endangered and needing legal protection.

To many individuals involved in illegal wildlife trade, the danger of losing a species is not enough of a reason to stop hunting or fishing. Hunger, desire for profit, and

reluctance to lose a resource that one's neighbors will likely seize instead are all reasons that people continue hunting even when a species is in decline. Examples can be found in the world's fisheries, where international treaties have failed to effectively manage species like bluefin tuna or North Atlantic cod (WWF, 2008), (WWF, 2009).

Consequently, conservationists cite reasons that hunting wild species is harmful to human life in their work to convince people- particularly traffickers and consumers of wildlife- that the trade in endangered animals should stop. One argument that is frequently employed is the potential spread of infectious diseases from trading in wild animal meat. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) arose in China in 2003, infecting over 9,000 people worldwide and killing almost 800 of them (CDC, 2005). SARS was found to have spread from a species of bat which simply carried the virus, to a type of civet popular in Chinese restaurants. Since the civets were widely available and traded in crowded 'wet markets' (open-air markets in which live animals are sold and slaughtered, raw meat is displayed without refrigeration, and little hygiene exists) SARS quickly infected the animals and then their human traders.

Hundreds of species of animals find their way into Asian wet markets, where they are caged in close quarters and hideous conditions. It was found that the virus had mutated under these conditions which allowed it to jump from civets to humans (Bell, Hunter, & Robertson, 2004). Once the disease was traced to the civets, thousands of the animals were exterminated, the danger that they posed to humans not lost on the Chinese authorities.

The human health threat inherent in the wild animal trade may be one of the few consequences that people will take seriously. Other threats, like species imbalances leading to an abundance of pests (in Vietnam hunting of snakes and birds of prey frequently results in plagues of rats in the rice fields) or predator attacks on livestock (tigers, left with little else to eat and little forest in which to hunt it, are attacking domestic animals more frequently) do not seem to convince people to hunt less.

Illegally hunted animals are traded for a wide range of uses. On the international level, live animals support a vibrant exotic pet trade- birds and fish, for example- while pelts and horns supply trophy seekers. On a regional and local level, animals are widely hunted for their meat and are sought for medicinal purposes in many parts of the world. 'Bushmeat', a term popularized in Africa, refers particularly to meat from animals hunted in the wild and not traditionally thought of in the West as good to eat. In central Africa, chimpanzees and gorillas are particularly vulnerable to the bushmeat trade.

Demand for components of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is also an important driver of international and regional wildlife trade, evidenced by the fact that China is the destination for more illegally trafficked wildlife products than any other country in the world (ENS, 2008). China is the principle destination of illegally trafficked wildlife from all over Southeast Asia, including Vietnam (ENV, 2008), (Hance, 2009).

III. Illegal Wildlife Trade in Vietnam

Current research places China at the top of the list in terms of demand for trafficked wildlife and parts (Traffic, 2009). The endangered species come from all over the world, but Vietnam is in one of the regions where poaching is most intense, because of its high biodiversity, growing population, and poor law enforcement. As Vietnam rapidly empties its forests to meet the recreational and medicinal demands of Asia's growing middle class, locally-based trade networks have expanded into the comparatively rich forests of Laos and Cambodia, countries with smaller populations and even poorer enforcement capacities (Hance, 2009), (ENS, 2009).

Hunting is the number one threat to biodiversity in Asia (Science Blog, 2002). The majority of the wildlife trafficked in Vietnam ends up in China, much of it destined for exotic meat restaurants, but evidence suggests the Vietnamese are consuming larger amounts than before. Wild animal meat and products are popular among Asia's growing middle class, with one of the key species currently suffering a significant decline being bears, because of a powerful chemical with medicinal properties that happens to be present in their bile.

Other animals end up in medicinal distillations or steeped in the local liquor. Anyone who has visited Southeast Asia has likely encountered the ubiquitous bottles of rice whiskey with whole cobras coiled inside. Understandably, most tourists are amused by them and many buy bottles as souvenirs. Visitors to Vietnam are shocked to find that the sale of such items is not legal. After all, they are available in airport gift shops. Other souvenirs include sea turtle shells and products made from them, as well as several other

marine items like coral and preserved sea horses. All of these species are supposedly protected under Vietnamese and international laws.

Bear bile, once a coveted and rarely used medicine, taken in powdered form from the dried remains of a bear's gall bladder, is now used recreationally (mixed into rice whiskey) in many parts of Asia, Vietnam included. Ironically, the widespread adoption of bear bile as a fashionable cure-all is due to a technique pioneered in North Korea which keeps the bear alive for repeated withdrawals of bile from its gall bladder and has resulted in a glut on Chinese markets following the technique's spread (Animals Asia, 2005). Bears are now kept captive all over Asia for the purpose of harvesting their bile.

Contrary to claims that farming an endangered animal can help conserve the species in the wild, this practice has led to a decline in wild bear populations all over Asia because of a seemingly unlimited demand coming from growing numbers of individuals, and entrepreneurs' desire to cash in while they can by joining the supply end. Hunting has increased with farming and the Asiatic Black Bear is now a primary target for conservation efforts. Several television public service announcements (PSA) have been created to increase awareness of the issue in Vietnam, their main targets being the consumers of bear bile, and their friends and families. A link to one example follows <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R8DJTjCqtY>>. Presently, it is still too soon to tell if the PSAs are having a significant effect on the use of bear bile in Vietnam.

Part of the problem with regulating wildlife trade is the ambiguity of Vietnamese wildlife law and the tendency to ignore international regulations. For instance, Siamese crocodiles (*Crocodylus siamensis*) are farmed in Vietnam and under one law, Decree 159,

individuals may trade domestically in their skin and flesh after obtaining the proper licenses from the government. Under another law, Decree 32, the same crocodile is classified under the highest priority and not permitted to be “exploited” except for certain unspecified “scientific purposes” or “international cooperation.” International law, namely the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), to which Vietnam is a signatory, classifies the species as critically endangered, making it illegal to transport any part of it over international boundaries except when the person in possession of the animal has proper documentation. Because of ambiguities such as these, it is very easy to find specimens of farmed species and similar, wild species passed off as farmed, in markets and souvenir stores, as well as in airport gift shops, as with the whiskey infused with Vietnamese King Cobra (*Ophiophagus Hannah*) a CITES Appendix II creature also protected by Decree 32.

Vietnam is in a period of transformation. The country has been busy over the past decade re-writing its laws so it can be up to date with the international community. However, even in best case scenarios, many regional officials either do not know the national laws or are unable to apply them. For example, not having the manpower or resources to prosecute the thousands of citizens who illegally hold bears in captivity in their homes in order to sell their bile, Vietnam recently passed a law requiring anyone owning a bear to get the animal implanted with an identifying microchip. The introduction of microchips was intended to protect further bears from being captured in the wild. It was also meant to prevent people from selling bears now registered to them.

More information, and the effectiveness of this law, is examined on the website of Animals Asia Foundation, one of the principle organizations working to end the bear bile trade (Animals Asia, 2008). The law in effect legalizes the keeping of bears for people already having them in their possession, although the sale of bear bile is still forbidden. These details may seem convoluted when one is aware that the only reason anyone keeps a live bear in his house is to harvest and sell its bile.

At about the same time as the new law on bears was being passed, a bear rescue center was built with direct assistance from Animals Asia and opened in Tam Đảo National Park outside of Hanoi. The center is intended for housing confiscated, illegal bears- that is, the *really* illegal ones, the ones without chips. Vietnamese and international wildlife trade experts in Vietnam disagree bitterly over the effect of the new system. While some say the chips and the rescue center give authorities both a solid legal ground when taking bears from households, and a place to put the confiscated animals, others openly deride the rescue center as fueling the trade. They claim that people who keep bears in captivity are not going to care whether or not bears are chipped and make so much money from bile sales that they will simply buy more bears from traders if their bears are confiscated. Finally, they maintain that rescue centers only discourage the nation from really taking the initiative to enforce laws, since releasing the animals back into the wild effectively guarantees their capture once again (Primmer, 2008).

Further complicating law enforcement, clauses exist that exempt certain people in exceptionally indigent circumstances from being harshly prosecuted. Multiple cases of this sort have been documented by Education for Nature-Vietnam. It is classic socialist

policy that, in this case, is directly at odds with efforts to protect threatened and endangered species. Poor people, women who are divorced or widowed, and members of ethnic minority groups frequently benefit from the exemptions by way of the philosophy that they cannot afford either a fine or a prison sentence. When caught, they are simply asked not to do it again.

It is important to understand that demand drives the wildlife trade, and that much of the demand is regional in Asia. European and American desires for wild animals as pets, furs or exotic meats are not the main threat to wildlife in Asia. People sympathetic to the idea that the West exploits developing nations for its own purposes over-compensate in faulting outsiders for the loss of exotic wildlife. For instance, Wikipedia's 'offal' entry contains the following information:

"The Cantonese and Vietnamese consumed monkey brains, but this is now rare to non-existent, and primarily offered to rich, Western tourists. Strange items are more associated in the Chinese southeast, Vietnam and Southeast Asia, where the tropical diversity and use of exotic items captured the Westerner's imagination during the era of colonialism up to the Vietnam War and is still a target of interest for adventure-seeking Western tourists. (Wikipedia)"

Most sources are quick to point out that after China, the USA is the second largest destination for animals poached from Asia. This is true: most of the traffic goes to expat Chinatowns (Traffic, 2009). The evidence is clear. If an organization wants to stop the trafficking of endangered species, they need to focus on reducing demand, primarily among Chinese populations in China and in the large Chinese diaspora.

In the past decade, Vietnam has transformed from an agrarian society to a rapidly industrializing one. While change comes slowly to the countryside, the cities have

modernized at a rate exponentially faster: people who did not have telephone service of any kind a decade ago now have expensive mobile phones. Families who once thought TV was a luxury now own entertainment centers and computers with DSL, and young ladies who recently rode 40-year-old bicycles to work now own \$3,000 Vespa scooters. As their rising incomes permit them to do so, Vietnamese people are purchasing larger vehicles, more advanced gadgets, and showier accessories.

With their sudden rise in disposable income, urban Vietnamese are under tremendous social pressure to display their wealth. One way to do so is by dining at restaurants in large groups of friends or colleagues. While many folks typically take trips to sprawling outdoor restaurants specializing in typical Vietnamese dishes like seafood hotpot or pan-fried beef strips, another trend is to seek out more exotic, 'wild' meats, particularly for men, the primary consumers of wildlife (Nguyễn D. P., 2005). It is thought that eating a wild animal imparts its strength to the consumer, so the brains, balls and penises of multiple wild animals are increasingly popular for men. A wide variety of candidate species like turtles, bears and wild cats are sought for their feral essence. Tigers, nearly extinct in Vietnam because of rampant hunting, turn up frequently in Hanoi in pieces, victims of the demand for potent distillates (called tiger bone glue) which are believed to cure such common afflictions as sore joints and impotence. In spite of the wide availability of cheaper, less environmentally destructive remedies, the sheer power and rarity of tigers puts them in high demand by the wealthiest men (Nguyễn S. V., 2003).

Virtually every mammal and reptile in Vietnam is prized for a variety of properties, both by exotic meat eaters and followers of traditional medicine. Although a survey by World Wide Fund for Nature's wildlife trade wing TRAFFIC suggested that a majority of TCM doctors actually oppose the use of wildlife and no longer prescribe it specifically because of the rarity of most species, many ordinary people still prefer these ancient remedies (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007). By all accounts, the primary reason for the decline of so many species in Vietnam is the consumer demand to eat, drink or apply any number of animal parts to sore joints or uncooperative body parts (Science Blog, 2002). As in the West, popular beliefs often overrule medical knowledge among people who do not regularly visit doctors, and men advise their friends to drink some bear bile or snake wine in order to enhance their health or sexual performance. Bear bile is one wildlife product consumed almost exclusively by men (Nguyễn D. P., 2005).

In Vietnam there also exists a taste for unusual dishes, and this is manifested in the wide range of bizarre and unlikely food delicacies like congealed goose blood (*tiết canh*), rice soup with pork intestine (*cháo lòng*), and fermented shrimp paste (*mắm tôm*). According to my mentor and Vietnamese cultural consultant Nguyễn Trọng Tín, a major influence on Vietnamese culinary art and society is found in the many years of hunger and shortages that plagued regions of the country for centuries, forcing residents to create palatable foods from offal, and other unwanted or rotting ingredients. Forest wildlife, under these circumstances, has always played a role in the Vietnamese diet, providing protein when food was scarce, as well as being valuable in traditional medicine. However, the demands placed on the forest's resources never became unsustainable until recently.

According to residents of Bồ Trạch district in Quảng Bình province in central Vietnam, where the author participated in a project feasibility study in 2003, animals including porcupines, several species of primates, civets, and the occasional wild cat have always made up part of the local diet. However, the relative danger and difficulty involved in catching these animals, combined with the ready availability of agriculturally produced foods, preserved hunting as an activity that was mostly supplemental. This reality kept hunting low-impact for generations. The ongoing transformation of Vietnamese society is dramatically changing this trend. Demand from wildlife traders has transformed wild animals into cash commodities and hunting is now the main occupation of many villagers. Now villagers are hunting more animals but eating them less, selling what they catch to traders so they can buy staples like rice and vegetables. In the past, hunting was sustainable; now, it is not. At no point in the study did villagers ever express concern that what they were doing was illegal.

Although many Vietnamese are aware of laws protecting wildlife, they typically are not deterred by risk of punishment. Since law enforcement in most of the developing world tends to be an occupation of entrepreneurs, obeying laws is not as much a concern as is finding a way around the laws. In many of the cases documented by ENV in Hanoi, officers reported "suspect escaped," "no crime found," or even "the officers asked the suspect not to commit the crime again, he agreed and signed a pledge not to eat wildlife, and was not prosecuted (ENV, 2008). Most people familiar with wildlife crime in Vietnam assume that these reports simply hide the fact that the officer received a bribe to look the other way.

Since 2003, environmental organizations working in Vietnam have increased their response to the trade in endangered species. Vietnam is a hotspot for biodiversity and has several endemic species, but conservation efforts are primarily concentrated on tigers, bears, and several species of primates. BirdLife International is very active in bird conservation. Fauna & Flora International (FFI) focuses on protecting landscapes that are home to monkeys, gibbons and langurs. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is partnered with Cát Tiên National Park in southern Vietnam and is involved in tiger conservation. Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV) focuses heavily on awareness training and education, but has expanded its operation recently to track wildlife crime in the country. ENV has recently been working closely with the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), which funds bear rescue operations and, as a result, ENV's activities have become very bear-focused.

IV. The Role of Education for Nature-Vietnam

Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV) is a Vietnamese established and operated NGO in Hanoi, Vietnam. Its mission is to promote awareness and understanding of the natural world and foster a sense of stewardship among Vietnamese people, particularly its youth. It is a small organization, with a total staff of under 20 individuals. It is funded by several international grant-making organizations and wildlife conservation groups, including Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Conservation International (CI), and the World Bank (ENV, 2005).

Since 2000, ENV has been visiting schools in greater Hanoi in an attempt to engage children and interest them in their country's natural heritage. ENV produces the publication Green Forest (*Rừng Xanh*) and maintains an environmental news bulletin on its website. In the past three years, ENV has been increasing its work to document wildlife crime in an attempt to maintain accurate data on trafficking and to promote wildlife law enforcement. Thanks to its PSAs and its outreach work, school-age Hanoians in particular seem to be aware of the organization, and the growing volume of tips to its hotline indicate that the general public is beginning to take notice as well.

In 2005 ENV began operating a toll-free hotline for callers to report wildlife crimes in their communities. For the first time, citizens could take the initiative to stop traffic of endangered animals and their products in local markets, restaurants and elsewhere. Providing one's name is optional for informants. However, when informants give their names and phone numbers, ENV is able to follow up with them on the development of their case. Awareness of the hotline is increased by ENV's outreach activities, which include classroom presentations, radio and TV Public Service Announcements (PSAs), posters, and advertisements in newspapers and on public buses.

Hotline reporting process

When I first began planning this Practicum, my intent was to conduct statistical analyses of the data recorded during each call to ENV's Wildlife Crime Hotline, in order to determine what sort of response they were receiving. Some of the questions I had were whether the PSAs were resulting in increased calls to the hotline, with the result hoped to

be an evaluation of whether the existence of the hotline was encouraging individuals to report crime, and how effectively ENV's activities were reaching the public. However, upon my arrival I discovered that there was simply not enough data to do what I had planned, so I adapted my plans to fit the available information.

When a call or email to the hotline is received, ENV's six-person wildlife crime unit (WCU) opens a new case file. All available information is entered into a preliminary report form (see appendix), and that information is then entered into a database. Then a member of the WCU begins an investigation, calling local police departments for more information, or personally visiting the location of the alleged violation. Since ENV is located in Hanoi, cases that take place in the capital are much easier to track.

The WCU follows a case until the Vietnamese authorities consider it closed—typically, the authorities impose a fine, or an offender receives a jail sentence, or a case is considered too vague to prosecute. The WCU follows all these developments until there is no more activity that can be documented. Then, ENV's technical advisor reviews the report and approves it for ENV records. After that, the case is also considered closed by ENV.

Although the WCU communicates frequently with law enforcement authorities, the two do not work as a team. Informants within national and local law enforcement call the WCU fairly routinely with tips, and ENV is slowly building a relationship with some of these individuals, but WCU remains non-governmental and separate from any police department.

Between the time ENV began documenting wildlife crime cases in 2004, up to the time of this research in July 2008, there had been 1,393 cases opened, 436 (roughly 30 percent) of them from tips to the hotline. Over 246 of those cases were still considered open. The volume of cases the WCU is tracking is overwhelming for the tiny staff of six individuals, and this affects ENV's case report system. A case may be closed as far as the authorities are concerned long before ENV is able to conclude its own investigation.

The backlog has forced the WCU to establish priorities for cases which result in the more important ones receiving the most attention while less important ones are left open and effectively ignored. The priority scale is based on a number of criteria including species importance and location. For instance, a tip about tortoise shells being sold in a Hanoi tourist shop would be immediately investigated, whereas response to a tip about a macaque in captivity in a private residence would be less immediate.

A priority scale is also applied to the identity of the callers, a subject of some controversy in the Hanoi conservation world. ENV wants to focus on reports which originate from the targets of its outreach activities: Vietnamese callers unaffiliated with conservation. As a result, those calls receive more attention than tips from friends of staff, or conservation colleagues at other organizations.

ENV procedure requires that the informant be called back with information on the status of the case they called about, to encourage repeat calls. Somewhat ironically, the more frequently one calls, the less significant one's tips are considered to be. This has sparked complaints among some people in the Hanoi international community.

In two months' study in Hanoi, the author heard several such complaints. Critics remarked that someone they knew had called or emailed to report animals in captivity, and received little more than a 'thank you' but no follow-up. Presumably this obvious preference is hurting ENV's reputation where it needs support; if it damages its reputation with others working in conservation, it could find that it is unable to recruit staff or raise funds in the future. Although the motives for giving priority to cold calls from Vietnamese residents are clear, available information shows that a great percentage of significant information has come from foreigners and Vietnamese affiliated somehow with conservation. Of the 167 closed hotline cases in which the informant gave his or her name, 70 cases were from tips from non-Vietnamese. It is unclear how many were from Vietnamese people working in conservation. Of 246 hotline cases open, 206 of those were from anonymous callers, and the remaining 40 divided evenly between foreign and local callers (ENV, 2008).

V. Reflections

Why Conservation is Particularly Challenging in Vietnam

In the West, conservation of endangered wildlife is reasonably effective. While there are ongoing battles even in the developed world over how best to approach the protection of wildlife- in the United States for example deep divisions exist over predatory species like wolves and big cats- the pressing issues for these animals are not so much their being direct targets of hunters as much as victims of habitat loss. In contrast, countries like Vietnam struggle with decimation of many important species

primarily through poaching. Western experts most frequently attribute poaching to the poverty and lack of development that exists in these countries and design conservation programs accordingly. In doing so they overlook cultural differences that destine many such programs to failure.

Even if the only reason people hunted was because they were poor, adherence to small income-generation programs shows a misunderstanding of basic economics and behavior in Vietnam. One example of such a program involves agricultural assistance in which farmers are given fruit trees (mangoes, for instance) with the idea that the people will then have fruit to sell at the market. Mangoes, which require time, land and water to grow, bring in less than a dollar a kilogram, while a single langur or pangolin currently brings in \$25- \$100 thanks to high demand. The current financial rewards for selling a wild animal far outweigh traditional agriculture and result in hunting having a much lower opportunity cost. The most common result of income generation programs like the one described above, therefore, is that *in addition to* rather than *instead of* hunting, villagers now have a modest income from the new NGO-assisted enterprise. Furthermore, since women and youth are typically responsible for many agricultural activities, men may continue to hunt as they are not crucial between sowing and harvest.

In 2004, the author participated in the design and implementation of just such an agricultural assistance program in central Vietnam, in an area bordering a national park (*buffer zone*) in Quảng Bình province. Fauna & Flora International (FFI) was interested in expanding its primate program to the districts near the park. It joined with American human services organization Counterpart International (CPI) to set up "forest gardens", a

concept first developed in Sri Lanka to reported success. Through this program, villagers would receive commodity-bearing native trees, such as mango or black pepper, and be assisted in their maintenance until mature crops could be taken to market. The program began in 2004 and reached the end of its funding two years later; the reported result was that while trees had been planted, many households were still also poaching wildlife, timber and other resources from the National Park, only now they had improved ability to do so. One source suggested that the program essentially failed because it placed too much faith in the locals to police themselves without giving them an incentive to do so, while at the same time, it did nothing to improve the capacity of local law enforcement.

A species conservation project in Vietnam needs to recognize these cultural and financial realities. It should involve the direct participation of communities living in the region in order to recognize and accommodate their unique needs and concerns. It should also be better coordinated with law enforcement. Furthermore, a positive relationship should be fostered between all parties. Programs run by Vietnamese organizations have an advantage where foreign organizations are seen as outsiders and their motivations perceived with suspicion. A local organization may gain more trust and support from the populations it works with.

“Corruption” or “The cost of doing business”?

One important factor that binds Vietnamese society together is its system of favor-granting and returning. This system may take the form of barter or frequently of cash payments, delivered discreetly in envelopes to recipients. For almost all Vietnamese

people, returning favors and delivering envelopes are simply the way business is done. An anecdotal story illustrates this reality. The author once chatted with an American businessman at the airport on a trip out of Hanoi. He was packing up and leaving the country, commenting that the company he was working with had been unable to succeed in VN because of all the corruption. When it was pointed out to him that slipping someone an envelope was simply the cost of doing business, he responded with a combination of shock and awe, as if it had never occurred to his company to write off bribes as fees and thus reclassify them as business expenses. However, in Vietnam, that is simply the way business is conducted.

Hierarchy

The centuries-old Confucian tradition which exists in many Asian societies is also very influential in Vietnam. Under this system, older men always have authority over everyone else; men have authority over women; and family loyalties trump other relationships in most situations (Huy, 1998). Strict hierarchies exist which cannot be superseded by one's position in an organization (including law enforcement). This social reality was powerfully demonstrated in a notorious case where an older businessman was permitted to keep red-listed wildlife on his property and the local rangers were powerless to intervene (VietnamNet Bridge, 2007). Multiple international non-governmental organizations protested the high-court decision which allowed the man to keep more than 40 tigers on his property, but their protest did not overturn the decision. The troublesome

rivalry between Vietnamese and foreigners within the country also became a major component of this particular dispute. There are a handful of cases in the WCU database that appear similar to this case in that a prominent local official or citizen was caught hunting or in possession of endangered wildlife, but was not prosecuted.

Unfair pay

Another difficult issue in Vietnam is the great discrepancy between local and international wages. Generally, foreign staff receive salaries in the thousands of dollars per month; in contrast, Vietnamese staff receive in the hundreds. When the author interned at FFI in 2003-04, the top three foreign staff made between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per month. The top Vietnamese staff person received \$700. The average annual salary in Vietnam is less than \$2000.

While it is arguably necessary to pay foreign staff more than Vietnamese staff because prices in Vietnam are set much higher for foreigners (a system that persists despite its official outlaw), the discrepancy in salaries is large enough that it incites resentment which, not surprisingly, precludes effective work being done and leads to tension within many organizations.

Misconceptions

A thick blanket of cultural superiority overlies virtually every interaction that involves foreign companies or organizations working with local partners in Vietnam. To

be fair, it is often unintentional- that is, people are not really aware they are doing it. Attitudes range from fairly benign ("they just don't have the qualifications or experience yet") to appalling ("these people are all incompetent and only care about money".) These quotes are representative of just a fraction of the many comments I have heard spoken by non-Vietnamese- and even Vietnamese who have grown up overseas- while working in Vietnam. It is accepted in the NGO community that foreigners are necessary in top administrative positions, and an organization- or even a field office- without foreigners at the helm is usually seen as inferior.

VI. Recommendations for ENV at Conclusion of Research

The ENV wildlife crime database, while not perfect, contains extremely valuable information for the progress of conservation in the country. There are three main ways for information to make its way into the database. Just over a third of the cases (36.6%, or 483) resulted from internal monitoring, in which ENV's Hanoi-based staff visit restaurants and shops and make note of wildlife either being on the premises or on menus. A further third (33.2%, or 436) came from the hotline (email and telephone are both included). A remaining 26% (342) came from newspaper articles, clipped daily by WCU monitoring staff. A negligible 4% are attributed to 'other'. There was no further information about this 4% so it cannot really be considered significant. Of the top three, cases reported by newspapers were most likely to be closed (49%), but given the types of cases reported this way that is hardly surprising. Where monitoring and hotline reports tend to expose crimes in progress, newspaper stories highlight cases that came to light

because law enforcement was doing their jobs, pulled someone over, arrested or fined them, and dispatched their cargo. However, good publicity may be the most effective way to get more positive results from law enforcement, which is why newspapers need to be encouraged to report more of these stories and be commended for the great work they have done so far.

Vietnam has an extremely lively press tradition, with dozens of dailies published nationally and provincially. In studying the ENV database, a few papers show consistent habits of reporting on wildlife crime. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the newspaper of the Ministry of Police, “People's Police” (*Công An Nhân Dân*) was responsible for the most stories. Out of a total 339 WCU crime reports attributed to newspapers, 104 left blank the column where they were supposed to include which paper. Out of the 235 left, “People's Police” contributed 56 (23.8%). “Labor” (*Lao Động*) came in second with 31 (13%), and “Liberated Saigon” (*Sàigòn Giải Phóng*) was third with 26 (11%). “Pioneer” (*Tiên Phong*) was fourth with 24, and “Law” (*Pháp Luật*) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE) reporting arm tied for fifth with 18 each. Vietnamese people can be observed reading newspapers at all times of the day and “Labor” is probably one of the most widely read in the nation. It stands to reason that continued attention to wildlife crime through newspaper stories in popular newspapers would ensure increased awareness of the problem among the public.

I recommended to ENV while I was still in Vietnam that I thought the newspapers should be their strongest allies. A good investigative journalist would look for stories that expose crime, and these cases are perfect for that. A reporter could do a weekly report,

and the stories are unlikely to dry up. Vietnamese newspapers are widely read. Therefore, cultivating relationships with reporters is probably a very constructive way to contribute to ENV's goal of conserving endangered wildlife. If crime is kept public by consistent reporting, and if law enforcement sees itself depicted favorably in the news, it stands to reason that more people would want to be seen as positively.

The experienced Vietnam cynic would say that prestige can be bought and law enforcement would just bribe reporters to write good stories about them. In spite of this possibility, encouraging the media to cover wildlife crime would achieve another of ENV's most important aims, raising awareness. If public contribution to conservation efforts became fashionable, as certain aspects of environmentalism (combating air pollution in particular) are indeed becoming in urban Vietnam, any negative effects would be offset by positive developments.

Since a large part of the demand for wildlife products comes from notions that animal medicines can cure illnesses, ENV should consider working harder to involve TCM practitioners in its work. Several TCM hospitals exist in Hanoi and unknown hundreds or thousands of people engage in private practice. Vietnamese people pay attention to doctors on TV in the same way as other societies. So far, ENV has joined with famous pop stars to promote its message, and this probably gets the younger generation's attention. Older people who are more likely to use medicines made from animal parts might be better reached if a well-respected doctor explained alternatives to them.

ENV's priority system for investigating wildlife crimes is necessary if it is to accomplish anything with its current staff size. Thus the priority scale applied to different species and crimes will have to suffice for the time being. However, placing higher priority on calls from Vietnamese informants appears to be damaging ENV's reputation and interfering with its ability to carry out its own objectives. The organization should find a better way to handle each call fairly and place equal importance on foreigners' tips.

Finally, since all evidence points to demand, particularly from China but also from Vietnam's own growing middle class, ENV awareness activities need to target consumption. The anti-bear bile PSAs are an excellent start, but increased television and radio presence with endorsements from celebrities may help ENV reinforce its message, as well as attract additional funding, while continued pressure on local law enforcement would target unlawful activities that ENV itself cannot stop.

VII. Conclusion

It is easy for those involved in conservation to be depressed by wildlife trade activities in Vietnam. It is difficult not to think the situation is hopeless when one sees how frequently trucks loaded with wild turtles, pangolins, porcupines, snakes, and so on, are apprehended on the nation's highways. Traffic stops of wildlife traders have quadrupled since 2005, but this does not necessarily reflect a 4-fold increase in crime. Rather, it shows that enforcement has been improving and reporting is becoming more consistent.

ENV has only been collecting data on trade for four years, and it is impossible to know what percentage of the actual trade is represented in its database. Much research in the country still must be done by talking to people and writing down what they say, and making general assumptions based on as many discussions as possible. Thus while the average conservation organization staff member in Vietnam may go from day to day with a strong sense of doom, it is important to recognize the progress the country is making in its efforts to stop wildlife trade and even though it is far from ending the threat to rare wild animals, it is at least doing a better job than it was four years ago.



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Wildlife Crimes Investigation Report

Case Number		Incident date		
Classification		Hunting Possession Transport/trade	Selling: Market Selling: Shop/other Selling: Restaurant	Advertising Farming/Zoo Other
Case Title			Province (where incident occurred)	
Species List				
Common name	Scientific name	Quantity	Weight	Protection status
Investigation Summary (narrative description of the incident, observation, and findings)				
Pending Actions (if any action is prescribed, a follow report will be completed)				
Trade Seizure and transport of wildlife case details				
Shipment origin		Mode of transport		
Shipment destination		Registration No.		
Restaurant shop or market case details				
Establishment name				
District		Monitor site Should site be tagged for monitoring?		
Incident location (full address)				
Subject information (identify one or more subjects in the case)				
Subject name	DOB	Commune (residence)	District	Province

Source information (source of information about the case)							
Informant name				Contact details (address and/or phone number/email)			
Representing (organization, profession)				Source type: (hotline tele. Email, News, Monitor, other)			
News Publication, issue, date (if news source)							
Reference information (Names and contact details of key contacts involved in the case)							
Name (name, title, organization)				Contact details (address and/or phone number/email)			
Outcome (animals released, placed, sold, other, subject punishment, fines, etc.)							
Case Status (Open, closed, pending)							
Informant notification (results of investigation)				Date and time:			
Principal notification							
	Name	Date	Time		Name	Date	Time
A	Nguyen Phuong Dung			C	Vu Thi Quyen		
B	Douglas Hendrie			D	Dang Minh Ha		
Supplemental documents (list numerically)							
Report By				Date of report			

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