

## Learning From Forest Conflict: Lessons From Asia

*June 2009, Erica Pohnan*

In Thua Thien Hue Province in central Vietnam, local people regard the 200 hectares of coastal sandy forest around them as a spiritual place. For as long as they can remember it has been revered as a burial ground for past war heroes and other ancestors. When a silicate company arrived and began harvesting the sand, they were distressed that this would ruin the local water supply and damage their valuable forest. Some villagers even warned that the disturbances will release the ghosts of the dead.

Conflicts such as these have long been a sensitive issue in Vietnam and therefore a difficult subject for analysis. However, through a new RECOFTC project, a researcher will be able to take advantage of Viet Nam's growing openness to embrace, learn from, and hopefully transform natural resource conflicts. Nguyen Thi Hong Mai, from Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF) will examine the conflict between the community and the silicate company more closely, and look for ways that the conflict can be transformed to trigger positive change. Another six researchers across Asia will analyze forest conflicts under the project, which aims to identify the commonalities and root causes of forest conflict in the region, and learn lessons on how they can be effectively addressed.

In East Kalimantan Indonesia, CIFOR's Yayan Indriatmoko is learning from an ongoing conflict between oil palm companies and indigenous peoples. His findings may produce ideas on how to reduce future conflicts related to oil palm development. In Thailand, Rawee Thaworn, from RECOFTC's Thailand program, hopes that the lessons learned from his research on a dispute over land allocation will help influence the development of forest policy in his country. Researchers from China, Cambodia and Lao PDR are also involved.

In all six countries where the studies will be conducted, as across much of Asia, a process to increasingly devolve forest management to communities is underway. However, although communities are being granted rights to manage local forest resources, there are still many constraints that prevent them from [actually exercising them](#). Through synthesizing and sharing the lessons learned from the case studies, RECOFTC will help to inform national and regional policy-making processes in the hope that future conflicts can be prevented or mitigated. This learning will also help inform RECOFTC's [NRM conflict capacity building program](#).

The project will build the skills of the researchers, most of whom have spent years working with communities but are new to the specialization of conflict research. RECOFTC will provide mentoring support throughout the research process, from study design, data collection, case study writing through to ensuring their specific findings reach national policy-makers and other targeted audiences.

The project was launched with an inception workshop held at RECOFTC's Bangkok headquarters in May, where the researchers and mentors met to discuss and plan the research, overview the conflict cases to be investigated, and learn some new research skills and tools.

Please visit the [project homepage](#) for further information or contact Dr. Yurdi Yasmi, Senior Program Officer: [yurdi@recoftc.org](mailto:yurdi@recoftc.org) or visit the RECOFTC website: [www.recoftc.org](http://www.recoftc.org)