



Reducing Conflict through Co-Management

Lessons Learned from Tram Chim National Park, Vietnam

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Key message:

To avoid conflict and succeed in forest protection, managers of protected areas need to recognize the rights of local people to harvest forest products for subsistence, and facilitate their participation in planning processes.

Introduction

Conservationists world-wide are moving away from advocating exclusive protected areas to an acceptance that resource-dependent communities around them form part of the ecosystem (McElwee 2010). Strict separation between preservation and use is no longer considered suitable, particularly for population-dense countries such as Vietnam.

Protected area management in Vietnam focuses on enforcement to stop the exploitation of forest resources. Until recently, Vietnamese law prohibits the collection of any forest products from special-use forests even if the conservation impact was low. This was not good news for millions of people living near Vietnam's 2.3 million hectares of protected areas, who rely on these resources for livelihood support. Local communities bear the cost of protecting natural areas, through the loss of legal access to resources, and this causes tensions and open conflict with authorities.

This brief argues that some access to protected area resources is possible, provided it is carefully controlled and involves local people. A participatory wetland conservation project has been trialed in Tram Chim National Park (TCNP) in the Plain of Reeds, Mekong Delta, Vietnam. This has involved extensive consultation with local people to allow the legal use of some resources in a controlled manner within specified areas. Recognition of people's rights to harvest forest products for subsistence, and facilitation of their participation in the design of management actions, has greatly relieved tensions between the local people and Park authorities and has improved Park management through better cooperation.



Conflicts in Past Management of TCNP

TCNP was designated as a special-use forest and wetland conservation area in 1998; it is governed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) under the Law on Forest Protection and Development, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment under Decision No. 109/2003/CP on the conservation and sustainable development of wetlands. Its mandate is to preserve the wetland biodiversity of this last remnant of the Plain of Reeds. Tram Chim is home to approximately 200 species of birds, of which 16 are globally significant, especially the Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone sharpie*), which migrates here in the dry season.

Legally, the TCNP authority had responsibility for day-to-day management, overseen by the Provincial People's Committee and the District People's Committee. The Park authority is also accountable to MARD and other Government agencies. This governance arrangement precluded involvement of local people – direct stakeholders – in park management, and was highly centralized and bureaucratic.

Consequently, local people called the Park 'Rù'ng Câm' or 'forbidden forest' and did not consider themselves to be stakeholders in its conservation. Vu Thi Nhung (2004) reports that about 90% of households surrounding the Park did not understand the purpose of the protected area, and 94% said it did not bring any benefits to their lives. The lack of incentive posed a challenge to achieving greater participation from communities as a way to build their feeling of stewardship of the Park and its resources.

In 2008, 60% of the population surrounding TCNP was classified as poor, with 3,374 poor households located in villages directly adjacent to the Park boundaries (TCNP 2010a). For most users, income from forest products harvested from the core zone (mostly fish and vegetables) fills gaps and complements other income sources in times of need, rather than being a steady income source.

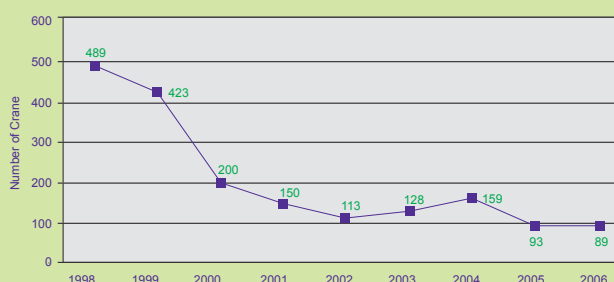
This exclusionary management approach did not work well in TCNP either to protect forests and biodiversity or to stop illegal and unsustainable resource use (TCNP 2010b). In fact, it led to the rapid degradation of resources (Figure 2) due to pressures from surrounding communities – approximately 95% of arson incidents were committed by local people, either for rapid resource extraction or to distract the Park authorities from illegal activities (Nguyen and Wyatt 2006). There was also little coordination for socio-economic development among local people in order to mitigate such pressures on the Park (Vu 2004).

Considering this background, the idea of a participatory project to serve poverty alleviation, wetland conservation, good governance, and conflict avoidance was suggested. This initiative was carried out with support from the CARE subproject of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation Program (2006) and WWF-Coca Cola (2008-2010).



Figure 1: (left) Location of TCNP

Figure 2: (below)
Decrease in Sarus Crane Numbers in TCNP, 1998 to 2006





Co-Management for Avoiding Conflict and Improving Conservation

Since 2008, the co-management pilot in TCNP allowed groups of participants to develop their own Natural Resource Management Plans following a set of guidelines provided by the Park authorities utilizing local knowledge. Participants then negotiated their plans with a review committee (community representatives, Park and local authorities) to ensure sound democratic practice as well as environmental sustainability. Specific locations, fishing methods, harvesting periods, and quotas were determined. Given that the Park holds executive rights over the plan, there were negotiations to ensure that local resource users benefited significantly from participation. Through this process, an improved level of understanding of the benefits of conservation was achieved among participants, as well as an acceptance of measures such as harvesting quotas and seasonal effects.

Legal access to the Park and its resources provides essential income for the local poor and acts as a safety net against impoverishment when other forms of income are unavailable, such as in the flood season when agricultural activities are impossible. In 2009, after two years of co-management, participating poor households received VND30,000 to 50,000 (US\$10 = VND205,100) for a single fishing day (TCNP 2010). Each participating household received additional income of VND1.3 million per month (Lai 2011). The success of the program encouraged the Park to expand the co-management areas from 720 to 900 hectares in 2010. A survey conducted in July 2010 showed that 63% of 120 interviewees, including some who were not actively participating in co-management, supported its implementation for poverty alleviation and to control pressure on the Park's resources.

Table 1: Harvests from TCNP under Co-management

Harvests/person day (2009)		Total (2009)
Fish	2.1 kg	12,526 kg
Grass for fodder	260 m ²	150,600 m ²
Vegetables	9.1 kg	6,209 kg
Snails	56.2 kg	18,587 kg
Dead wood for cooking	1.4 <i>thuoc</i>	2,155 <i>thuoc</i>

Source: TCNP (2010a).

Chavalit (2006) estimated the fish stock in TCNP to be about 2,500 tons per year. At maximum sustainable yield, the Park's ecosystem could support a harvest of 50 tons of fish annually. The current harvesting figure is around 12,500 kilograms of fish per year (Table 1), so there is potential to expand the benefit to more poor families. However, annual fish trends must be evaluated and the quota adjusted to suit environmental conditions. This year, the water levels in the flood season were particularly low, partly due to upstream dams, resulting in a low fish stock. Local people could monitor fish stocks as part of Park management.

Co-management has promoted understanding of the Park's biodiversity value and resources, opened up communications between the local people and authorities, and reduced conflict through improved relationships. Since implementation, a reduction in forest fires has been observed, due to reduced arson attacks and the collection of grass and dead wood in piloting areas, thus reducing fuel load (TCNP 2010). Further, the number of cases of fishing via electrocution, recorded by the management board, has declined considerably.

This negotiated access to Park resources is not opening up new areas to exploitation – it simply regulates what is already happening and provides transparency. This arrangement allows local people and authorities to work together towards conservation goals, and has led to greater compliance on the part of the local people with management regulations that they have helped to formulate, reducing work for local and Park authorities.

Linking Grassroots Democracy and Natural Resource Management

Park management today recognizes the rights of local people to harvest forest products from pilot areas for subsistence, and facilitates their participation in the design of management actions. The TCNP example demonstrates that the role of local people in the management of protected areas needs to be recognized in Vietnam's policy framework, particularly the need for allowing some harvesting of forest products and involvement in management actions. Decision 178/2001/QD-TTg and Decree 117/2010/ND-CP are important steps in this direction, but further action is essential when benefit sharing mechanisms are piloted and scaled up. The requirements and implementation will be different for each national park according to its ecology and specific pressures on resources, but the lessons learned in TCNP are likely to be pertinent to many cases.

The Government should consider amending the Law on Forest Protection and Development and the Biodiversity Law, which presently prohibit exploitation of forest resources in protected areas. Exemptions to allow activities under a Natural Resource Management Plan approved by the National Park authority could be agreed. This would also promote empowerment of local communities to conserve their traditional knowledge and skills in the management of natural resources, and to communicate this information to Park authorities.

Insights from co-management in TCNP have the following policy implications:

- The Forest Protection and Development/Biodiversity laws should include requirements for local people to be involved in management decisions. This supports the democratic participation policy, creating linkages between democracy and conservation laws in Vietnam.
- The Forest Protection and Development/Biodiversity laws should allow actions under an approved Natural Resource Management Plan.
- The implementation of Decree 117 should support the development of specific benefit-sharing mechanisms that allow local people to use forest products essential for their subsistence and facilitate their participation in the design of management actions.
- The Government's democratic participation policy (Decision No. 29/1998/N-CP and Ordinance 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11), which allows local people to exercise their right to be informed and consulted and to participate in decision-making processes, could be extended to specifically include natural resource management and local communities.

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