

Rights to Land, Trees, and Forest Products by Women and the Poor in Rural Vietnam

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, Vietnam has been embarking upon an ambitious national plan to move from a socialist to a market economy. One cornerstone has been to allocate long-term property rights to households, including privatizing much forestry land through the issuance of household land tenure certificates (LTCs, also known as 'red books'). Although previous commentators on women's rights to land under this new system have noted the need to include women's names, along with their husband's, on household LTCs (Tran Thi Van Anh 1995), what has previously been unnoticed in Vietnam is how women may be losing *de facto* rights to unallocated or common lands, which are now being privatized at a rapid rate. Women in marginal areas, particularly areas with limited wet rice land, often depend on common lands for the collection of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) for both subsistence and market purposes, including wild fruits, medicinal plants, and leaves to make brooms and conical hats. Previously, these products had been collected freely by women and children. Now, as common and open forest lands are being divided up and privatized, women are losing their access to these products, primarily because common lands are being privatized and planted with timber and pulp crops. Government reforestation policies have traditionally favored exotic fast growing timber species, which are usually planted and harvested by men. This has the end result of not only denying income opportunities to women, but making the lands less biologically diverse.

Forest Resources in Vietnam

From 1943 to 1995, Vietnam went from 14.3 million hectares (ha) of forest to 8.25 million ha of forest (FIPI, 1996). It is believed that Vietnam has been losing about 200,000 ha of natural forest cover yearly since then—a deforestation rate of 2.4% per year. While it is currently estimated that forest continues to cover 28% of the land area of Vietnam, only about 1% of that is undisturbed natural forest (Ogle, et al., 1998). As a result of the continuing attention to deforestation, reforestation has become a concern of the government. There have been several national initiatives since 1992 to reforest large areas of the country. According to the government, since 1992, Vietnam has replanted more than 2.2 million ha of forests. With these seeming successes in hand, in 1998 the government embarked on an ambitious nationwide plan to plant 5 million ha of forest, such that by 2010 the total forest area of the country will have reached 14.3 million hectares (equivalent to the figures on forest cover present in 1943). The National Five Million Hectare Reforestation Program (5MHRP), as it is called, has received support in the area of \$250-300 million US (MARD, 2001). The explicit goals of the 5MHRP are not only environmental, but also economic. The government hopes to increase legal domestic wood exploitation to 2 million m³ a year, of which 85% is supposed to come from plantation forests (Brown, et al., 2001).



Map 1. Map of Vietnam, showing field site area, Ha Tinh Province, in red

Field Site

This study took place in the buffer zone of the Ke Go Nature Reserve (KGNR), in Ha Tinh province, north central Vietnam. KGNR was established in December of 1996 with a total area of 35,301 ha. The reserve was established to protect a bird biodiversity hotspot, the Annamese Lowlands Endemic Bird Area, home to two endangered species of pheasant (the Vietnamese pheasant, *Lophura hatinhensis*, and the Imperial Pheasant, *L. imperialis*). Prior to this designation, Ke Go was the site of logging by 4 different State Forest Enterprises (the logging companies owned by the socialist state). The topography of the reserve is mostly low hills with elevations between 100 and 500 meters. To date, 46 species of mammals, 270 species of birds, and 562 species of plants have been recorded for Ke Go (Le Trong Trai, 1996). Approximately 40,000 people live in the buffer zone of the reserve

Methods

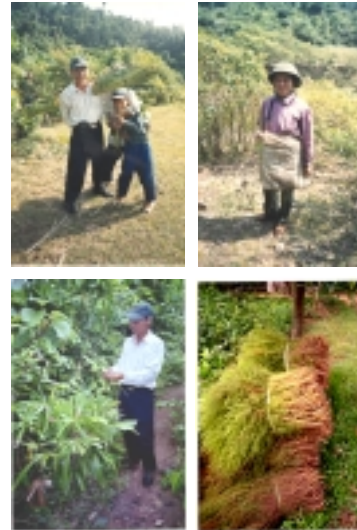
I conducted two large household surveys in the buffer zone of Ke Go, interviewing over 300 households total (200 HH in a survey on fuelwood in March-May 2001 and 104 HH in a survey on NWFP collection and income in June-Sept 2001). I also conducted group meetings and focus groups in 11 villages in 3 communes in the buffer zone of park from Nov. 2000 to October 2001. I worked closely with several elderly villagers to obtain oral histories of the area. I made numerous trips into the Ke Go forest to look at forest product collection. For each different type of forest product collected from Ke Go (palm leaves, medicinal plants, wildlife, timber, rattan, etc), I conducted focus groups with collectors, and in-depth interviews with knowledgeable people, such as village medicine men. I also interviewed local traders and those who worked at the provincial markets dealing with forest-based products. I supplemented these village interviews with interviews with KGNR rangers and management board staff, and other provincial and district policymakers.

Forest products gathered in Ha Tinh

There are several main types of forest products gathered in the villages surrounding the Ke Go Nature Reserve. Timber is the most important, monetarily. Fuelwood and charcoal also contribute significantly to incomes. Non-wood forest products include a number of groups of species, including rattans, leaves for brooms and crafts, and medicines (see Table 1).

Table 1: Most Important Non-wood Forest Products around Ke Go Nature Reserve

Latin Name	Local Vietnamese Name
Rattans:	
Calamus spp.	May
Dendrocalamus patellaris	Giang
Calamus rudentum Lour.	Song
Rhapis laosensis O. Becc	Heo
Broom Grasses:	
Thysanolaena maxima	La dot
Ormosia spp.	Ranh ranh
Palm leaves to make conical hats:	
Livistona cochinchinensis (BL). Mart.	La non
Medicines:	
Acrocephalus capitatus Benth.	Nhan tran
Streptocaulon juvenens (Lour.) Merr.	Ha thu o
Acorus gramineus Soland	Thach xuong bo
Lindera myrrha (Lour.) Merr.	O duoc
Homalomena occulta (Lour.) Schott	Thien nhien kien



Pictures of Forest Products in Ha Tinh, clockwise from upper right: 1) A palm leaf (*la non*) collector in Cam My, Ha Tinh, holding up a newly harvested petiole 2) Broom grasses (*ranh ranh*) newly cut and waiting to be unbundled and dried 3) *Livistona cochinchinensis*, the source of leaves for conical hats in Vietnam 4) Children often harvest *la non* leaves, as they are easy to find, cut and transport.

Gendered Forest Product Collection

Different forest products are collected by men and women. Men dominate the collection of larger, more distant forest products such as timber and charcoal. Women tend to collect products that are lighter to carry, such as palm leaves and broom grasses. Children are also involved in forest product collection, especially during the summer school vacations, to help their families earn money (see Table 2).

Table 2. Divisions by Gender in Forest Product Collection

Forest Product	Who Collects		
	Men	Women	Children
Timber	X		
Charcoal	X (Burn the wood)	X (Help carry)	
Fuelwood	X	X	X (dry leaves)
Rattan	X		
Medicinals	X	X	
Broom grasses		X	X
Palm leaves for conical hats		X	X
Forest foods/fruits	X	X	X

Rights and Access to Forests:

Forest products can be gathered from one of several locations. The first is the KGNR, but according to Vietnamese law all natural resource exploitation in nature reserves is technically illegal. The second source of forest products is the nearby State Forest Enterprise (SFE), the state-owned logging company. These lands are predominantly plantation lands of pine and provide few forest products other than fuelwood. Another source of lands are private gardens and private hill forests. However, despite aggressive nation-wide land allocation strategies, very little forest land has been allocated to private individuals in this sample survey. Only 5% of the households (out of 200) had 'bare hill' land allocated to them and only 3 households had forest land allocated. The final remaining area for forest product collection are the officially designated 'bare hills' that cover much of the buffer zone of KGNR. 23% of Cam My commune, 34% of Cam Hung commune, and 40% of Cam Son commune in the buffer zone are classified as bare hills, most with scrubby vegetation cover. These 'bare' hills, however, provide a number of NWFPs, in particular broom grasses, fuelwood, and some medicinals.

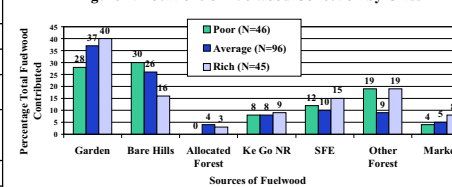
Table 3. Locations for Harvesting Forest Products

Forest Product	Where Harvested From			
	KGNR	SFE	Private forest/garden	Bare Hills
Timber	X			
Charcoal	X	X		
Fuelwood		X	X	X
Rattan	X		X	
Medicinals	X		X	X
Broom grasses				X
Palm leaves for conical hats	X			
Forest foods/fruits	X			X

Access to Forest Products by Income Class:

During a 200-household survey on fuelwood use in the buffer zone of KGNR (10% random sample in half the villages in the 3 study communes), respondents were asked to estimate the quantity of the total household fuelwood collected from different locally recognized land use types. The answers revealed that there are significant differences between rich, average and poor households (classes follow official Vietnamese Government guidelines which are based on local income assessments) in where they were able to access fuelwood supplies. The rich households relied more on private gardens and the market, while the poor, not surprisingly, relied more on 'bare hills' (common lands). The poor had no access to allocated (privatized) forests.

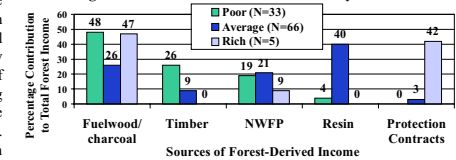
Figure 1. Locations of Fuelwood Collection by Class



Income from Forest Products:

In a 104-household survey on income (20% random sample of five villages), respondents were asked to estimate their yearly income from various forest-based products and services. Surprisingly, overall forest-based income was highest in the 'average' income household. However, this higher figure was based on the fact that the average income households had more access to pine resin-tapping contracts from the SFE and to 'protection payments' from the SFE to guard forest lands from fires and vandalism. The poor had less access to these income sources and relied more heavily on the collection of forest products (particularly fuelwood/charcoal and timber) from the KGNR and from common lands.

Figure 2. Forest Based Income Sources by Class



Obtaining and Losing Access Rights:

As seen in Figure 2, the rich received the most benefit from forests through 'joint-venture management'-type activities through protection payments. The average households received the most benefit from resin-tapping contracts. The poor were left with products on common and state lands. However, these areas are beginning to be allocated through new government programs, which not only provide LTCs to the land but credit and support for reforestation activities on these supposedly 'bare' hills. While only a few farmers have been allocated hill land so far, there are plans to allocate hundreds of hectares of these common lands. The author visited the hill and forest farms of all households in the study area who had been allocated the newly privatized land. In every case, the land had been cleared and replanted with exotic trees, including *Acacia* spp. and *Eucalyptus* spp., as these seedlings are provided at a discount by the same agency doing the land allocation. In each case, when interviewed about who would control these trees, the answer was the husband or male in the household. The common lands, as they shift from common to private control, are not only becoming less biologically diverse, but also are becoming the exclusive preserve of men, who are seen as the proper guardians of *planted* and *timber* trees.

Summary and Conclusions:

The desire to plant plantation forests at the expense of vegetation on bare hills will likely become more widespread as the 5 Million Ha Program expands in coming years. While the person to whom this land has been allocated will likely profit from this conversion, what is not being asked is what benefit the community will receive? There is likely to be no environmental benefit from planting exotics on these hills, as they are already degraded and unlikely to hold much conservation value for the nearby nature reserve. But more importantly, villagers in the area will have lost access to a diverse variety of plant products. These tree planting programs are having a disproportionate impact on the poor, and particularly on women, by enclosing with trees once common lands.

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