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People or the National Park an Ethnography of Forest Devolution in Vietnam

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Abstract

The government of Vietnamese started to implement forest devolution policy in the 1990s by which it shifted the control over the forest from the state to the hand of local villagers. Under the new situation, the bundle of rights over the forest and duration of those rights are substantially expanded. The government expects that by giving villagers more rights in longer duration, villagers would invest more in land and consequently they will receive higher return from their investment. Forest cover thus will increase simultaneously. This paper uses property conceptual framework as a lens to look at access to forest resources in the uplands of Vietnam. It examines changes in property landscape in an upland village located in the buffer zone of a National Park. There have been a lot of changes regarding social unit, property object, legal institutions and property ideology during and after implementation of devolution policy. The implementation of the devolution policy is strongly influenced by global concern about biodiversity conservation, market force on landscape value and local power relations. At local level, those who have access to political power (local elite) are the ones who capture most of benefit from the devolution. By contrast, villagers find themselves in a losing side, having no choice but tie to local elite on a patron-client basis to gain access to cultivated land. Forest then becomes the place for villagers to express their discontent to the local authorities and local elite. Unexpectedly, the implementation of the devolution policy worsens local livelihoods and exacerbates environmental condition.

Keywords: Forest Access, National Park, Vietnam