



Local People versus National Park: Effects of Forest Devolution in the Vietnamese Uplands

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1. Introduction:

The Vietnamese government implemented forest devolution policy in the early 1990s under which it shifted state forestry to household-based management system. This research explores how forest land was contracted between Management Board (MB) of Ba Vi National Park and local Dao (ethnic minority) households in a small upland village.

2. Background: the Park and study village

- The Park was *forbidden forest* in 1977 (2,140 ha). All land above the contour 400 m belongs to *forbidden forest*.
- Ba Vi National Park was established in 1991 (7,377 ha). All land above the contour 100 m belongs to the Park (Figure 1). In principle, livelihood activities within the Park are totally banned. Currently, villagers seriously lack land for cultivation
- Dao households were forced to resettled below the contour 100m. Households' swidden areas were entirely located within the Park territory thus subject to ban.

Figure 1: Present land use pattern in the commune



Note: green color is the area of the Park. The outer red color demarcates commune boundary. Almost all land area within the commune boundary belongs to the Park

3. The land contractual

- MB contracted 536 ha to 15 households in the commune in 1996. Of these 15, six are from the study village.
- In principle, land contracted is used for forest planting and forest protection.

4. Results of the land contractual

4.a Local elites capture the land

All five land recipients are local cadres who worked at the village and/or commune administration (local elites). To grab the land they bribed MB and did not let other villagers know about the contractual. Thus, almost all households were excluded from receiving the land. To gain access to land for cultivation villagers have to tie to local elites and this constitutes a patron-client relationship between two sides. Local elites give villagers land to plant food crops. In return, villagers have to plant softwood trees for local elites and forest trees for MB on the same piece of land. Villagers neither entitle to softwood trees at the time of harvest (Figure 2) nor forest planting fee paid by MB. All benefit is captured by local elites. Villagers' access to the land for cultivation is denied when softwood trees close the canopy as food crops cannot develop under the shadow of the trees.

Figure 2: Harvesting softwood trees of local elites



4.b Conflict among villagers, local elites, MB

- Villagers keep practicing swidden cultivation in the forest regardless of the Park's prohibition (Figure 3)
- Villagers keep tending cattle in the forest (Figure 4)
- Villagers keep cutting timber trees in the forest (Figure 5)
- Villagers keep collecting firewood in the forest (Figure 6)
- Villagers uproot trees to keep access to land for cultivation open

5. Conclusion

- The Park establishment excludes villagers' access to forest land and forest resources. Local livelihoods become precarious
- The way forest devolution policy was implemented creates elite capture and conflicts over access to forest resources.

Figure 3: Swidden cultivation in the Park



Figure 4: Cattle grazing in the Park



Figure 5: Timber confiscated by MB



Figure 6: Firewood cart confiscated by MB

