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Colliding Understandings of Biodiversity Conservation in Vietnam: Global Claims, National Interests, and Local Struggles

CLAUDIA ZINGERLI

Forest Policy and Forest Economics, Institute for Human-Environment Systems, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, Switzerland

In the course of the last decade, biodiversity conservation has become an important policy device in Vietnam's environmental sector. This article provides a political ecology analysis of the ascent and implementation of biodiversity conservation policy in Vietnam and draws on a case study of Ba Be district, located in Vietnam's northern mountain area. It shows how international conservationists and national counterparts were able to create new policy frameworks and to shape and alter the policy contexts in biodiversity-rich places. The article reveals the frictions among international, national, and local interests in biodiversity resources and points at the limits of strict conservation agendas for socially and environmentally meaningful policy outcomes. Only a path toward renegotiation of the current policy context seems able to mitigate further social and environmental pressure.

Keywords biodiversity conservation, development, environmental policy, policy actors, political ecology, protected areas, Vietnam

Biodiversity conservation and the creation of protected area systems have become important policy devices to address biodiversity threats and to prevent further loss in most countries of the world today. Also in Vietnam, conservation efforts have been strengthened considerably toward the end of the 20th century. However, both the concept of biodiversity and the protected area approach are highly contested, especially at the level of implementation. Wilshusen (2003b, 80) for example, remarks that the term biodiversity most often carries little meaning for those who do not work directly in the international conservation arena, and Brown (1998, 76) points out that the concept of biodiversity tends to be problematic both in its application to resource management and specifically in dealing with local, national, and global values and interests. For the most part, international conservation

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Address correspondence to Claudia Zingerli, Institute for Human-Environment Systems, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, ETH Centre HG, Raemistrasse 101, CH-8092 Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: claudia.zingerli@env.ethz.ch

agendas stress intrinsic values and a sense of future existence that carries an ethical, moral, and aesthetic value (Stocking et al. 1995). Often they do not reflect much of the material values ascribed to biodiversity from a resource user's point of view. Similarly, the protected area approach bears many controversies at the different levels of policy debate and implementation (Mulongoy and Chape 2004). It often gives rise to conflicts over resources between local resource users and those involved in nature conservation, nurtured by the fact that many of the biologically diverse rural areas in developing countries are characterized by high levels of poverty, insecure land tenure, and landlessness, as well as unstable or undemocratic political systems (Wilshusen et al. 2003).

The frictions between understandings of biodiversity conservation at the international, national, and local level are key to this article. It adds to a growing body of literature that points at the politics of conservation and the contested nature of biodiversity resources. Recent studies on issues such as the discursive plurality of biodiversity conservation (Bryant 2000) or the social structural elements of power in resource politics (Wilshusen 2003a) show that current approaches to biodiversity conservation, including the development of a protected area system, still feature significant shortcomings. They provide insights into problems of social justice (Fortwangler 2003), coercive dynamics of policy frameworks (Peluso 1993), or new regimes of economic accumulation (McAfee 1999) that often result in further marginalization of poor, resource-dependent people. A recent book by Brechin et al. (2003) suggests that there is a need to create a better understanding of protection and conservation as social and political processes. The authors call for undertaking concerted dialogue and negotiation in the context of a specific intervention that may shape mutually agreeable courses of action for both conservation and human dignity.

This article provides an analysis of the politics of conservation by looking at the case of biodiversity conservation in Vietnam. Since the mid 1990s, biodiversity conservation has become an important policy device. It is considerably linked with the engagement and investment of a financially powerful conservation community that considers the rapidly developing Socialist Republic of Vietnam one of the "hot spots" of biodiversity in Southeast Asia. That the conservation agenda could be established is also related to international obligations that bind the government of Vietnam to fulfill the signed international treaties (e.g. Convention on Biological Diversity). New alliances between international conservationists and the national government have been formed, with consequences for natural resource users at the local level.

In this article, I argue that this change of emphasis in Vietnam's environmental policy and the systematic enlargement of a protected area system increase pressure on resource users in biodiversity-rich places. This creates tensions and frictions between policy actors and resource users at the international, national, and local level. I reconstruct the developments for a specific conservation area and reveal conflicting interests and local struggles. In the sense of creating concerted dialogue I reflect on the potential of renegotiation in order to mitigate environmental policy consequences in Ba Be National Park area and elsewhere.

A Political Ecology Perspective

This article adopts a political ecology perspective on biodiversity conservation politics in Vietnam, where conservation efforts are largely concentrated in protected

areas and national parks. How protected areas become arenas of conflict that result in contested patterns of resource management is a classical theme in political ecology (Zimmerer and Bassett 2003). Some political ecologists seek a better understanding of the politics of environmental change by adopting structuralist explanations of land degradation and environmental change (Blaikie 1994; Bryant and Bailey 1997). They refer to capitalist forces or oppressive state policies and their impact on local people and resources (Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Stonich 1993). Others use poststructuralist approaches and focus more on historical and cultural influences on the evolution of concepts of environmental change and degradation as linguistic and political forces in their own right (Escobar 1996; Leach and Mearns 1996). A commonality of many political ecology studies is that they are often premised on a sense of social justice for environmental explanation and development (Peet and Watts 1996; Forsyth 2003).

In this article, I use a historical and actor-oriented approach to explore the politics of biodiversity conservation in Vietnam (cf. Bryant and Bailey 1997). Its focus lies both on international influences on national policy frameworks and on national policy influences on local resource use. Next to the topic of conflicts in protected areas, it furthers another classical theme of political ecology: the nexus of place and nonplace influence on the environment (Bryant and Bailey 1997). In doing so, it recalls how biodiversity conservation became an important and powerful policy device in Vietnam and shows how different actors with different values of biodiversity get involved in a discursive and material struggle over the use and conservation of the biodiversity-rich mountain environment of Ba Be district (cf. Stocking et al. 1995; Brown 1998). For simplicity, but bearing in mind the variations among the different groups of actors, the key players in this study are characterized as the strong and interventionist central state with its line agencies, the financially powerful international conservation community, and the resource-dependent local communities. The central state generally has a controversial role by simultaneously promoting national goals of socioeconomic development and fulfilling international obligations in the environmental sector. The international conservation community, although equipped with long-lasting experiences in environmental protection and conservation, tends to favor a rather technical landscape ecology approach to biodiversity conservation in the study area, missing out on taking into account concerns and livelihood struggles of local resource users. The resource users, finally, assume a dual role as active modifiers of the natural environment as well as addressees of changing policies and emphases regarding the use, exploitation, and protection of the biodiversity-rich mountain landscape.

I use a structuralist argument that explains how conservationist forces change national policies and how they impact on local people and the natural resources. For the latter, this structural change may be for the better, as strategies of resource rehabilitation and long-term conservation take pressure from them. However, for local communities this change tends to be oppressive, in the sense that it increases pressure to alter agricultural practices and seek alternative livelihood opportunities. Especially for poorer groups in village communities, this may result in further marginalization and, in the case of disregarding the new conservation policy, a criminalization of their resource use practices (cf. Peluso 1992).

To some extent, I also use a poststructuralist argument and the concept of power as implicit element of the study. I provide explanation for relationships and the establishment of a status group that legitimizes specific approaches to resource use

and conservation (cf. Apthorpe and Gasper 1996; Bryant and Bailey 1997). Depending on the political influence of different status groups, some of their agendas get translated into policy programs and shape policy implementation and the enforcement of rules and regulations, sometimes to the exclusion of others (cf. Wilshusen 2003a). According to this second line of argumentation, the notion of agency of different groups and group conventions is explored.

Data for this study were gathered during field research in Vietnam, carried out between August 2000 and June 2001 and during a follow-up visit in May 2002. Most of this time was spent in three villages, located in the core and buffer zone of Ba Be National Park in Bac Kan province, northeastern Vietnam. During the entire time my female research assistant, responsible for translations from Vietnamese into English language and vice versa, accompanied me. We conducted 185 unstructured and semistructured interviews with local resource users (88.6%) and local authorities, National Park staff, forest protection staff, agricultural and rural development officers, and international nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff (11.4%). Additionally, we recorded oral histories, carried out a baseline survey, conducted focus group discussions, and participated in daily economic and social activities. Semistructured interviews and oral histories were tape-recorded and transcribed by my assistant. On average the interviews had a duration of 45 min, with a range between 30 min and 2 to 2.5 h. I complemented interview data from the field with nonlocal sources, including 20 interviews with national government officials, development experts, project consultants, and scientists, as well as general statistics, policy documents, and academic literature. This article adds to a theme first explored in my dissertation on "Vietnam's Mountain Problematique" (Zingerli 2003).

The Ascent of Biodiversity Conservation in Vietnam

During the last three decades, Vietnam has gone through dramatic and rapid economic and social change (Liljeström et al. 1998). The economic renovation programme (*doi moi*), officially launched in 1986, made an end to the previously relatively closed socialist economy (Dang Phong and Beresford 1998). With the reform program, Vietnam successively makes the transition from a planned economy toward a market economy under state management. The guiding political influence of these reforms emerges from the Vietnamese Communist Party, the only political force in the monoparty regime of Vietnam (Abuza 2001).

With economic reforms and integration into the world market also came integration into international environmental regimes and cooperation with global environmental players. A great number of multilateral and bilateral development agencies and nongovernmental organizations identified Vietnam as a new place to work. Among those working in the green sector, Vietnam's wealth in biodiversity is a big issue. Geographically, Vietnam is characterized by a long coastline and a wide range of latitude and altitude. It bears an unusual diversity of ecosystems, species, and genetic resources (Le Ba Thao 1997). The country has a variety of marine and coastal habitats, inland lakes and rivers, tropical rainforest, monsoon savannah, subalpine scrubland, and two large river deltas in the north and in the south, providing for extensive wetland habitats. These habitats are home to more than 12,000 plant, 5500 insect, 2470 fish, 800 bird, 275 mammal, 180 reptile, and 80 amphibian species (IUCN 1999). Ten percent of the world's mammal, bird, and fish species are found in Vietnam, and over 40% of local plant species are endemic. In recent years,

three large and two small new species of mammals were discovered. Some of them, such as the *Vu Quang* ox (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*) or the large muntjiac (*Megamunticus vuquangensis*), are so different from any currently known species that a separate genus had to be created in the Western classification system. These spectacular discoveries reinforced the global significance of Vietnam's biodiversity. At the end of the 1990s, around 30 international nongovernmental organizations and over 15 bilateral and multilateral agencies engaged in conservation projects in Vietnam (NGO Resource Centre Vietnam 1999; UNDP 1999), revealing that the international community of conservationists is keen to preserve this wealth.

First Vietnamese conservation efforts were already made in the 1960s, when a first national park was established in Cuc Phuong in Hoa Binh province. However, only in 1986 was a National Conservation Strategy developed. It was followed by the National Plan for Environment and Sustainable Development in 1991, the Law on Environmental Protection of 1993, and the National Environment Action Plan and the Biodiversity Action Plan of 1995. The last was developed with support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in collaboration with the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The key organizing agency for the Biodiversity Action Plan implementation is the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment (MoSTE). It is assigned to work closely together with the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) and other implementing agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the Ministry of Fisheries (MoF), and the National Center of Natural Science and Technology (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam 1995). The supporting and implementing agencies attest to a high urgency for biodiversity conservation because many biodiversity resources are threatened by agricultural expansion, encroachment, and exploitation. IUCN (1999) and the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment and the National Environmental Agency (1999) moreover emphasize that the maintenance of biodiversity is essential for the well-being of the ecosystems, which has immediate implications for economic and social well-being. They state that the gene pool is of great economic value and has the potential to make an economic contribution through research and the production of medicines and essential oils derived from plants. In addition, MARD pursues a strategy of ecotourism development, closely linked with the creation of a protected area system. Protected areas and national parks are considered as important tourist destinations for both international and increasing numbers of Vietnamese travelers. The meaning given to biodiversity among these players draws on production values for products that could be commercially harvested in the future and on non-direct-use values such as recreation and tourism (after McNeely 1988).

From this historical point of view, biodiversity conservation strategies for Vietnam have been developed within only a few years. One of my international informants reports that these recent developments have mainly been driven by international obligations of the government. The agreement of the Convention on Biological Diversity, for example, required an expansion of the conservation area from 1 to 2 million hectares. During the last decade, the number of Vietnam's national protected areas has grown to 167, of which 13 are national parks (Vietnam News Agency 2001). My informant points out, however, that there are numerous problems with implementation of biodiversity conservation strategies in the localities. Also, IUCN (1999, 70) stresses that the on-the-ground reality of the protected areas manifests various forms and degrees of human encroachment. All of the

protected areas show signs of degradation by activities such as shifting cultivation, uncontrolled migration, and the unchecked and illegal harvesting of timber, wildlife, and other nontimber forest products, as well as uncontrolled fires. IUCN (1999, 74) finds that national expressions on conservation and environmental protection are typically confined to the lead institutions at the highest level of the state hierarchy. There are few institutional guidelines and financial means for capacity-building and policy implementation in the provinces and districts.

Despite these difficulties, biodiversity conservation has become a powerful concept in Vietnam's environmental sector. By means of the direct intervention competencies of the central state, policy contexts can change very quickly in biodiversity-rich localities, especially when government agencies are supported by international conservation projects. One of the consequences is that biodiversity conservation can outweigh other interests and even national policy objectives, such as socioeconomic development or poverty alleviation. The revaluation of the environment by international and national policy actors then tends to exclude local resource users from decision making concerning the use of natural resources on which their livelihoods largely depend. How this happens and what the consequences are is illustrated with the case of Ba Be National Park in Vietnam's northern mountain area.

Policies and Interests in Ba Be National Park Area

Study Area

Ba Be National Park lies in the northwestern part of Ba Be district in Bac Kan province, northeastern Vietnam. It covers a total area of 23,003 hectares, partly or completely including seven communes with a total population of 18,000 (Statistical Office of Ba Be District 2000). Around 2800 people live in the core zone of the National Park. The area is inhabited by the ethnic groups of Tay, Dao, H'mong, and Viet (or Kinh). Tay and Dao established their permanent villages between the 1940s and 1960s. H'mong and Kinh arrived later, by either spontaneous migration or resettlement programs of the government. In the national socioeconomic assessment, the local population is generally considered as "poor" (UNDP Viet Nam 2004). However, there are distinctive socioeconomic differences within each village community. There are usually four groups. Those who live in good and average conditions achieve rice surplus or rice sufficiency from their own land. They participate in the market system, have permanent houses, and own commodity goods such as motorbikes or boats. The households ranked as poor and very poor do not own enough lowland fields to achieve rice sufficiency. They largely depend on cultivation in upland fields and work on both lowland and upland fields of the better-off households on a wage labour or exchange mode. Poor and very poor have a share of 35% in the studied village communities (Zingerli 2003). Their dependence on upland fields and their lack of off-farm income opportunities make them vulnerable to both environmental and policy change.

From a biodiversity point of view, Ba Be National Park consists of tropical evergreen broadleaf forest on limestone mountain and is one of the few shelters for some of the last populations of highly endangered species of primates, such as the Tonkin snub-nosed monkey (*Rhinopithecus avunculus*) or the François leaf monkey (*Semnopithecus françoisi*), as well as other rare and endangered mammals (PARC Ba Be/Na Hang 1999). The only natural mountain lake of Vietnam enhances the representative

importance for biodiversity conservation of Ba Be National Park. The lake is habitat to about 60 fish species, out of which a great number are endemic.

Originally, the idea of conservation in Ba Be district goes back to the year 1977 when lake Ba Be and its surrounding areas were recognized as cultural, historical, and environmental reserve to protect its landscape and historical sites. When in the late 1980s the already mentioned endangered species and the Vietnamese salamander (*Paramesotriton deloustali*) (Nguyen Van Sang et al. 2003) were sighted the provincial and national government deemed it necessary to strengthen conservation efforts. In 1992, Ba Be became the eighth national park of Vietnam (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam 1993).

Changing Policies

The new focus on biodiversity conservation represents only the latest step in a series of policy changes in Ba Be district and other biodiversity-rich places in the northern mountain areas. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, agricultural reforms marked the end of collective production units and access to formerly restricted areas for agricultural production was provided (Ngo Thi Meh 1995). In the early 1990s, forest management reforms were introduced (Morrison and Dubois 1998), and a little later biodiversity conservation became a prominent policy concept (IUCN 1999). During this period of almost 30 years, economic and environmental concerns have often stood diametrically opposed to each other. Between many of the recent policies conflicts of policy objectives, priorities and strategies have emerged. In the late 1970s, for example, the ratification of Resolution No. 6 was a start signal for household-based decision making in agriculture after years of collective work (Ngo Thi Meh 1995; Watts 1998). The government promoted agricultural expansion, more production output, and terracing and cultivation on marginal areas or sloping land. The resolution provided incentives for agricultural production that involved trade-offs between agriculture and forestry (Morrison and Dubois 1998). ''With Resolution No. 6 we were allowed to reclaim upland fields freely,'' residents of Ba Be National Park area recall. Upland fields played a significant role for the diversification of the production systems and for increasing agricultural output (Pham Quang Hoan 1999). However, this important decision fell together with the creation of the protected area in Ba Be district. Consequently, the protected area around lake Ba Be was modified by intensified agricultural activity. Between 1983 and 1998, the areas of upland fields, open forests, and rice terraces increased significantly by 10 to 17% mainly at the expense of primary and secondary forests (Zingerli et al. 2002).

Agricultural expansion and increase of production output, as promoted in the 1970s and during the 1980s, resulted in environmental change and opposed the idea of a nature reserve. Seeking livelihood security and food sufficiency outweighed any protection measures. Today, the local resource users are officially blamed for deforestation and environmental degradation caused by their ''backward resource use practices,'' ''traditional lifestyles'', and ''little effort for innovation'' (Nguyen Vanh et al. 1995). Hence, policy objectives have changed within a few years only in Ba Be. The government's attempt is now to promote agricultural intensification in the valley floors, forest rehabilitation, and strict biodiversity conservation in protection and special-use forest areas (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam 1998; Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999). Local residents are supposed to alter their resource use practices, to reforest the upland field areas with

endemic forest and fruit trees, and to carry out protection services for the National Park. This means that some of the local families have to give up some of their production areas.

This historical perspective reveals that during decollectivization the biodiversity-rich environment of Ba Be district served as resource provider for the local and national economy, regardless of future environmental consequences, and that the natural resources were exploited at a rapid rate. However, the reforms and the ascent of biodiversity conservation strategies contributed to a revaluation of Ba Be as a biodiversity-rich locality. In the current policy context, local livelihood needs stand at odds with biodiversity conservation objectives.

Colliding Local, National, and International Interests

The current director of Ba Be National Park recalls that the protected area and the National Park in Ba Be district were established to preserve the forest as well as to counteract the general trend of forest destruction ongoing in Vietnam. The chairman of one of the villages located in the core zone reports, however, that the National Park had issued regulations on forest protection but did not do much to enforce them. According to the work program of the National Park staff, activities between 1992 and 1998 were primarily concentrated on constructing a boundary landmark system, protecting and recovering 4000 hectares of forest, improving 22 km of road as well as the electric, water, and communication system, constructing offices and accommodation for staff, moving illegal immigrants out of the park, and settle legal residents in the National Park (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam 1993). In the meantime, the farming households continued to use the resources according to their livelihood needs, including investment in bamboo plantations, crop cultivation in upland fields, and hunting.

It was only when the internationally funded project on Creating Protected Areas and Resource Conservation (PARC) started its activities in Ba Be district that a more rigorous resource conservation management was implemented in Ba Be National Park. The biodiversity conservation program of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and UNDP finances the project. It is implemented by the Forest Protection Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). IUCN and a private consultancy company provide technical assistance at the site level. Other conservation organizations such as Flora and Fauna International have been involved in the project activities by carrying out ecological studies and biodiversity monitoring. PARC is the first GEF/UNDP-funded project to be nationally executed by the government of Vietnam. This mode of execution and implementation will help to ensure that project experience can be applied elsewhere in Vietnam, thus ensuring the replication and sustainability of proven processes, strategies, and models (PARC Ba Be/Na Hang 1999).

When the project started in 1999, PARC Ba Be/Na Hang (1999, 4) assessed that the "threats to biodiversity at this ... site include agricultural encroachment, particularly through the clearance of forests for agriculture, timber exploitation, wildlife hunting, and the unsustainable harvest of minor forest products. Additionally, the loss of vital forest corridors between the larger forest blocks is threatening the long-term survival of regional fauna by inhibiting the genetic flow between separated plant and animal populations." Therefore, the PARC project endeavours to develop

and pilot feasible methods of protecting Vietnam's unique and highly threatened ecosystems. It wants to improve operations capacity in order to efficiently manage and maintain the two adjacent areas of Ba Be and Na Hang, and to reduce external threats to biodiversity through integrating conservation and development objectives and activities at the local level.

The PARC project states that its key focus is to integrate nature conservation and socioeconomic development, to address and link the development needs and aspirations of local communities with nature conservation goals. However, one of the project consultants reports that "socio-economic development is only a means to the end for PARC project. Only where biodiversity is endangered there is a reason for PARC to take measures for socio-economic development . . . Socio-economic issues are considered as supporting factors to ensure conservation. Local communities should respect conservation and mitigate negative impacts on conservation measures." The PARC project therefore seems to have only an instrumental interest in socioeconomic development for biodiversity conservation.

Despite some project activities that involve socioeconomic development of local communities, the cooperation between the local residents, the National Park management board, and the project team has been tense. The PARC project's much stressed participatory approach appears to be merely lip service. Although villagers are repeatedly invited to attend meetings and trainings in the headquarters of the National Park, the attitude toward them is rather paternalistic and top-down. Trainers and officials invited by the PARC project and the National Park typically read rules and regulations to the local people and do not respond to their concerns and petitions. In one such meeting that my assistant and I attended, one of the government officials was directly confronted with a local family's livelihood struggles and the problem of giving up upland fields for resource rehabilitation at the expense of food security of the household. The official responded laconically that it was not in MARD's competence to find solutions to the problems of the local people.

Other incidents, such as the confiscation of all hunting guns of households living in the core zone of the National Park, worsen the relationship between villagers and National Park staff. Some villagers claimed that the compensation payments for the guns were too low and that they feel forced and deprived of their rights to protect their fields and property. A number of them sold the guns in the nearby market places to people who accepted higher prices than the National Park would have paid. The guns have in many cases merely crossed the core zone boundary. The effectiveness of this action is questionable. As our analysis of a series of land-use maps from 1983 to 1998 reveals, encroachment on the core zone of Ba Be National Park from the surrounding buffer zone is a central factor in deforestation and resource depletion inside the National Park's core zone (Zingerli et al. 2002). However, the direct link between core and buffer zone communities has never been appropriately considered in the conservation plans for the National Park, as so far it primarily focuses on managing the core zone.

The concept of biodiversity conservation not only creates conflicts between the internationally funded conservation project, the National Park staff, and local resource users. Discrepancies in understandings and objectives of biodiversity conservation also emerge at the international–national interface. The international on-site technical advisor complains, for example, that the natural resources in Ba Be National Park are generally managed very badly. Although he tries to elaborate an overall natural resource management concept for Ba Be National Park together

with the National Park management board implementation is difficult. The national executives prefer to coordinate their activities according to an investment plan, which typically pursues economic objectives. This includes, for example, the establishment of a tourism infrastructure. The greatest share of the annual budget of the National Park is therefore not spent on protection activities but on the construction of roads and buildings. In this respect, the international counterparts are restricted to the role of advisors only.

How values and interests differ between the national executives and the international conservationists is illustrated by the following occurrence. In the end of 2000, the National Park management board decided to construct a road in the very core zone of the protected area without consulting the PARC project consortium. Construction works started in the beginning of 2001. The road cuts through a very steep, rocky, densely forested slope on the eastern shore of the lake, crosses the river on a suspension bridge at its southern end, runs through a village, and continues on the western lake side to join the road to Cho Don district. The construction of the road reflects fundamentally different motivations between the local policy actors. From a development and tourism point of view, the road provides the much-needed infrastructure for the local communities. It links them with the district town and marketplaces, which were previously only accessible by crossing the lake on small steel boats. From the point of view of the conservationists it is, however, highly controversial and contested. The difficult access to the area around the lake was largely the reason why wildlife and plants had still populated relatively undisturbed niches of Ba Be National Park. Now the road is likely to increase the pressure on resources. It is now possible to easily access the previously undisturbed forest area, and the increased traffic on an important road between two market centres may adversely affect the remaining fauna. It is obvious from such occurrences that a common understanding of the biodiversity conservation concept does not exist in Ba Be National Park area.

The Politics of Biodiversity Conservation in Ba Be

The case of Ba Be National Park area is an example of how a locality is being penetrated by a powerful policy device that is primarily debated in international policy arenas, far from national and local histories and concerns. From this example, four points should be taken a little further to explore the politics of biodiversity conservation in Ba Be.

First, by using a focus on multiscale political economic processes and policy programs (cf. Blaikie 1995; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003), the case of Ba Be recalls the powerful impact of international and national policy ideas for a local policy context in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Despite early Vietnamese attempts to conservation in the protected areas of Cuc Phuong (1962) or Ba Be (1977), biodiversity conservation became a key concept in the environmental sector only during the 1990s and with the assistance of international conservationists. Today, it is strong enough to outweigh other policy objectives. Although the government of Vietnam generally puts great emphasis on national economic development, the socioeconomic development goals are weak in places selected for biodiversity conservation (usually protected areas and national parks). Typically for Vietnam, the interventionist central government can easily allocate national executives in the locality and provide them with political power to enforce a conservation agenda. These places then

become rather isolated from the booming economy of the lowland and industrial centres, and the pressure on people to protect biodiversity resources to serve national and international interests grows enormously. In Ba Be this means that the local development and policy context is almost entirely determined by nonplace interests of biodiversity conservation.

Second, Ba Be is also an example for the formation of a powerful coalition of policy actors that shares specific interests and conventions. Not only does this coalition between international conservationists and national executives operate legitimately in fulfilling international obligations in the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It is also financially well equipped by established global environmental players such as the GEF and UNDP. These structural conditions give them substantial influence in shaping agendas and implementing national policy frameworks. Although empirical evidence shows that the understandings of biodiversity conservation between these two (ideal type) policy players occasionally collide, especially regarding trade-offs between conservation and development goals (e.g. infrastructure and road construction), they form a coalition that bears ideal interests for the environment. From a Neo-Weberian political ecology point of view (cf. Bryant and Bailey 1997, 14), it is the power of agency of this group that shapes and alters the policy and livelihoods context of many, impeding on the agency of less powerful groups, such as the local resource users.

A third point concerns the agency of and opportunities for local resource users. Especially the poorer families in Ba Be National Park are not well served with these policy developments. Although there are program activities for socioeconomic development and nonfarm income generation, such as tourism, transport, handicraft, or protection services, the contributions to the household income are very modest. My informants report that they receive an annual amount of US$5 for carrying out protection services such as patrolling, due to other budget priorities of the National Park management board and the PARC project. However, without assistance the poorer households are not willing or able to make investments for off-farm production. As a consequence, they continue to farm their upland fields and to collect nontimber forest products in the forest. By doing so, some families disregard the conservation policy and risk to become criminals (cf. Peluso 1993). My informants make clear, however, that a process of open criminalization has not yet set in because those who disregard the policy guidelines mostly act in silence. The village community and the local representatives who know their desperate situation from own experiences protect them. Consequently, the conservation policy is indirectly opposed by local resource users due to a lack of alternatives provided.

A fourth point emerging from this case study takes the politics of biodiversity conservation beyond the district of Ba Be. Since the beginning of project operation, the PARC consortium have had the objective to use the Ba Be site as a model for biodiversity conservation to be replicated in other biodiversity-rich places in Vietnam (PARC Ba Be/Na Hang 1999). The same coalition of international conservationists and national executives has already started to operate in a second site in the Central Highlands of southern Vietnam. The here adopted political ecology perspective reveals, however, that this model of biodiversity conservation hampers consultation with local resource users and is not able to treat their agency as a crucial component for successful conservation efforts in the long term. Especially in an area like the Central Highlands, which is characterized by a long history of warfare struggle, sociocultural heterogeneity, and social unrest due to large resettlement projects

of the Vietnamese government (Salemink 2000), the rather technical landscape ecology approach of PARC is unlikely to reconcile conservation and development. Its lack of sensitivity to historical and social conditions bears the risk of nurturing further conflict among the local population and between the national and international policy players promoting biodiversity conservation in other protected area sites in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Drawing on diverse interests and understandings of biodiversity conservation in Vietnam, this article provides an analysis of the politics of biodiversity conservation. It reconstructs the emergence of Vietnam's biodiversity conservation policy and discusses the developments of a specific protected area in the northern mountain area. It shows that in the process of the Vietnamese economic renovation program the country opened up considerably and became more receptive to international policy ideas, such as biodiversity conservation. Because the conservation of Vietnam's biodiversity resources attracts a lot of international interest, the country also experiences an inflow of important financial means. In the interest of commercial and nondirect uses of biodiversity resources, international conservationists and national counterparts formed a new status group that shares a specific intrinsic as well as market-driven conservation interest.

Similar to many other political ecology studies but original for Vietnam, this article reveals that with the arrival of this coalition in the locality the biodiversity resources became politicized and contested among a greater number of policy actors and resource users. The ascent of biodiversity conservation and the penetration of the locality with this, in the context of Vietnam, ''new'' policy device are exemplified in the biodiversity-rich locality of Ba Be. The analysis unravels unequal power relations. There is an influential winning party of national executives and international conservationists, and a losing party of local resource-dependent groups of the communities living in Ba Be National Park. The case study shows that despite the late emergence of the conservation agenda in Vietnam, many shortcomings of conservation efforts experienced in other places and countries could not be prevented. Despite available insights into the common dilemma between conservation and development and rather innovative concepts to conservation, such as Integrated Conservation and Development Projects, a landscape ecology model to conservation and resource protection was applied in Ba Be. It shows a lack of meaningful involvement of local communities in the conceptual planning and implementation processes and largely fails to be receptive for local resource users' concerns in environmental and resource use planning. The model promoted is unaware of the political sensitivity of its conservation agenda. It not only protects species but also contributes to the exclusion and marginalization of the poorer groups of the local population. The lack of receptiveness for local concerns is moreover intensified by weak democratic structures in the localities. A low level of popular participation and inadequate procedures for filing complaints and petitions restrict local resource users from becoming real partners for the powerful status group of national executives and international conservationists. Renegotiation is only to be expected if the conservationists start to show more respect toward local livelihoods or if political and institutional structures start to work in the interest of the local people.

In search of a common ground for cooperation and reconciliation of conservation and development, the political ecology perspective adopted here challenges the powerful status group as well as the political-institutional context of Vietnam in its reform era. It reveals frictions between intrinsic values given to biodiversity resources in the international and national arenas and material values of biodiversity resources in the local context, and calls for finding ways to bridge these values. A conceptual debate involving actors at all levels is necessary to overcome these frictions and to embark on a renegotiation process of conservation and development in Ba Be district in particular, and in the many protected area sites in Vietnam in general. In this situation, efforts should be made to work with more mutual respect and a consciousness for historical and social characteristics of society and place.

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