

Displacement and Relocation Redux: Stories from Southeast Asia

Pamela D. McElwee

INTRODUCTION

THE ISSUES CONCERNING displacement and relocation from protected areas that Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (this issue) describe for India are not confined to South Asia: far from it. These trends are also happening in Southeast Asia, across a range of countries of different political stripes. Policies to impose new parks or strengthen enforcement at existing ones, nationalisation of forest reserves, and implementation of stricter conservation rules on private lands under the guise of biodiversity or watershed management have been resulting in significant relocations and dislocations of people (see Lohmann 1999; Vandergeest 2003a and 2003b; Olivier and Goudineau 2004). In Thailand, for example, more than half a million hill dwellers have been blamed for deforestation and damage to watersheds and threatened with relocation. Smaller scale resettlement projects, such as those around local protected areas, often affect from hundreds to thousands of people every year in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

Because I agree nearly every point with Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (this issue) about the difficulties of resettlement, I focus my response on two issues that I feel bolster their arguments even more. One is a simple question: do we have any evidence that relocation actually has a positive effect on the conservation of protected areas? That is, above and beyond arguments about social justice, marginalisation and fairness, is there any actual empirical evidence that relocation solves the problems that conservationists claim it will? Examples from Vietnam show that in fact relocation does not necessarily provide

Pamela D. McElwee, Assistant Professor of Global Studies, Arizona State University, Coor Hall 5648, PO Box 874802, Tempe AZ 85287-4802, USA.

Address for Correspondence

Pamela D. McElwee, Assistant Professor of Global Studies, Arizona State University, Coor Hall 5648, PO Box 875120, Tempe, AZ 85287-5102, USA.

E-mail: pamela.mcelwee@asu.edu

***Conservation and Society*, Pages 396–403**

Volume 4, No. 3, September 2006

Copyright: © Pamela D. McElwee 2006. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use and distribution of the article, provided the original work is cited.

the grounds for better biological integrity, primarily because relocation of local populations has often entailed their being replaced by other groups – hunters and poachers, immigrants, or other business interests – that have even a greater impact than the people originally moved.

My second argument is related to the first: while resettlement is a ‘solution’ to a perceived localised threat to a protected area, I argue that there is evidence, particularly from Southeast Asia, that blame on internal populations to parks rather than external economic and political threats is misguided. Countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia have long histories of rogue timber companies and cash crop plantations (coffee, oil palm and the like) that often have much greater impact on protected areas than internal local populations. One of the worst examples is an Indonesian plan proposed in 2005 to create a 1.8 million hectare oil palm plantation along the Indonesian–Malaysian border on the island of Borneo, which would virtually swallow up or cut through three national parks: Betung Karihun National Park, Kayan Mentarang National Park and Danau Sentarum National Park (Wakker 2006).

Thus, while Rangarajan and Shahabuddin focus some of their attention on problems of misunderstanding between biologists and social scientists as one major aspect of the problem of relocation, I note that there are often more nefarious processes at work in Southeast Asia, involving far more powerful players than mere park biologists or university social scientists. Resettlement is often used as a tool in Southeast Asia to disempower (often minority or marginalised) local people who occupy valuable lands or strategic places, while empowering stronger actors such as local governments, state agencies, and private development interests. These processes have long existed, but now often come under the name of ‘conservation’. I will demonstrate this with the use of case studies of resettlement in protected areas in Vietnam, where local people were moved out in the name of ‘biological conservation’, while other development interests stepped in with new threats to the park once the people were out of the picture.

The Rise of Conservation (and Resettlement) in Southeast Asia

As was the case in India, many colonial states in Southeast Asia also implemented protected areas strategies for fear of declining resource availability or to preserve resources for exclusive colonial use. However, in Vietnam in particular, the French colonial regime that controlled Indochina between the late 1800s and 1954 left behind no ‘protected areas’, as the British did in many of their colonial possessions. While there had been concern about excessive hunting pressures starting in the early 1900s, it was not until the 1930s that the French planned to set aside some areas of land as ‘hunting reserves’.¹ However, at this time an economic depression was already badly hitting Indochina, which along with WWII, hindered the administration of the reserves, and they were eventually abandoned. Thus, the establishment of protected ar-

was never had a colonial history in Vietnam, as it did in parts of Africa and India.

Historically, central state interest in protected areas can only be traced back to the early 1960s and the personal influence of Ho Chi Minh, an advocate of natural resources conservation. When Vietnam created the first national park in 1962, President Ho Chi Minh personally dedicated Cuc Phuong National Park, one hundred miles south of Hanoi. He said then, 'Forests are gold. If we know how to conserve and use them well, they will be very precious.' Cuc Phuong was Vietnam's first established national park, and since then, over 120 new protected areas have been added. Vietnam now has more than two million ha of land (about 7% of the total land area) in some sort of protected status (ICEM 2003).

Most protected areas are officially to consist of a strictly protected inner core in which almost all anthropogenic activities are banned. Buffer zones that allow for regulated production activities are supposed to be designated as well, but are outside most parks' officially demarcated boundaries. Because so many of Vietnam parks are less than 20 years old, many were drawn up 'creatively' by placing jagged borders that excised out any major human settlements. Yet, in densely populated Vietnam, this has not eliminated the problem of resident people: out of the more than 120 protected areas, only one is believed to have no people at all living in it (ICEM 2003). Because the core zones of most protected area in Vietnam are to have almost no human uses, resettlement plans exist for several parks that have the budgets to propose such plans (these usually include only the larger parks and those funded by foreign conservation organisations). While major resettlement has thus far been limited by funding constraints and a lack of a nation-wide policy on resettlement to only these few parks, two examples of where it has already occurred provide insight into why resettlement is often problematic.

Two Case Studies: Cuc Phuong and Cat Tien

The one major relocation programme that has already been adopted was in Cuc Phuong National Park in the years 1985 to 1990. The government ordered the resettlement of all families living in the central valley of the park, involving about 1000 ethnic minority (Muong and Dao) people, who had lived there long before the park was established. The impetus for the resettlement was the swidden (slash and burn) agriculture that the minorities practised, which was considered a threat to the biological integrity of the park. One of the more interesting justifications for the resettlement was that the Muong people were prosperous enough to be able to survive relocation, and that they were prosperous precisely because they were 'poaching' off park resources. A consultant to the relocation project wrote that 'In fact the Muong people living in the park are very privileged in comparison with other peasants in the country. Besides the normal benefits from agriculture they have additional profit from il-

legal hunting, unlimited free fuelwood, timber for selling and unlimited pasture land for their cattle' (Szaniawski 1987). However, the local people themselves argued against resettlement in cultural, not material, terms, and forcibly resisted the resettlement: 'They affirmed that they (unlike some of the more recent settlers) had lived on the Cuc Phuong site long before the National Park was established and that it was the land of their ancestors.' (Phuong and Dembner 1994). Despite the resistance, resettlement did take place and those moved were provided with some limited compensation in the form of a one-time cash payout, a newly prepared village site outside the park, timber for reconstruction, seeds for new fields, and one year's supply of food.

The state considers the move a success: the Ministry in charge of parks claims that 'forest was rehabilitated quickly, living conditions of people after removing to buffer zone area were improved positively, some of the households even became wealthy. In short, both economic conditions as well as cultural and spiritual conditions of the residents were much improved' (MARD 1997). This conclusion does not seem to have been based on any social or biological survey, however. In a recent report based on interviews of resettled residents, households reported that there was 'insufficient food in the new location and access to food within the national park had been much better'. The authors of the survey noted that 'People resettled from the park had previously subsisted on forest resources, were unused to agricultural pursuits, had little knowledge of agricultural techniques and land in the resettlement areas was not fertile enough for successful cultivation. People have low levels of education and there has been little investment in the area to assist local people to find any alternative means of survival.' (Rugendyke and Son 2005).

As noted earlier, once people are resettled out of the park, they are often replaced by new threats. There is no better example than what happened in Cuc Phuong after the Muong were moved out. In 2000, the government decreed that a new national highway running north to south linking Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City would be built, and that it would need to bisect Cuc Phuong National Park. The road was planned to run straight through some areas of the park that had previously been 'saved' by the relocation of Muong villages. Despite opposition from park managers, environmentalists and even some politicians, the plan was approved and construction of a national highway is in progress. The irony is that an alternative option of running the road around the park was rejected, because that would have necessitated expensive resettlement of 900 mostly Vietnamese households (Reuters 2001).²

Another major resettlement project that has been in the works for years and is slowly being carried out is at Cat Tien National Park (CTNP), the only known habitat of the Javan rhinoceros outside of Indonesia. More than 9,000 people lived within the official park boundaries as of 2003, including indigenous minorities (Xtieng and Ma) and in-migrants, the latter of whom are both ethnic Vietnamese and other non-indigenous ethnic groups. Another 180,000 people lived in the buffer zone. A joint project was proposed by the Cat Tien

authorities and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 2003, called the 'Integrated Boundary Re-Demarcation and Resettlement Action Plan', which would redraw the boundaries of the park to exclude some communities while also implementing a plan to resettle at least 1000 more. WWF project officials noted of the plan that:

'At a time when community-based conservation initiatives are becoming increasingly prominent, the plan to draw a clearer divide between humans and nature at CTNP was deemed both necessary for conservation and socially appropriate in this particular context... Resettlement, in particular, was promoted as an important socially appropriate option for conservation based on the parks' critical conservation status, preliminary acceptance of local communities, and consistency with Vietnamese legal and institutional contexts.' (Morris and Polet 2004: 2–3).

The resettlement plan was based on concern that the park was highly fragmented, having been cobbled together from lands in three different provinces, and there was fear that rhinos could not move freely throughout the area with human settlements blocking the way.

The WWF stated that its involvement in resettlement was to be based on principles of fair compensation, open discussion, and voluntarism, and that it would follow the World Bank's operational guidelines on resettlement for the move. Yet the project ran into considerable problems as it was managed by provincial authorities, not the WWF, who found their influence more limited once they had provided some money for the move. In fact, the Dong Nai provincial authorities had previously tried to resettle some of the indigenous villagers under a different national plan to reduce shifting cultivation in the 1990s, but almost all of the villagers had left the old resettlement site to return to the forests around Cat Tien. One Ma man in a scheduled resettlement village said to a reporter about the re-move, 'Better to be struck dead immediately and die here! If we go down [to the resettlement site] people don't know how to make a living.' A Xtieng minority woman expressed her disappointment with the government's position by saying, 'In the past, Xtieng people still lived here the way we do, so why did we have thirty-seven rhinos as well? And now if we use whatever we need, what effect does that have on the rhinos?' (Nhat 1999). The complaints that the indigenous people expressed that they were being targeted while their actions had little effect on rhinos or the park were to some degree backed up by the fact that a 2002 survey of park violators (those who had been caught by forest rangers hunting or extracting within the park) found that 85% of violators were ethnic Vietnamese immigrants, while only 2% were Ma and 4% Xtieng (Morris et al. 2004).

Throughout the discussions surrounding the Cat Tien resettlement project, it appears that little attention was paid to the fact that the landscapes surrounding and in the park had become highly fragmented as a result of state

development plans to grow cashews and coffee in the area, as well as by past logging by the government, not just by the agriculture of the Ma and Xtieng. After the Vietnam War, the area had been designed an economic development zone and there were high rates of government sponsored in-migration. Army veterans in particular had been urged and subsidised to move to the Cat Tien area to work on state cashew and timber plantations. However, once the Javan Rhino was re-discovered in the park in the 1990s, conservation rather than development became the new mantra. Yet in the end, rather than targeting the nearby state production lands or migrant Vietnamese park violators, it was primarily indigenous villages that were targeted for resettlement instead. The irony is that if the move goes ahead, the Ma and Xtieng minorities who have lived there for centuries could be forced to move, only to be potentially replaced by Vietnamese pioneers who know little about forest management and can be expected to deforest to plant cash crops, as they have done in other parts of the province.

There are numerous other examples from Vietnam where resident locals (often indigenous peoples) were either excluded from park resources or 'quasi-resettled' only to be replaced by others. 'Quasi-resettlement' occurs when people are not directly asked to relocate, but rather are slowly squeezed out economically when their lands are swallowed up into a park. For example, around the Song Thanh Nature Reserve in central Vietnam, indigenous Katu have been losing their traditional hunting and forest product collecting grounds as reserve borders are increasingly being enforced (field interviews, 2005). At the same time that the Katu are being excluded, recent reports indicate that large numbers of ethnic Vietnamese hunters, many from the city of Danang or even further away, have moved in and are bribing guards to let them work, while in another part of the reserve a gold mining company has been given a license by the province to operate. Additional freelance immigrant gold miners have joined the rush. Park rangers often turn a blind eye to these hunters and gold miners because they can be bribed to do so, while the Katu who enter the park to obtain subsistence goods do not have the cash to pay the guards. The Katu then become the target of interdiction, and perhaps further resettlement in the future.

Resettlement Results

Despite the conventionality of the use of resettlement as tool to solve conflicts between human uses of landscapes and conservation, studies of the effects of resettlement – both on resettled peoples and on park habitat after resettlement – are surprisingly scarce. While the common conservationist wisdom is that resettlement reduces conservation threats, there is surprisingly little evidence to support this claim, echoing the concerns raised by Rangarajan and Shahabuddin. In general, resettlement in Vietnam is usually underfunded, poorly planned, and often targeted at the weakest people, not the ones with the

biggest conservation impact. There is little evidence that even when resettlement is approached in a more open and better funded way (as the WWF hoped the Cat Tien plan to be) there still are problems with guaranteeing free and informed consent and compensation in a country plagued by corruption and one-party rule. The lack of a national policy setting levels of compensation for protected area resettlement complicates the matter, and rumours of resettlement can circulate for years while money for compensation is cobbled together from various sources. Planning resettlement in this way can be even more detrimental to park management as it discourages long-term resource management by local people, who may choose to overexploit the area if they know they will be forced to leave in the future. And as I have noted, removing one set of people often allows another in, particularly in places with weak enforcement, poor ranger training, and high levels of corruption. These problems are particularly acute in Vietnam, but they complicate park management in most countries of Southeast Asia.

There are other problems affecting protected areas that are equally complicated, yet often ignored in discussions of threats. These include wildlife poaching and illegal timber cutting by the very authorities in charge of parks, a huge problem that many conservation organisations have not been able to tackle. One particularly egregious example was exposed in 1999 in the province of Binh Thuan, where thirty-six defendants were accused of 'violating forest protection rules, irresponsibility, corruption and illegally stockpiling military weapons' (Huong 1999). The gang reportedly cut down 53,429 m³ of trees – with a value of 1.6 million U.S. dollars – in various wildlife sanctuaries and protected forests with the tacit co-operation of local authorities. Twenty-nine district and provincial officials were eventually under indictment, including the former deputy director of the provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry. If twenty-nine out of thirty-six defendants in this case were government officials, it is easy to see the greatest threat to protected areas is often not local people, but rather high level, often well-organised criminal activity linked with official corruption.

As Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (this issue) note, the simple fact is that resettlement often does not solve the social and biological pressures on protected areas. Much resettlement in Vietnam and elsewhere is predicated on the belief that local people are the main threats while in reality, the situation is much more complex. Large political and economic pressures on natural resources threaten protected areas as much or more so than the subsistence action of local residents, and I urge further research on comparative cases like South Asia and Africa to the Southeast Asia examples I have used here. There is a phrase in Vietnamese that is apt for this dilemma: *Lo ha ra lo hong*, or 'to block the little hole while the big hole still exists' Continuing to blame local people for conservation pressures while ignoring the often larger threats of roads, hunters, miners, migrants, logging companies and corrupt officials is a perfect example of this problem.

Notes

1. Documents from the Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer (CAOM), Aix-en-Provence, France: RST NF #02925, 'Plans des réserves temporaires de chasse des provinces de Bac Giang, Ha Dong, Hai Duong, Lao Cai, Ninh Binh, Phu Yen, Phu Tho, Son Tay, Thai Nguyen, Vinh Yen, Cao Bang', 1935; RST NF #2926, Letter from the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin to all provincial chiefs, 17 Sept 1935.
2. Resettlement and dislocation from infrastructure projects are covered under a national policy which dictates set levels of compensation, but resettlement from protected areas is not covered by the safeguards under this policy and is done on an ad hoc basis by each park. Resettlement from dams and roads is almost always considerably higher than payments for environmental dislocation as a result.

REFERENCES

- Huong, L. 1999. 'Ngay Thu 3 Xet Xu Vu an Pha Rung Tanh Linh (day three of the trial of the case of deforestation in Tanh Linh).' *Lao Dong [Labor] Newspaper*, Hanoi, April 5:1.
- ICEM. 2003. *Vietnam: National Report on Protected Areas and Development*. Review of Protected Areas and Development in the Lower Mekong River Region. International Centre for Environmental Management, Queensland, Australia.
- Lohmann, L. 1999. *Briefing 13 - Forest Cleansing: Racial Oppression in Scientific Nature Conservation*. The Cornerhouse, Dorset.
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). 1997. *Review Report on Planning, Organization and Management of Special Use Forest*. MARD, Cuc Phuong National Park.
- Morris, J. and G. Polet. 2004. Is Resettlement an Option for Equitable Conservation? A Case for the Boundary Re-Demarcation and Resettlement Plan at Cat Tien National Park in Southern Vietnam. Paper presented at conference 'People in Parks-Beyond the Debate: Achieving Conservation in Human-Inhabited Protected Areas'. Yale University, April 2-3, 2004.
- Morris, J., G. Polet and N.D. Son. 2004. *Park Violations in Cat Tien National Park and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Violators*. Cat Tien National Park Conservation Project Technical Report No. 51.
- Nhat, A. 1999. Song Cung Te Giac (living together with the Rhinoceros). *Lao Dong [Labor] Newspaper*, July 7 and July 9 1999:6.
- Olivier, E. and Y. Goudineau. 2004. Planned resettlement, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma in Laos. *Development and Change* 35(5):937-62.
- Phuong, N.N. and S. Dembner. 1994. Improving the lifestyles of people living in or near protected areas in Vietnam. *Unasylva* 176.
- Reuters. 2001. Vietnam's new highway may cut through Reserve. *Reuters Newswire*, Hanoi, Oct 29.
- Rugendyke, B. and N.T. Son. 2005. Conservation costs: Nature-based tourism as development at Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 46(2):185-200.
- Szaniawski, A. 1987. Assistance to Strengthen Cuc Phuong National Park. Field Document No. 4., Tropical Forestry Action Plan-FAO, Hanoi, Vietnam.
- Vanderveest, P. 2003a. Land to some tillers: Development-induced displacement in Laos. *International Social Science Journal* 55(1):47-56.
- Vanderveest, P. 2003b. Racialization and citizenship in Thai forest politics. *Society and Natural Resources* 16(1):19-37.
- Wakker, E. 2006. The Kalimantan Border Oil Palm Mega-Project. Milieudéfensie – Friends of the Earth Netherlands and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC), Jakarta.