
Legal and illegal logging in Vietnam

Illegal logging is rampant in Vietnam. Vietnamese newspapers frequently report on new logging scandals. A few examples from last year illustrate the point. In January, the People's Army Newspaper ran a story about the arrest of "notorious timber trader" Nguyen Van Hung. In June, Labour Newspaper reported that railway guardsmen had stopped the transportation of illegally logged timber on a train. And November saw the conclusion of the biggest ever illegal logging case in the central highlands. Pioneer reported that Kon Tum People's Court convicted 19 people, including 10 government officials, of illegal logging and giving and receiving bribes.

Pamela McElwee, a PhD student from Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, has researched illegal logging in Vietnam for several years. In a recent article, "You say illegal, I say legal", she discusses some of the issues raised by illegal logging in Vietnam.

McElwee compares large illegal timber operations with the "small actions of hundreds of thousands of local loggers desperate for timber". She explains that although the state often blames local people for deforestation, in fact the state itself has "significantly contributed" to the problem.

When the government nationalised the country's forests (in the mid-1950s in North Vietnam and after the reunification of the country in 1975 in the south) it handed them over to State Forest Enterprises. "Vast stretches of Vietnam's highlands were logged by the state, not local people, until they were completely bare," writes McElwee.

McElwee refers to a 1989 review of the operations of the Easup Forestry-Agriculture-Industry Union. Formed in 1979 in Dak Lak province in the central highlands, the Union was intended to support 200,000 people, organised into villages with names like "Green Forest Town". More than 20,000 people moved from lowland areas to work for the logging company. The Union logged timber worth US\$2-3 million a year and after ten years it had logged about half the standing volume of wood surveyed in 1979. McElwee concludes that the Union's logging caused major changes in the province, including "high rates of lowland-to-upland migration, loss of indigenous minorities' land rights, and expansion of wet-rice agriculture in areas more suited for shifting cultivation given low irrigation levels and highly variable soils and inclines."

In addition to having logged large areas of the country's forests, the state seems unable or reluctant to deal with illegal logging. McElwee describes how a gang of illegal loggers in Yen Bai, in northern Vietnam, used dynamite to build permanent roads into the forest and even marked the trees they wanted to log, apparently without fear of prosecution.

Illegally logged timber in Vietnam is transported on trucks, trains and even Vietnam Airlines aeroplanes. "These types of connections indicate that the people involved are not small-scale operators, but rather powerful figures with wide webs of smuggling networks," notes McElwee.

The Forest Protection Department, which polices illegal logging in Vietnam, is often involved with State Forest Enterprises in illegal logging. With salaries for Forest Protection staff as low as US\$30 a

month, corruption is widespread.

When Forest Protection Department staff try to catch illegal loggers they often find themselves outnumbered and outgunned. In February 2005, Labour reported that between 30 and 40 people attacked a forest patrol team in Bu Gia Map National Park after the patrol team discovered them transporting illegal timber.

Although the Forest Protection Department uncovered more than 50,000 violations of the Law on Forest Protection and Development in 2004, many of these involved small-scale offences. At a Forest Protection Department checkpoint between Cambodia and the Vietnamese coastal port of Nha Trang, McElwee saw government logging trucks loaded with timber from Cambodia using forged papers to pass the checkpoint unimpeded, while local farmers on three-wheeled tractors carrying firewood or timber for housing, but with no paperwork, were stopped and fined.

During a year's fieldwork in Ha Tinh province in northern Vietnam, McElwee interviewed villagers living near Ke Go Nature Reserve and Cam Xuyen State Forest Enterprise. Half of the 104 households she talked to received some income from selling forest products such as fuelwood, charcoal, rattan or medicinal plants.

McElwee found that the Forest Protection Department focuses almost entirely on the local market where villagers sell firewood, but does nothing to stop army and border police from logging and transporting timber.

A government radio campaign makes things worse by explaining that the Nature Reserve is government property and out of bounds to local people. A village headman commented to McElwee, "Why don't we stop people from going into the nature reserve? We could - they pass through our village every day. But the government tells us again and again, that is the government's property. Then the government ought to stop people from going in, not us."

Villagers see their use of timber as having a small impact on forests compared with the large-scale loggers, who use boats to transport wood from the Ke Go Nature Reserve. Villagers asked McElwee, "What's wrong with taking a tree now and then? It's just to build a house. Everyone needs a house."

By Chris Lang, e-mail: <http://chrislang.org>

Article based on information from: Pamela McElwee, "You Say Illegal, I Say Legal: The Relationship Between 'Illegal' Logging and Land Tenure, Poverty, and Forest Use Rights in Vietnam," *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*, Vol. 19, No. 1/2/3, 2004 . <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JSF>