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## [Vietnam: Road-building threatens Phong Nha Nature Reserve](#)

The Vietnamese government is currently negotiating with a range of bilateral and multilateral "aid" agencies to raise funds for its five million hectare reforestation programme. So far, little of the estimated US\$4.5 billion needed has been formally committed, but in December, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) announced a US\$287,000 project "to promote the programme in Vietnam". On 7 December, Nguyen Van Dang, Vietnam's Rural Development Minister and Fernanda Guerrieri, FAO's representative in Vietnam, signed the agreement for the FAO project.

The five million hectare reforestation programme aims to boost Vietnam's tree cover to 14 million hectares --the area of forest indicated on French maps of 1945 (see WRM bulletin 38). However, much of this tree cover, which the government and the international "aid" institutions invariably describe as "forest", is in fact monoculture plantation. Under the five million hectare plan, the government proposes planting one million hectares of fast-growing tree plantations for the pulp and paper industry. This year 250,000 hectares of plantations were established under the programme, according to a recent announcement from the government. And next year the government plans to plant 120,000 hectares with fast-growing trees to serve the paper, mining and chipboard industries.

At the same time as advertising increased "forest" cover however, the government continues to destroy Vietnam's remaining areas of forest. In Quang Binh province, for example, a road is currently being constructed which for 12 kilometres runs through the core zone of the Phong Nha Nature Reserve --an area under consideration by UNESCO for potential World Heritage Status. According to Flora and Fauna International in Vietnam, no adequate environmental impact assessment has been carried out, although the proposed road cuts through the habitat of several rare species including Ha Tinh Langurs, Black Langurs, Red-Shanked Douc Langurs and Siki Gibbons. Phong Nha is also renowned for its spectacular limestone rock formations. In 1924, a British explorer named Barton investigated the Phong Nha caves on a 15 day expedition, and described the caves as among the longest and most beautiful in the world.

A military enterprise, the Truong Son Construction Company, is in charge of building the road and is employing soldiers as a workforce. In places the proposed road would be 12 metres above the current ground level, and much of the material required to build the road would be taken from areas blasted to clear the route of the road. As well as disturbing wildlife, the extensive blasting would seriously damage the fragile cave systems in the Nature Reserve.

Another controversial road, the 1,690 kilometre-long Ho Chi Minh Highway, is also under construction in Vietnam (see WRM bulletin 35). On its currently proposed route from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, the highway will pass close to Phong Nha. Earlier this year Ha Dinh Duc, an eminent Vietnamese biologist, expressed his concern that blasting associated with the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Highway could damage Phong Nha's caves. In reply, Ha Dinh Can of Vietnam's Transport Ministry, told the San Jose Mercury News: "No blasting. There's nothing to worry about. The caves will not collapse. We're even forcing the construction companies to quarry their road stone more than 60 kilometres away from the limestone ranges."

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Such precautions simply do not apply to the road through Phong Nha --the Truong Son Construction Company estimates that 4.5 tonnes of explosives will be needed for every kilometre of the road through the limestone area.

Flora and Fauna International (FFI) argue that the Phong Nha road is contrary to Vietnam's law on Special Use Forest (Nature Reserve). FFI is working with other conservation groups in Vietnam, including World Wide Fund for Nature, Birdlife International, Frontier and the Frankfurt Zoological Society, to petition the government to halt construction immediately until a thorough and independent EIA is carried out.

According to James Hardcastle, of FFI Indochina Programme, "The road construction has been bypassed in the general debate and petition against the Ho Chi Minh Highway. FFI feel that action should be taken immediately to also review the feasibility and environmental impacts of this smaller road."

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