ROLE OF FORESTS IN BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

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1. Realities of biodiversity within the forests

Human being’s life are heavily dependent on the natural resources provided by the earth including land, water, air, minerals, animals and plants. However, due to the human overexploitation and other drivers, people in the 21st century are facing serious problems of depleted and exhausted ecosystems and an increasing loss of animals and plants which are known as biodiversity. Biodiversity is an invaluable natural resource and of fundamental importance to human beings’ survival, well-being and sustainable development and to the health of various ecosystems on the Earth.

Protecting biodiversity on the sustainable principle has been a strategic approach in worldwide conservation plans and management of the Earth’s natural resources. As a result, the United Nations and members of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) has designated the date of 22th May as the International Day for Biological Diversity. To celebrate this day every year activities are organized to raise the public’s awareness and to give people warnings about the threats to biodiversity. Besides, various activities associated with this day give us the opportunity to have a fair, complete and comprehensive view about biodiversity.

The United Nations designated 2011-2020 as the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity, which is aimed to promote strategies for biodiversities as well as a holistic vision of how to live a harmony with nature that biodiversity at different levels can be ensured. It was stressed by the United Nations that stable ecosystems will help create jobs. In a world of increasing unemployment rate among the youth, sustainable use of ecosystems is unquestionable and crucial to not only the health of these ecosystems but also the well-being of human beings’ future generations. In fact human activities have caused extinctions of animals and plants at a much a greater rate than natural extinction processes, being hundreds or thousands times faster. The realities have been that people have overexploited the biodiversity-related resources, even protected areas, which has disrupted the ecological balances and resulted in natural disasters such as floods, droughts and forest fires in the last decade. Although governments around the globe have established many protected areas intending to achieve conservation and development of natural resources, biodiversity has still been seriously degraded and depleted. In recent years, loss of species and degradation of natural ecosystems in particular rainforests have been taking place at an unprecedented speed, which are caused primarily by human’s activities. To date thee has been more than 40% of primary rainforests destroyed. Every year approximately 6-7million hectares of agricultural land are made unsuitable for production due to soil erosion. It has been estimated that 5-10% the number of plant species in the world are endangered of extinctions over the period from mid-1990s to 2010 and the number of species going extinct will increase to 25% by 2050. To cope with this challenge, governments around the world have 55 Conventions related to biodiversity conservation, including the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, Ramsar Convention (Wetlands), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), World Heritage Convention (indirectly by protecting biodiversity habitats) and Bonn Convention on Migratory Species (CMS);

Vietnam is rated as having high biodiversity with important ecosystems. Varied climate and hydro-meteorological conditions are among the factors that bring about great species diversity with over 7,000 plant species in the forests. The Vietnam’s forests provide habitat
for nearly 300 species of mammals, 260 reptile and amphibian species, 826 bird species, 120,000 insect species and 2,000 freshwater fish species that have been identified. The forests play a very important role in biodiversity conservation. The forests are giant sinks of carbon dioxide to reduce green house gases emissions, which is one of the causes of climate changes; Forests supply and regulate water, control flood and prevent soil erosion and run-off, support production and protect infrastructure. The forests also limit small-scale or expanded desertification and contribute to regulate the climate in the regions, acting as watersheds. It can be said that the forests help protect the environment and make our country’s sustainable development possible.

In Vietnam the last few decades have witnessed considerable successes in biodiversity conservation works in the protected forests and special use forests. This has been made possible by the continuous efforts made by the Government of Vietnam and the effective support from the international community. The public’s awareness about the role of the forests has been greatly enhanced. The policies on the socialization of forest sector have come into operation and proven effective. The legal system for protecting and developing the forests has been more and more complete, including the policies on forestry especially those that facilitate participation of private economic sectors and different organizations in forestry activities. There have been legal bases being put into place for environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, provision of forests ecosystem services, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. Furthermore, division of the State’s roles and responsibilities among sectors and government levels and agencies and organizations has been made clearer and strengthened. By implementing various programmes and projects, the Government has extensively and profoundly strengthened actions to protect the forests, nature and biodiversity.

The system of designation of protected forest and special use forests in Vietnam has been playing an active role in protecting biodiversity, biological gene pool, historical and cultural heritages and forest landscape. These protected areas and special forests have greatly contributed to mitigating impacts of climate change. Moreover, these have been contributing to the social and economical development at the local and national levels.

Despite these achievements, Vietnam is still having a rapid decline of biodiversity. Area of importance ecosystems has been gradually narrowed. Number of specials and individuals of wildlife have significantly decreased. Many wildlife species have been depleted fully in terms of number of individuals or are being endangered of extinction at a high degree. There were 430 endangered species listed in Vietnam’s Red Book (2007) and 462 species were listed on the Vietnam’s Red Directory (2007), which was 161 species more than in the Red Book published previously (1992-1996). Worth mentioning is that 9 animal species and 2 species of slipper orchids (scientific name Cypripedioideae) have been considered extinct naturally. The quantity of many rare and valuable plants and animals has been seriously reduced. Although we have good news that the forest coverage has increased, it should be noted that part of the increased forests area are plantations and low biodiversity reforested forests. Area of primary forests and rich forests is continuing to be depleted.

2. A number of drivers of depleted forests biodiversity

2.1. Human population growth: this is associated with increasing residential land, agricultural land and forestry land, especially for poor people and forests-dependent people who rely on the forest for a living, for example timber and firewood harvesting and wildlife hunting. This has been putting a huge pressure on the protected and special use forests. Many local communities have committed to participate in forest protection but there has been lacking collaboration between the local people and government agencies. Poor management of residential status in many localities has led to outsiders to come and influence some local people to violate the laws.
2.2. The market values of rare and valuable timber and wild animals have been increasing while these resources have been made exhausted in the buffer zones and the areas in the proximity of the protected forests and special use forests. This has also put a great pressure on the forests and led to further declined forest biodiversity.

2.3. Many hectares of protected and special use forests are converted to other land uses such as to build hydro-power plants, roads and buildings and for mining. These have made it easier for forest destruction activities and illegal trade and transport of timber and other forests resources, which contributed to the depletion of forests biodiversity.

2.4. There are few forests rangers on large areas of forest. Furthermore they are not well equipped enough to do their tasks. Moreover, in many cases the trials on violations were not transparent and delayed. The main culprits of some violation cases are not identified or adequately punished. Therefore, these trials have not set good example for others. Many violations are continuing to take place, with some cases there has been indication of disregarding the laws and the state officers. This has collectively affected the forests quality.

2.5. There is irregular and lack of a holistic approach in the collaboration and coordination among local governments and inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral agencies. In particular at communal level, some communal governments have not done a good job in enforcing the laws. These governments also do not coordinate closely with the forest protection officers in controlling the forest hackers. These also pose a threat to the forest quality.

2.6. There is lack of or limited investment in protected and special use forests and lack of buffer zone developing projects. Investment in forest protection only accounts for a very small proportion of the Government’s expenses, for example money invested in 661 Project. Climate change and increasing complexity of the weather with frequent prolonged droughts and floods have collectively damaged biodiversity.

3. Guiding principles in forests biodiversity conservation

3.1. Continue to complete legal bases for biodiversity conservation:

This is given the first priority. Forthcoming efforts will be focused on developing legal bases to enforce the Law on Forest Protection and Development, the Law on Fisheries and the Law on Biodiversity. A strategy for managing the protected areas until 2020 and a Vision for managing the protecting areas until 2030 will be developed. Also, policies on the investment to develop the system of special use forests until 2020 and an action plan for conserving endangered species for the purpose of conservation will be developed.

3.2. Complete the land use planning of the protected and special use forests based on the current legal system, including the following: reviewing and undertake land use planning for the 2.2 million hectares of special use forests and 5.3 million hectares of protected forests on the principle of conservation and sustainable development. These forests will be managed in a consistent manner based on the establishment of a stable national forestry territory, which is divided into sub-zones, patches and blocks of forests both on maps and marked in the field.

3.3. Establish a system for protecting and conserving forests biodiversity, including: strengthening the patrolling of hotspots of forest destruction, illegal logging, wide life hunting and boundary areas; putting in place adequate penalties for violations of the laws on forest protection at the local levels; implement the Policy on the investment to develop special use forest period 2011-2020 issued by the Prime Minister’s Decision No. 24/2012/ QD-TTg. Enforcing the benefit distribution policy issued by the Prime Minister’s Decision No. 126/QD-TTg and Decision No. 57/QD-TTg on forest protection and development plans.

3.4. Continue to strengthen communication, information and education work on the laws and awareness about forests biodiversity, including: Revising the communication
methods to suit different target audiences with a focus on the methods applied to ethnic
groups living in remote and mountainous areas; mainstreaming basic knowledge of nature and
biodiversity conservation into primary and secondary curricula; printing and distributing
communication materials on forests biodiversity conversation to communities; constructing
sign boards at public places adjacent to the protected and special use forests and in the buffer
zones.

3.5. Mở rộng sự tham gia, thực hiện đầy đủ các cam kết quốc tế Actively involve and
fully participate and implement international commitments via conventions and treaties and
cooperation with international, regional and bilateral partners in forests biodiversity
conservation such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES),
The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations
Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the United Nations Framework
Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC. This will help enhance the position of Vietnam
internationally and regionally. At the same time, Vietnam will look for new funding sources
such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)
and REDD+. Other actions include strengthening efforts to raise ODA fund to protect forests
and conserve biodiversity, protect the environment, erase hunger and reduce poverty, provide
livelihoods and step-by-step enhance the efficiency of forestry management; actively;
actively cooperate with countries, institutes and schools in the world and in the region in the field of
scientific research, education and training and forestry extension in order to have fast access to
state-of-the-art technological and scientific standards and to develop Vietnam’s human
resources and science and technology.

In order to conserve and sustain biodiversity of the forests ecosystems, to implement
programmes and strategies for biodiversity conservation at the national level and to
implement the Conventions that Vietnam has been a party to at an international level, on this
very special occasion to celebrate the International Day for Biological Diversity, the World
Environment Day and the Word Day to Combat Desertification, we would like to strongly call
on the ministries, industries, sectors, government agencies and social associations, scientists,
national and international organizations to take concrete and practical actions to contribute to
our joint efforts of biodiversity conservation.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I wish you good health and hope the
Ceremony will be a success!

Thank you for your attention!