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62. © Reforesting "Bare Hills" in Vietnam: social and environmental consequences of the 5 million hectare reforestation program. McElwee, P. *Ambio* 38(6):325-333. 2009.

Reforestation “Bare Hills” in Vietnam: Social and Environmental Consequences of the 5 Million Hectare Reforestation Program

In recent years, forestry has been strongly promoted by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam through large-scale projects to rehabilitate and reforest millions of hectares of land. One project to reforest 5 million hectares has received hundreds of millions of US dollars for implementation. Yet based on a case study in one area of northern Vietnam, this project appears to have had a number of unforeseen consequences. Large areas of land classified as “bare hills” have been targeted for reforestation, despite the fact that these lands already harbor a number of species that were used by local communities. The bare hills were especially economically important to poor households and to women who collected a variety of nontimber forest products there. Because the reforestation project focused most efforts on establishing new plantations rather than supporting natural regeneration, diverse sources of nontimber forest products were being replaced with monocrop exotic tree plantations. A strong inequity in the allocation of private lands for reforestation has characterized the greening projects to date, and this may have continuing unwelcome social, environmental, and economic impacts into the future, particularly for the poor.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, forestry has been strongly promoted by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam through large-scale projects to rehabilitate and reforest millions of hectares of land. These investments have reversed years of deforestation, with forest cover rising from 28 percent of the land area in 1990 to more than 38 percent in 2005 (1, 2). The promotion of forestry has primarily been through two major schemes: the expansion of protected areas to cover large areas of remaining natural forest, and a nationwide project to reforest 5 million hectares of degraded land (known as the 5MHRP). These projects are expected to total nearly 2 billion US dollars in international and national funding (3).

As a result of the 5MHRP and other projects, the plantation forest area has nearly tripled during the past 20 years. These plantations have often been established on the millions of hectares of land in Vietnam classified as “bare hills” (*doi troc*) and “wastelands” (*dat trong*). These areas are often treated in policy as degraded, valueless, ownerless, and in need of environmental rehabilitation (4). A major goal of programs like 5MHRP has been to transform these lands into smallholder forestry plantations to reap both environmental and economic benefits, with an emphasis on improving sustainable livelihoods for the poorest rural areas. Some reports have already declared these plantations a success, based on numbers and quality of trees planted (5). While there appears to be no doubt that Vietnam has indeed made a “forest transition,” reversing from net deforestation rates to overall net reforestation rates since the 1990s when these reforestation programs began (2), there has

been of yet little research in Vietnam on the localized environmental and social impacts of these reforestation projects. There have been virtually no before and after studies that compare what local environmental conditions and livelihoods were like before plantation forestry was established and only a handful of studies that look at the local-level economic impacts of forest land privatization (6–11). Even without such evidence, most government and donor reports assume that reforestation through smallholder plantations will have a net positive impact on households, as they will have increased forest goods to sell, and previously degraded lands will have been improved through the expansion of forest cover with concomitant improvements in watershed protection and biodiversity (12–14).

However, based on research in north central Vietnam, this article asserts that in some areas, reforestation projects have had unforeseen impacts. The 5MHRP and other reforestation programs have often focused efforts on privatizing land considered to be “bare” and requiring that recipient households plant seedlings chosen and provided by the state projects. Yet negative outcomes from this institutional approach include a loss of access to lands for the collection of economically important nontimber forest products (NTFPs), which has especially impacted women and poor households. As bare hills are privatized and turned into smallholder plantations, the poor have been the least likely to receive land allotments and thus have no substitutions for lost NTFP income. This appears to be leading to a stratification of landholdings and greater village inequality in the study site. Further, because the 5MHRP has on the whole emphasized plantation forestry more than natural regeneration, one outcome has been the replacement of diverse, though often degraded, native flora by monocropped exotic tree plantations.

This is not surprising, as similar processes have been observed outside of Vietnam. There have been numerous criticisms directed at industrial tree crop plantations over the years, with accusations that they expropriate land from local communities with little environmental or economic benefit (15, 16). Although smallholder tree plantation projects often have more pro-poor goals than such industrial tree farms, even these smallholder and “social forestry” schemes have received criticism as well (17, 18). For example, in China, where an ambitious Sloping Land Conversion Program (also known as the “Grain to Green Program”) similar to the 5MHRP was launched in 1998, livelihood benefits do not appear to have reached as many poor households as were originally targeted (19) or have caused increasing pressure on nonreforested lands (20). Many of the new forests planted in China also appear to be low-diversity monocultures that are not equivalent to high natural forest that was once extant (21, 22).

However, unlike the China reforestation project, which has received much scholarly attention of late (22–25), there has been little assessment of the Vietnam 5MHRP, which started about the same time. Thus this report contributes to a preliminary assessment of reforestation in Vietnam by outlining the historical trends in Vietnam in forest management and