

# 1 Environmental Awareness in Vietnam – An Introduction

In a world where humans are continuously and enduringly influencing their natural environment, environmental protection becomes one of the most important issues for mankind. Aside from the development of new methods and techniques helping to accomplish more efficient and sustainable use of the world's natural resources, it appears to be equally important to look at the relationship between humans and their natural environment. While this topic holds a place on the agenda of environmental research in the economically developed nations of this world, it is relatively new in those countries only recently experiencing economic revival.

Looking through some recent publications on Vietnam it becomes clear why the topic, nevertheless, is of inevitable significance to the country: Not only is Vietnam seen as seriously affected when it comes to expected damage from climate change (Dasgupta et al. 2007: 28), Vietnam is also a country in transition, undergoing a rapid transformation of the natural environment induced by human activities, with the goal of profiting from the benefits of economic progress.

The World Bank (WB) calls Vietnam “a development success story” (WB 2014a). This might be justified considering the rapid transition this country has gone through. Transition, in this context, refers to the effects on both human society and its natural environment.

By the end of the 1970s, after more than thirty years of war between 1945 and 1978 followed by a period of economic downturn, Vietnam was one of the poorest countries in the world, burdened with a dysfunctional economy. This changed with the introduction of economic and – to some extent – political reforms, the so called *đổi mới*-reforms<sup>1</sup>, by the sixth congress of the Communist Party of

<sup>1</sup> Literally translated, *đổi mới* means “renovation”. Policy connected to these reforms is also often referred to as the “policy of open doors”, as the government “opened” the Vietnamese market to foreign investment from non-socialist countries.

## Perceptions of Change in Vietnam

Vietnam (CPV) in 1986. Since then, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) has been undergoing continuous transformation and has reached the WB classification of a *lower middle income country* in 2010 with a Gross National Income per capita (GNI per capita) of 1,160 USD<sup>2</sup>. The availability of new sources of income for the residents of Vietnam created by the liberalization of the economy changed the livelihood strategies of people in Vietnam profoundly within a rather short period of time. Fig. 1 illustrates Vietnam's economic achievements in relation to the WB classification.

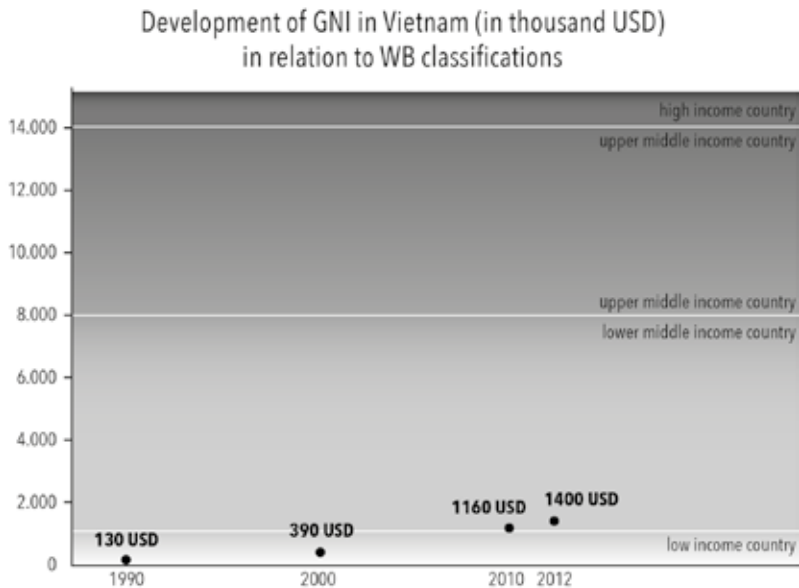


Fig. 1: Development of GNI (in thousand USD) in Vietnam in relation to WB classification. Adapted from ADB 2013.

<sup>2</sup> This classification is based on the gross national income per capita and includes the following income groups: GNI per capita of 1,035 USD or less: low income; GNI per capita of 1,036 USD - 4,085 USD: lower middle income; GNI per capita of 4,086 USD - 12,615 USD: upper middle income; GNI per capita of 12,616 USD or more: high income (WB 2014b).

The progress the country has achieved during the previous decades goes hand in hand with several drawbacks, including negative impacts on the natural environment. This is especially visible in diminishing forests and waste scattered in the landscape. The not so obvious, but nevertheless serious contamination, can be found in measurement of air, land, and water pollution. Reports about environmental pollution are constantly in the news, including reports about topics such as urban pollution, as well as pollution caused by industrial complexes but also illegal logging and wildlife trade.

In examining the issue of transition, one needs to consider focusing on the rural parts of the country. One of the effects of economic growth in Vietnam is that cities are extending into their surroundings. As highways are being widened, vehicles on these highways are changing, and their numbers are growing. At the same time, the number of industrial complexes in the country is increasing. These are only a few of the obvious changes taking place. Vietnam is a country in flux. The peri-urban areas, where the urban and the rural parts of the country intermix, are apparently the domains where the transition is most visible. These are the places where industrial complexes and new residential areas are being constructed while the original dwellers try to keep up with the pace. This is not only the arena in which the new and the old mix but also a place where, as a result of the lack of efficient environmental legislation, the above mentioned environmental problems are becoming very visible.

The importance of the countryside is also evident from another perspective, closer to the cognitive aspect of this study's subject. It is the special relationship Vietnamese people claim to have with the countryside and its symbolic character. For example, a family visit to the hometown around the Lunar New Year or in honor of the dead ancestors on their Death Memorial Day (*giỗ*)<sup>3</sup> provides a vivid testimonial to

<sup>3</sup> Celebrating birthdays is a rather new habit in Vietnam and mainly applies to the younger generations and children. Traditionally, Vietnamese celebrate the death anniversary. The whole family comes together to pray and offer food and other goods to the deceased, and has a meal together. The deceased is believed to be among those celebrating wandering in an in-between world (Personal conversation).

this. Speaking to people about Vietnam does not only involve speaking about a country proud of its achievements in politics and economics, but also about a national identity built on the myth of Âu Cơ and the dragon king Lạc Long Quân<sup>4</sup>. This myth presents Vietnamese as the people derived from the mountains and the sea, thus, with a supposedly special relationship to the diverse natural environments of the country.

Considering the importance of the natural environment and rural areas to people in Vietnam, taking a closer look at the relationship between humans and their natural environment in the rural areas appears to be an important task, especially as these sites are on an irreversible path of transformation. The main aim of this study is therefore, to provide an overview of the – possibly diverse – perspectives people living in rural Vietnam have regarding their natural environment. While these perspectives might be shared among groups of people, the study follows a rather explorative approach and, thus, is not searching for an overarching model, but rather aims to take into account the variations and diversifications to be found in these perspectives. The overall research question guiding the study is therefore:

What are the individual perspectives of people in rural Vietnam today on their local natural environment, consisting of their environmental values and attitudes, in the context of modernized livelihoods?

This main research question can be divided into five sub-questions, which allow for its operationalization:

<sup>4</sup> In the legend, the dragon king Lạc Long Quân takes the daughter of the king in the mountains, Âu Cơ, as his wife. After one year Âu Cơ gives birth to one hundred eggs and from these eggs their sons are born. When their sons are old enough Lạc Long Quân decides to go back to his palace in the sea, where his wife cannot follow. He therefore takes only half of their children with him to the sea; the rest stay with their mother on land. These are believed to be the founding fathers of the Vietnamese nation (Personal conversation).

1. What is the local definition of nature?
2. What do people know about the environment and what are their beliefs about it?
3. What are people's livelihoods and strategies and how are they connected to their natural environment?
4. What do people know and think about environmental protection?
5. What is the importance of values that can be related to pro-environmental thinking in the value system of people in rural Vietnam?

Being trained in area studies with a focus on Southeast Asia, and doing research on human-nature relations, requires availing oneself of the merits of other social science disciplines. However, as Holbig (2015) establishes, this is indeed the most significant characteristic of area studies:

The greatest potential of area studies lies in its **interdisciplinary** connections, which productively adopt and implement innovative impulses originating from cultural studies without losing sight of the capacity to connect to the social sciences. These connections provide it with the opportunity not only to theoretically and methodologically carry out highly topical research, but also to function as the connecting link, “translator,” and provider of impulses in both directions, between linguistics, cultural studies, and history on the one hand and the social sciences on the other – two groupings that continue to perceive each other as separate epistemic communities. (Holbig 2015: 27; emphasis in original)

In accordance with this statement, cultural studies can therefore be considered one pillar on which this study on human-environment relations in Vietnam are explored. Turning to the other pillars, a wide array of different scientific disciplines focus in one way or another on the relation between humans and their natural environment. While it is often difficult to draw clear lines between sub-disciplines, a more definite distinction can be made between anthropological approaches to the topic and approaches taken from the fields of sociology.

Anthropological approaches look at the ways by which humans have adapted their techniques and livelihood strategies to their natural environment and through that have often also changed this natural

environment.<sup>5</sup> Sociological sub-disciplines, such as environmental sociology, or – more interdisciplinary – human ecology, look at the question from a different angle as they take different levels of human-environment interactions into account. This includes a technical level, and a political or institutional level as well as the question of social concepts of the natural environment. Therefore, this study will, due to the nature of the research question, rely on sociological approaches rather than those offered by anthropology. As research about environmental awareness is itself at the interface between two disciplines, the study rests on concepts from the fields of sociology and social psychology. In order to illustrate the interdisciplinary character of the work, Fig. 2 shows the three theoretical and methodological fields.

Theoretical and methodological fields of the study



Fig. 2: Theoretical and methodological fields of the study.

The study aims at connecting a macro-level topic, namely, the situation of environmental and social change, with findings on the micro-level – that is, the perceptions of these transformations on a local level. Nevertheless, instead of being based on in-depth fieldwork the study

<sup>5</sup> Cultural ecology is an example of such a research approach.

relies on in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews conducted in one research site.

As the process of transition is most visible in areas close to the urban centers, a research site adjacent to the extended metropolitan region of Hồ Chí Minh City serves as a case study. As will be argued later on, the research site can be described as peri-urban, thus at the verge between rural and urban. The Southeast of Vietnam where the research site is situated is an economically prospering region and, while it is experiencing many of the benefits of Vietnam's transformation, it is also one of the areas under tremendous threat from environmental pollution.

Following this brief introduction, this book is divided into two parts, the introductory part and the presentation of the results. The introductory part consists of two chapters in which the reader will be introduced to the research topic and the background to the research.

Firstly, *chapter 2* takes a look at the current state of research related to human-nature relations, mainly from a sociological and social psychology perspective, but also touching on the knowledge provided by anthropological studies. In addition, during the course of this chapter, the main concepts applied throughout the study are introduced, culminating in a framework for the presentation of results. After this groundwork is laid, *chapter 3* presents the research design and process itself, including the interview sample.

The presentation of results is oriented along the framework introduced in *chapter 2*, and begins with an overview of the socio-economic situation of Vietnam in general and the research site in particular in *chapter 4*. The following chapter, *chapter 5*, continues with some basic indications about the natural environment in the country and the perspectives the interview partners presented regarding the natural environment of the research site throughout the interviews. The following three chapters pick up three of the categories presented in the framework, namely, people's definitions of nature (*chapter 6*), people's representations about nature (*chapter 7*), and finally their attitudes toward nature and the state of environmental values at the research site (*chapter 8*). *Chapter 9* attempts to bring these threads together by

## Perceptions of Change in Vietnam

presenting three exemplary cases from the interviews. The discussion of these cases provides a synopsis of the central arguments of this study. *Chapter 10* contains the conclusion and summarizes the arguments of this study.