



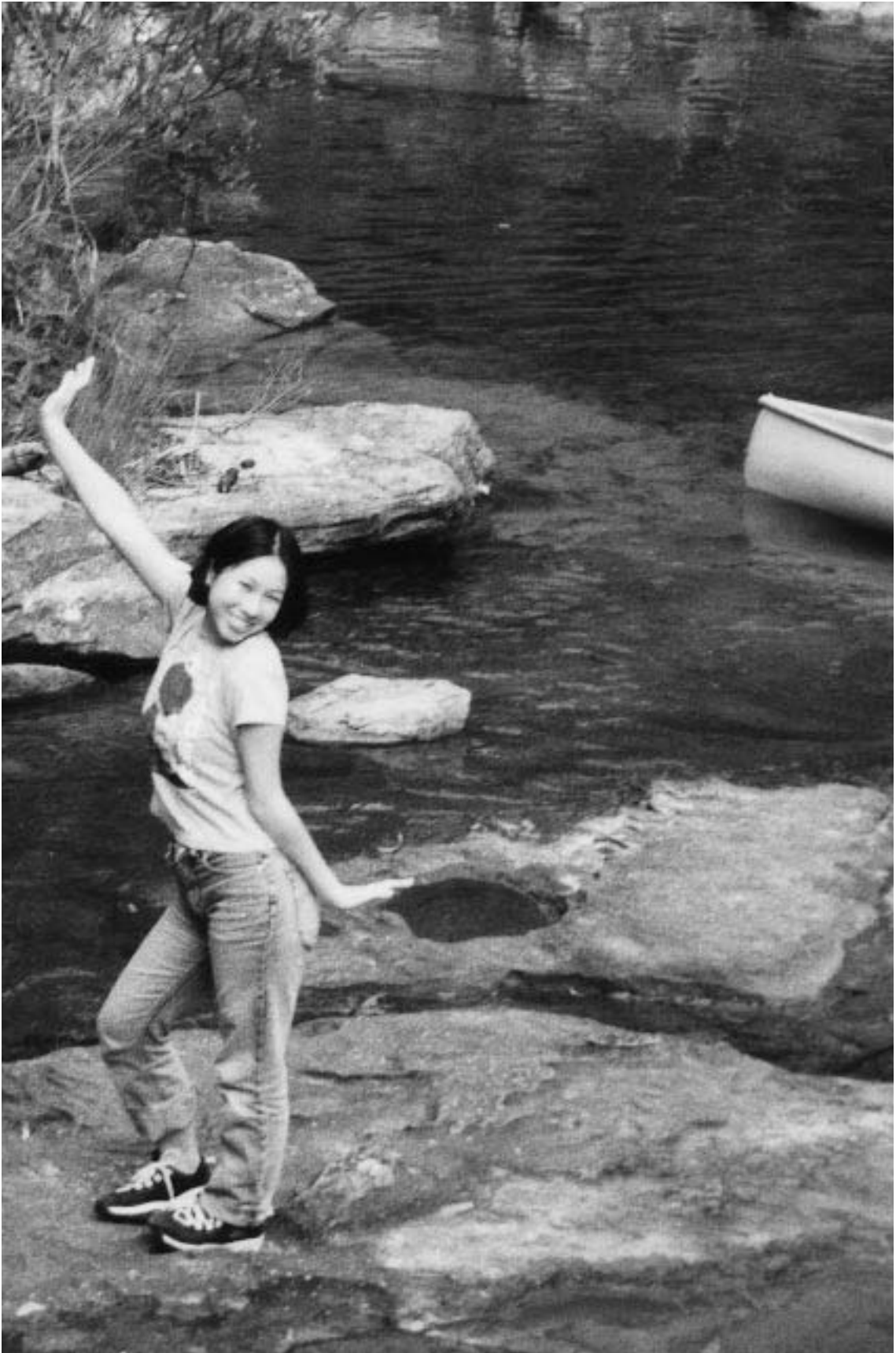
moving landscapes

NATIONAL PARKS & THE VIETNAMESE EXPERIENCE

mandy thomas

Studies in the Cultural Construction of Open Space

moving
landscapes



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FOREWORD

In the last three decades multiculturalism has moved from the position of being a novel idea to being a reality in the daily life of Australia. Nowhere is this more true than in New South Wales. In cities like Wollongong, Newcastle, and Sydney the variety of languages one hears spoken in public serves as a constant reminder of this reality.

There is no question that the great majority of the State's more recent migrants have settled in urban environments. It has thus been easy to think of multiculturalism as mainly an urban phenomenon. The danger of thinking within these confines becomes clear, however, when one considers the management of our national parks. The park system has been created for the benefit of all the State's citizens – directly through their ability to enjoy the reserved landscape and the cultural heritage it contains and indirectly through conserving the biodiversity which underpins the existence of us all. But to what extent has the park system been managed in accordance with principles and philosophies that are ethnically specific to the Anglo-Australian majority? The answer to this is, very considerably. Perhaps the most obvious testament to it, and to the efforts that have been made to address it, have been the steps taken over the last few years to give Aboriginal people a greater role in the management of the reserve system and to allow their cultural values to be recognised in the way the system is managed. This gives recognition to their indigenous status, to their being the only people in the State who are not migrants.

The first book in the present series, *A Multicultural Landscape: National Parks and the Macedonian Experience* (2001), reflected a move to open our thinking to the needs and values of all ethnic groups. The present volume stems from the same belief that a multicultural strategy by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should be based on in-depth knowledge. To this end, *Moving*

Landscapes looks not just at the relationship which Sydney's Vietnamese-Australian community has to national parks in NSW, but at the distinctive view of nature that Vietnamese people brought with them when they moved to Australia. It examines the idea of conservation in the context of Vietnamese culture and in the context of the recent social and economic history of Vietnam, a history that has strongly influenced the view of the world held by many Vietnamese migrants.

The challenge for the future will be to integrate what we have learned from studies like *Moving Landscapes* into the on-ground management of parks. The justification goes well beyond the principle of fairness – the future of the reserve system will depend to a growing extent on whether the State's migrant communities can identify with the national park 'idea' and see themselves reflected in it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Debus', with a stylized, cursive script.

BOB DEBUS, MP
Minister for the Environment



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This study was undertaken with the assistance of many Vietnamese-Australians who shared their stories, memories and photographs so that we might gain a better understanding of their relationship to different landscapes. I thank all those who generously gave their time. In particular, I thank Hoa Hoang Lam, Thao Nguyen, Alison Phan and Thuy Ai Ho for their very able research assistance in finding and interviewing individuals all over Sydney who could enhance our knowledge of Vietnamese perceptions of landscape and their relationships to national parks in New South Wales. Their own personal stories were very moving and perceptive. Fifty formal interviews were undertaken for this study and many more informal interviews. A detailed account of the methodology is found in Chapter One. This study contains at least one quotation from every person interviewed, and in doing so acknowledges that each person enhanced the study by adding to it a unique story or perception of the landscape or of their experiences in national parks. The generosity of all those involved in the various focus groups and excursions is gratefully acknowledged.

Many individuals from government and community organisations answered my questions and gave me much valuable information. I thank Hai Chung from the NSW Department of Fisheries who told me about his work with the Vietnamese community in raising awareness about fishing regulations and safety. I also thank the Venerable Master Hsin Yun from the Nan Tien Pagoda in Wollongong, Nguyen Chanh Giao from the Cao Dai Organisation, the Venerable Thich Bao Luc from the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation of Australia and New Zealand, the Venerable Thich Phuoc Son from the Phuoc Hue Temple in Wetherill Park, and Trish Zuhnemenr, Manager, Wat Buddha Dhamma Retreat Centre at Wisemans Ferry all of whom gave me much valuable information. Thuat Van Nguyen, who has been involved in the scouting organisation in both Vietnam and Australia,

gave me insight into the importance of scouting to many young Vietnamese-Australians and their enjoyment of national parks. I was also in touch with Hoa Hoang from the Vietnamese language program on SBS radio, as well as editors from the newspapers Chieu-Duong, Viet-Luan and Chuong Saigon. I have given pseudonyms to those people interviewed who wished to remain anonymous.

Numerous individuals at national parks around Sydney assisted by sharing their experiences of Vietnamese visitation to national parks. In particular, I would like to thank Jennifer Bolwell, the Senior Ranger NPWS, Community Relations, Sydney South Region, Royal National Park, who was helpful in sharing her experiences and views of visitors to the Royal National Park. Several rangers in the Blue Mountains National Park, Lane Cove National Park and Parramatta Regional Park, now Parramatta Park managed by Parramatta Park Trust, were also very willing to informally share their experiences with me.

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I thank Sharon Veale and Denis Byrne from the Cultural Heritage Division at the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS) for initiating this study, for their innovative approaches to cultural landscapes, and for their support and enthusiasm for this project. My thanks also to Joanna Erskine, an anthropologist at the NSW NPWS, who brought us all together in the first place and in many ways enabled this fruitful collaboration. I am grateful also to Martin Thomas for providing an elegant earlier study of

multiculturalism and national parks, an important background to the present study.

The congenial atmosphere of the Institute for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney made such a study possible in all its dimensions, from administrative support to intellectual challenge. I thank Professor Ien Ang and my colleagues Fiona Allon, Melissa Butcher, Sharon Chalmers, Elaine Lally and Fiona Nicoll for their interest in the project and their various input and ideas.

I gratefully acknowledge the expert editorial eye of Claire Armstrong and the design work of Gabrielle Tydd. Both Claire and Gabrielle assisted tremendously in shepherding the manuscript through the publication process.

While I am indebted to many people who assisted in the development of this research into a book, I take full responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation. I hope that the work may be taken in new directions by others wishing to delve more deeply into the cultural impact of migration on different engagements with our Australian natural heritage.

chapter 1

**INTRODUCTION:
ALTERNATE LANDSCAPES**



This study was initially conceived by Sharon Veale, historian at the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS) as a means of raising awareness of ethnicity as an issue in park management and interpretation. The project was intended to inform NPWS policy and provide information which may assist in reforming policies within the agency, as well as raising community awareness of migrant heritage. The wider research agenda of the NPWS Cultural Heritage Division is focused on exploring the influences of ethnicity on the experiences of visitors to the State's national parks. This has arisen as a response to the realities of a society with a significant number of migrants. The NPWS is also mindful of the indigenous context of national parks in relation to the dialogue being undertaken with non-indigenous ethnic communities.

In attempting to understand the different experiences and needs of diverse cultural groups who visit national parks, the NPWS has had to comprehend the characteristics of each community. The concept of 'community' is a complex one, but usually involves the notion of 'shared identity', whether on the basis of country of birth, language, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preference, age or other characteristics. As identity is layered, with individuals being involved in numerous communities simultaneously, the idea of a cohesive and clearly identifiable community is highly problematic. Nevertheless, community identification and cohesion is often an important means for a group to gain representation and to counter marginalisation. For this reason, studies of the different perspectives on national parks can have the effect of bringing to visibility not just the diverse views of nature, but the communities themselves.

It is important to explore the basis of our taken-for-granted understandings of national parks before evaluating a different cultural view such as the Vietnamese one. The reason for this is that the mainstream view has established itself through time as the norm and therefore privileged way of perceiving nature and landscapes. For example, as Staiff et al (2000) have pointed out, the scientific-

based signage in national parks is privileged over other non-scientific understandings of the environment, such as religious and aesthetic ones. In particular, national parks are viewed as separate from social activities and as non-corrupted by external influences so they can be viewed scientifically as something which can be accurately and objectively ‘described’, such as through placing scientific names of plants on signs rather than the social history of a site. If we can see these views as cultural constructions then we can more adequately evaluate different cultural ‘takes’ of the same object of study. What is apparent in a study such as this one is that different cultures have different understandings of the natural environment. By throwing into relief the modalities through which western societies came to understand nature, and mainstream Australian society in particular came to view national parks, we can more readily comprehend the variety of different understandings of nature that exist simultaneously with these popular views.

Ideas about nature in the West are in a transition period in which ideas about nature and landscape defy any easy definition and always include the idea of human involvement in their construction. Recently, much work in the NPWS has been undertaken to counter the view of nature as being ‘outside time and space, rather than a product of imagination and action’ (Gill, 1999: 59). In particular, the idea of a ‘cultural landscape’ has gained considerable currency. This view suggests that nature is a domain experienced and produced by people and invested with cultural meaning and value. This study seeks to further our knowledge of the relationship between cultural meanings and the use and understandings of national parks. The project explores Vietnamese-Australian understandings of natural and cultural landscapes. This entailed documenting the range of experiences of these environments in both Vietnam and in Australia. The approach is one that acknowledges the various Vietnamese views of the interrelations between people and environments, and records and interprets their attachments to

landscape. The study also outlines the nature of use of the NSW NPWS estate by those with a Vietnamese cultural background in order to help inform NPWS policy on park management and park interpretation. A small component of the study also suggests modes that NPWS may employ to raise awareness of heritage and environmental conservation in the Vietnamese community. Programs such as community partnerships and peer education were evaluated along with media and new technologies as information and education strategies.

In sum, *Moving Landscapes: National Parks and the Vietnamese Experience* examines the range of Vietnamese understandings of the natural and cultural environment both in Australia and in Vietnam. It documents the differing experiences of Vietnamese-Australians to the NPWS estate, focusing on the factors influencing the involvement of Vietnamese people in the estate, including social, age, economic, gender and cultural determinants. The study also ascertains whether particular parks or sites in the NPWS estate have social significance to Vietnamese people in Australia; provides material that could impact on NPWS policy in relation to education strategies for different communities; and indicates ways of increasing community awareness about the NPWS in the Vietnamese community.

METHODOLOGY

To obtain the most accurate picture of Vietnamese experience of the NPWS and its estate, it was important to interview a fairly representatively diverse sample of individuals in terms of age and socioeconomic background. It was thought that religion may play a role in the development of different understandings of the environment and so attempts were made to interview people with different religious upbringings (both Catholicism and Buddhism are

important in the Vietnamese community in Sydney). As well as age differences, I explored the differences between recently arrived Vietnamese migrants and earlier arrivals. This was important because numerous national parks were declared in Vietnam in the 1990s and there has been an increased interest in environmental protection in Vietnam in recent times. It was also thought to be worthwhile to interview people living in different locations throughout Sydney in order to determine if proximity to a national park makes any difference to the use of it among the Vietnamese.

My existing contacts within the Vietnamese communities were employed to access people from a range of age-groups and ethnicities (Vietnam has many different ethnic minorities), as well as from a diversity of locations throughout Sydney. I interviewed NPWS officers in several national parks in and near Sydney about their understandings of Vietnamese use of the parks. I also interviewed key players at several relevant community organisations and networks, such as the NSW Department of Fisheries Community Liaison Officer, Hai Chung, and various religious leaders in the community. Contact was made with Vietnamese media outlets (mainly newspapers and radio) in order to ascertain the amount and type of media coverage given to natural and cultural environment issues and any other issues related to national parks.

The method of choice for interviewing was in-depth one-on-one interviews, but some group interviews or focus group discussions took place in September 2001 (after the draft report was read and commented on). The focus groups were undertaken in Cabramatta and in the Royal National Park and added much valuable material to the information we had already collected by filling out the picture of the Vietnamese understandings of the natural environment in Australia. A fishing trip with Nhung Tran, a young Vietnamese Australian, and her extended family in the Royal National Park also provided insights into the role of fishing and waterways in the lives

of the Vietnamese. These group interviews, as well as several informal discussions, also provided an opportunity to find areas of agreement, incompatibility and overlap in the responses to the issues raised by the facilitator.

From my previous experience working with Vietnamese communities, it is apparent that many families feel most comfortable speaking openly only with Vietnamese people and often take time to build trust when speaking to those outside the community. Although I have numerous contacts myself, four Vietnamese-speaking research assistants made contact with a different set of people and this enhanced the ability of the study to cover the diversity of the Vietnamese communities in Sydney. The research assistants were Hoa Hoang Lam, Thuy Ai Ho, Alison Phan and Thao Nguyen. Almost all the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. All participants were assured that information would be confidential and their names are not used unless they approved of this.

Each interview took several hours and was structured informally. In order for the participants to feel at ease, the interviews were for the most part not taped but the research assistants took extensive notes. I undertook a number of interviews and also interviewed the research assistants themselves about their particular relationship to the natural environment. The focus group discussions were recorded on high-quality digital equipment and those participating were made aware that they were being taped. I conducted all focus group discussions. I also arranged an outing to a national park in Sydney and was a participant observer of the occasion, asking people about the surrounds and seeing how they related to it.

All interviewees were informed that we were undertaking a study about multiculturalism and the NPWS, with this being a case study of the Vietnamese. They were assured of confidentiality, and anonymity if they requested it. Where useful (and possible), informants were asked for permission to use their photographs for the publication.

TARGET GROUPS

Target groups included Vietnam-born people from a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, migration histories, geographical areas and socioeconomic backgrounds. Both women and men were interviewed and more than fifty people were interviewed in depth. Also interviewed were NPWS personnel from the Sydney region, and key individuals and interest groups in the Vietnamese community, including Vietnamese media outlets, Buddhist organisations, the head of the Vietnamese Community Organisation, and the Community Liaison Officer for the NSW Department of Fisheries.

The issues covered in the interviews with Vietnamese participants included their personal situation, their responses to the environment both in Vietnam and Australia, and their responses to the national parks of New South Wales, as well as their understanding of the NPWS, Aboriginal heritage and environmental issues. The interviews with NPWS personnel enquired into their understandings and perceptions of Vietnamese visitation and behaviour in parks, and their ideas about NPWS policy in relation to different understandings of the landscape.

The study begins with a brief outline of the history of the Vietnamese community in Australia and then goes on to describe the cultural landscape in Vietnam. There is then a broad overview of some of the diversity of views of nature in Asia generally, as well as specifically in Vietnam. Following this is a chapter on the cultural landscapes in Vietnam remembered by those interviewed. The next chapter documents the major findings of the research undertaken with Vietnamese families on their views of the landscape in Australia and their experiences of national parks. The main issues are summarised in the concluding chapter.

The project recognises that the NPWS is not a detached and

impartial observer of cultural diversity but rather that itself also reproduces many assumptions about cultural difference. Until the last decade the trend was for the NPWS to represent western mainstream views of nature in a homogenisation of attitudes towards the natural environment which has had the effect of suppressing a diversity of views about the landscape. The NPWS has the potential to become involved in the active negotiation of cultural change and cultural pluralism, and serve as a model for an organisation responding to its public by actively negotiating cultural interactions and experiences within its domain. The first step towards this diversified view of the work of the NPWS is to unpack the ways in which landscape is a cultural process, not only for visitors to national parks from migrant backgrounds, but also within the Service itself. We can then continue to deepen our understanding of the processes involved in constructing cultural landscapes.

chapter 2

THE VIETNAMESE IN AUSTRALIA



In 1975 three major events in Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) propelled thousands to leave in a mass exodus across both land and sea. All three states were rocked by sudden and profound changes in government and society, but by far the largest number of people who fled originated from Vietnam. In mid-April in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge had entered the capital and proclaimed power. On 30 April, North and South Vietnam were symbolically unified after the northern armies entered Saigon, the southern capital. Later in the year a new regime seized power in Laos, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed. The change in political leadership and ideology led to a dramatic change in fortune for many who had held power prior to 1975. Throughout Indochina those who had supported previous governments were now attempting to flee, fearful of the consequences of their political allegiances. Initially, those who had departed were people who had worked with the former regimes, but later a broader section of the population followed, ranging from the educated urban elite to farmers and ethnic minorities. Despite the enormous personal cost – both material and psychological – of departing, and the danger of the journeys taken by sea or land, people continued to flee their countries in ever greater numbers in subsequent years.

When we witness the vibrant cultural, social and political life of the Vietnamese in Australia today, it is astonishing to remember that at the beginning of 1975 there were not more than 900 Vietnamese in the entire country. Today there are over 180,000 Vietnam-born people living in Australia, and more than 50,000 Vietnamese-speaking people in south-west Sydney alone. Over the past twenty-seven years there have been several different waves of migration from Vietnam, constantly changing the demographic nature and socioeconomic profile of the population here. By plotting these changes we can understand much about the transformations in the Vietnamese communities and how these continuously related to changes both in Vietnam and in mainstream Australian society.

At the end of the Vietnam War, of the more than 900 Vietnamese in Australia more than half were babies, 537 being Vietnamese orphans waiting for adoption. There were also 335 Colombo Plan¹ students and 130 students studying privately. The remaining Vietnamese were mostly Vietnamese nationals married to Australian servicemen who had been on tour in Vietnam. Sydney was the site for the arrival of the first refugees from Vietnam at the end of April 1975, a group of 283 orphaned children who were adopted by families throughout the country. Very soon after the end of the war Vietnamese started fleeing the country in large numbers to find refuge elsewhere. By far the bulk left by boat, often in small, unsafe vessels.

Although few left at first, the numbers grew and grew, from 5,247 for the whole of 1976 to a peak of 21,505 for one month only in November 1978. Since the war ended more than one million people have fled Vietnam by boat and most arrived in Southeast Asia to be housed in refugee camps until they were accepted to live in another country. Some refugee boats also arrived on Australia's northern shores, amounting to 2,000 people in total. From 1975 to 1976 Australia accepted 539 Vietnamese into the country. The number rapidly increased to a peak of 12,915 in 1979–80. Although since 1980 there have been fewer refugees coming from Vietnam, the number of Vietnamese joining family members under family migration programs has steadily increased. In 1990–91 the total number of Vietnamese arriving in Australia to settle was 13,248, the highest level to date.

The so-called first wave of Vietnamese migrants, from 1975 to 1978, were mostly those associated with the South Vietnamese government or military. The second wave flowed out of the country after 1979 and consisted primarily of Vietnamese people with Chinese ancestry who were being forced to flee Vietnam by the new regime. The third wave of Vietnamese migrants, those arriving after 1985, consisted mostly of family members of Vietnam-born Australians who gained entry under a family reunion program.

Examined in total these waves of migration reveal that the bulk of Vietnamese arrived in Australia from 1977 to 1992, with very much fewer arriving since then. The Vietnam-born population is thus unusual compared with most other migrant groups for having arrived in large numbers over a relatively short period.

The end of the war in April 1975 coincided with a liberalisation of Australia's immigration policy towards Asian-born people, as well as a greater involvement with the Asian region. International pressure mounted on Australia to provide humanitarian support for refugees and to ease the burden of housing and feeding Indochinese refugees that had fallen on its northern neighbours. Australia launched a refugee policy in 1978 which aimed at balancing these domestic and international pressures. The Vietnamese also arrived at the opening of the multicultural phase of cultural policy in Australia, a crucial moment of political change, signalling Australia's ability to assist in the maintenance of ethnic identification after settlement. Vietnamese settlement was seen by many as a test case, both for the policy of accepting a large number of Asian refugees and for the dream of multicultural harmony.

An analysis of the Census reveals that there has been significant social differentiation within the Vietnam-born population since 1986, with evidence of social mobility and an increase in levels of education and occupation. But there are also disturbing social and economic trends, such as continuing high levels of unemployment, low levels of English proficiency and high numbers of unskilled individuals. This is understandable when one considers that the Vietnamese are a relatively recently arrived group, and most have suffered family dislocation and alienation because of their settlement in a country with a very different cultural and historical heritage. Over time these economic, educational and social disadvantages will no doubt be reduced, but more effort must be expended in assisting the most disadvantaged Vietnamese – those with little English and few skills. This study recognises that there are a significant number

of Vietnamese people in this category who are socially isolated. Efforts were made to interview numerous individuals from low socioeconomic positions and not just those with upward social mobility who would naturally have more opportunities to visit national parks.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE VIETNAMESE IN THE MEDIA

In thinking about the experiences of Vietnamese people in Australia one cannot omit the impact of media representations on their reception by other Australians. A report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence concluded that most Anglo-Australians have little contact with ethnic minority groups and hence their understanding of these people is greatly influenced by the representations of them in the media. This study indicated that the ‘media play a key role in shaping attitudes where direct contact is absent’ (Meadows, 1995: 183). As Dreher (2000) and others have argued, the reporting of ‘ethnic’ news is predominantly focused on ‘problems’ such as ghettoisation, crime, drugs, deviance and conflict (see also Loo, 1994, 1998; Jakubowicz et al 1994; van Dijk, 1991). At the same time, cultural differences in Australian society are viewed as alien, foreign and unassimilable, and therefore a threat to national coherence (Dreher, *ibid*; Collins et al, 2000).

The links between Vietnamese migrants and the ‘alien’ landscape they are from is clear from early newspapers reporting on their arrival. In 1977 an editorial in *The Australian* newspaper argued that ‘we must check these troublesome political arrivals, and send them straight back...We must process these people medically, and fumigate every shirt and slipper they arrive with’ (*The Australian*, 8 November 1977). The idea that the Vietnamese arrivals might be carrying disease was partly due to their being from a ‘tropical’ climate, at a time when tropicality was associated with pestilence. The

definition of Vietnamese people as being 'unclean' creates a justification for ethnic separation as well as discomfort around physical closeness between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese people. In an earlier study two of my informants, Huy and Mai, often told me how they sensed the unease that non-Vietnamese had with touching or coming close to Vietnamese people (Thomas, Mandy, 1996: 44). As one young Vietnamese woman wrote: 'I feel sad when I meet some unfriendly people. Maybe there are some misunderstandings, or there is something wrong with my body language.' (Pine, 1994: 16). In this study an older woman, 72-year-old Quyen, told me: 'I think we don't see any rangers in the parks because maybe they avoid us. I'm used to that now. They don't come near you if you are Asian, they avoid us like we are diseased or something.' These two women are both expressing their sense of the non-engagement of Anglo-Australians with the Vietnamese which creates many unsettling social situations.

Although rangers may be avoiding such people, it may also be the case that rangers are spending less and less time in parks relating to the general public. The nature of NPWS work has changed considerably over the past decade, which means that rangers have many other activities they must undertake during their working hours and generally have less time to communicate with the public, or to wander through the parks ready to assist or explain. It is apparent that NPWS staff who are in a position to meet the public should make some effort in engaging more communicatively with Vietnamese visitors to national parks. This would have a very positive effect on Vietnamese visitors by making them feel more welcome, safer and more secure in national parks, and ultimately assist in mutual understanding and community harmony.

The relatively recent arrival of the Vietnamese in Australia, and their location in relatively few areas of our cities, for some time mitigated against the possibility of much social interaction between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. The images of the Vietnam War as well as the earlier media stereotypes of Vietnamese people arriving in

Australia assisted in constructing Vietnamese people in homogeneous and static ways, both negatively and positively. However, the backgrounds of the Vietnamese in Australia cover a vast array of educational, religious and political experiences with different preoccupations and future directions. The last decade has seen a dramatic turnaround in interactions between the Vietnamese and wider society with increasing political and social incorporation into mainstream society. Nevertheless, stereotyping persists and there is much work yet to be done to counteract these images and representations of a very diverse and dynamic community.

VIETNAMESE COMMUNITIES IN SYDNEY

The expression ‘Vietnamese community’ is an ambiguous one. For the Vietnamese in Australia there is not a community in the sense of a homogeneous, well-organised and stable group in what are otherwise diverse and fluid urban areas. There are networks and a notion of connectedness, as there is also some degree of spatial concentration in certain geographical locations. The notion of a Vietnamese community presupposes uniformity, yet there is enormous regional, religious and ethnic diversity in Vietnam. Also, intermarriage with non-Vietnamese in Australia, individual mobility across ethnic boundaries and the shifting politics within these boundaries over time mean that categories represented as fixed and immutable are constantly changing.

The Vietnamese population in Sydney is the largest of any city in Australia and supports flourishing community organisations, religious groups, restaurants, shops and other businesses. The Sydney Vietnamese community continues to be the power-base of the Australia-wide Vietnamese communities and occupies a prominent role in the many Vietnamese organisations, media outlets and religious groups across the nation. In April 1975 Sydney became the



1 City of Sydney	9 Concorde	17 Sutherland	25 City of Blacktown	33 Warringah
2 Woolahra	10 Strathfield	18 City of Campbelltown	26 Ryde	34 Ku-ring-gai
3 Waverley	11 Burwood	19 City of Liverpool	27 Hunter's Hill	35 Hornsby
4 Randwick	12 Ashfield	20 City of Bankstown	28 Lane Cove	36 Baulkham Hills
5 Botany	13 Canterbury	21 City of Fairfield	29 North Sydney	
6 Marrickville	14 Rockdale	22 Auburn	30 Mosman	
7 Leichhardt	15 Hurstville	23 City of Parramatta	31 Willoughby	
8 Drummoine	16 Kogarah	24 Holroyd	32 Manly	



site of the arrival of the first Vietnamese refugees, a group of orphaned children from Vietnam, and although the people arriving in boats from Vietnam landed mostly on the northern shores of the country, Sydney still attracted the largest number of them as a settlement site. Today, at the Maritime Museum of Sydney, the *Hong Hai*, one of the wooden fishing boats that carried refugees to Australia, is on permanent display.

Sydney has been the background for many triumphant successes of individual Vietnamese people and Vietnamese communities as a whole. The first associations and community groups began in the city in 1975–76, the Vietnamese Community Organisation in Australia was established in 1978, and numerous Vietnamese newspapers, including *Chuong Saigon*, *Chieu-Duong* and *Viet-Luan*, were first printed in Sydney. Sydney remains the site of the head offices of many Vietnamese community, religious and media organisations. Sydney’s telephone directory currently includes Nguyen among its ten most common surnames. Sydney Vietnamese playwrights, musicians and other artists have often been celebrated in mainstream artistic circles for their originality and dramatic force. Several Vietnamese comics and actors began their careers in Sydney. Many Sydney Vietnamese doctors and lawyers were the first in their profession to make their mark in Australian community life.

The Vietnamese population is dispersed throughout Sydney with geographical pockets of higher concentrations, such as in the Fairfield local government area of south-west Sydney, which includes the suburb of Cabramatta, and in the Marrickville local government area closer to the inner city. More than 50,000 people born in Vietnam, or with parents born in Vietnam, live in the south-west area of Sydney. A significant number of recently arrived northern

Figure 1 – Map of Sydney local government areas. Areas with the highest concentration of Vietnamese-Australians are highlighted (6 and 21).

Vietnamese live in the Marrickville area, although there is no distinct 'northern' or 'southern' community.

Cabramatta remains the heart of Vietnamese social and commercial life. The central pedestrian plazas of Cabramatta contain a remarkable number of primarily Vietnamese and Chinese restaurants and stores selling Asian foods, a considerable number of Vietnamese published materials, Vietnamese music, and videotapes and DVDs of Vietnamese entertainers. In coffee shops and restaurants, Vietnamese artworks hang alongside tourist posters of Vietnam. In shops crowded with silk and cotton fabrics, the blasts of Vietnamese flute, electronic guitar or love songs make it hard to be heard. In bookshops and newsagencies one can find numerous Sydney Vietnamese newspapers, an array of contemporary Vietnamese diasporic novels, as well as many of the southern Vietnamese works popular before 1975. Herbalists prepare their products in shops beside the offices of Chinese dentists and doctors trained in Australia. One can buy just about any food that is seen in Southeast Asia: green mangoes, starfruit, sugar-cane juice, Vietnamese basil, sugar bananas, dozens of leafy green vegetables, seaweeds, pork cuts, and fresh seafood. Hairdressers, tax agents, games arcades, travel agencies, manicurists and butcher shops all add to the animated street life.

The Sydney Vietnamese are a relatively young and recently arrived population, with most people in the age group 20–40 years and with the peak year of arrival in Australia being 1991. Of those with qualifications, most are in the fields of engineering, natural and physical sciences, and business and administration, with a growing number in health, social welfare and education. However, the labour force participation of the Sydney Vietnamese is still relatively low and unemployment levels are chronically high, particularly among young people who have arrived in the last ten years. South-west Sydney is developing an underclass of Vietnamese people who have rarely been employed, have few skills and a low level of English proficiency.

Because of these difficulties the range of employment options is limited for many people. A large number of Vietnamese women work in their own homes, sewing clothes for the garment industry, for low wages and with poor conditions. Many find it difficult to get out of the cycle of unskilled low-paid work, which reinforces their social isolation and lack of engagement with wider society. Added to these stresses are the trauma of dislocation and family fragmentation that is still painfully felt by most Vietnamese families.

The rich and varied religious life of the Sydney Vietnamese is revealed through a great diversity of religious expression and places of worship. Ancestor worship is widely practised as an element of the Confucian tradition, but it is not unusual to combine ancestor worship with other religious practices. While Buddhism is the major religion there are also a significant number of Catholics, Baptists and other religious groups, such as Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai who have a popular temple in Wiley Park. The first Vietnamese-Australian Catholic priest was ordained in Sydney in 1975 and the first Vietnamese Buddhist society was formed in 1979. Three of the largest and most well-attended Buddhist temples are the Phuoc Hue Buddhist Pagoda in Wetherill Park, the Phap Bao Pagoda in Smithfield and the Huyen Quang Temple in Bankstown. There are very many other Vietnamese temples, meeting rooms and churches across Sydney. Religion is a very important focus of the Vietnamese communities and the remarkable religious diversity of the Vietnamese has contributed a great deal to wider society in terms of providing a variety of religious practice, places of worship and colourful ceremonies, and more importantly by enhancing tolerance and cultural pluralism across the city.

The Vietnamese Community Organisation is large and very active in the wider community, being the umbrella organisation for many others, such as the Vietnamese Women's Association and various youth organisations. The organisation is active in community welfare and in staging the two main festivals, the Moon Festival and

the Lunar New Year (known as *Tết*), which are usually held each year as large public celebrations in south-west Sydney. Recently the Vietnamese Community Organisation has been appointing dynamic young people as leaders, signalling the level of support among the Sydney Vietnamese for community change.

The full spectrum of political activities and beliefs is exhibited among the Sydney Vietnamese. Many individuals are very active in homeland politics. A significant number of northerners who came to the south in 1954 and held important military and government roles in the southern regime have at various times held key positions in the Vietnamese Community Organisation. However, the organisation has recently been moving away from the more extreme focus on homeland politics towards a greater welfare role in the community. Although it always had that role, priority was previously given to working towards democracy in Vietnam and the overthrow of the communist regime. While this is still a keen interest for some, the fire and vitriol have moved out of their actions as the government in Vietnam has attempted market reform and opened up its economy. As the decades pass since the communist takeover, many younger Vietnamese in Australia do not share their parents' interests in the politics of their homeland, and most older Vietnamese are more interested in visiting their families in Vietnam than in maintaining bitter disputes over the war. Nevertheless, there still remain many older Vietnamese, many of whom fought against the communists, were imprisoned in re-education camps and suffered at their hands, who will carry to the grave the pain and bitterness at the loss of their homeland. It is these men who are the most active in the political movements to restore democracy to Vietnam and it is Sydney where many of them live. While the political situation in Vietnam is still an important issue for the community as a whole, there has been a definite shift in priorities away from the past and towards a focus on the contemporary situation of the Vietnamese in Australia and their future here.

Many Vietnamese are active in local Australian politics. It is popular knowledge among many Vietnamese in Sydney that Melbourne has a higher number of Vietnamese academics while Sydney is the hub of political life, but this is gradually changing because of internal migration of Vietnamese between cities, as well as the changing nature of both communities as they evolve with the passage of time since first settlement.

Sydney is home to many artists, writers, playwrights and musicians who were already established arts practitioners in Vietnam. The Vietnamese Community Organisation actively promotes Vietnamese arts, by both more established as well as younger artists. The efflorescence of youth cultural activities is a hybrid blend of global popular culture, traditional culture and mainstream Australian socio-cultural life.

When discussing Vietnamese migration to Australia today we cannot forget the strong and continuing relationships with relatives and friends in Vietnam, but more importantly we must acknowledge the increasingly complex set of transnational relations of the Vietnamese worldwide. Not only do the Vietnamese have extensive networks of relationships across the globe, but there is also a continuous flow of information, ideas and commerce through these networks. For this reason, when we look to the future phases of Vietnamese migration, we are sure to be seeing an increase in global travel and trade, as well as the profound impact of the internet on the social, economic and political ties of the Vietnamese worldwide. This is important for the purposes of this study as the intensification of the flow of ideas and people between the homeland and Australia and with other Vietnamese throughout the world is very likely to impact on both the nascent conservation movement in Vietnam and the attitudes of Australian-Vietnamese towards their homeland.

Vietnamese communities in Australia will undoubtedly display increasing levels of participation and success in wider society, as well as being faced with tensions between the generations brought

up in different cultural worlds. The communities live against a backdrop of media prejudice and tangible hardships because of their low socioeconomic position and relative disadvantage. They are often expected to symbolically represent both the successes and failures of multiculturalism and Asian immigration, but the life experiences, imagination and strength of Vietnamese individuals disrupt any easy generalisations about the community as a whole and clearly point to a dynamic, exciting, but perhaps turbulent future.

¹ The Colombo Plan was a government initiative to educate and train students from developing countries in Australian academic and government institutions. The plan was focused on training promising young professionals for key industry, academic and government positions in their homelands.

chapter 3

ASIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPES



In Asia we just don't think of 'nature' like people do in the West. Just look at the history of it and the way our writers and religious leaders have talked about it, and you'll see that it has a totally different meaning. So of course national parks are something foreign to us.

Nhung (aged 38)

Nhung's comment reveals the sense that many Vietnamese have of the very different conceptions of nature in Asia, where Vietnam is located both geographically and culturally. In his study of ethnicity and national parks Martin Thomas (2001) explored the Western construction of 'nature' and how ideas about national parks in Australia arose from these conceptions. In this chapter these ideas about the cultural constructions of nature will be further elucidated by examining Asian perceptions of landscape in the contemporary moment. While it is important to emphasise that Asia is heterogeneous and diverse, cultural affinities within the region were frequently mentioned by many of the Vietnamese in this study.

'Asia' is both a geographical term and a historical construction and may cover an array of places, from Iran and Iraq (western Asia) to India and Pakistan (south Asia) across to China, east Asia and Southeast Asia. Historically, the region has been inhabited by civilisations which have interacted with each other over centuries. Numerous different philosophical streams have informed the different cultural groupings of Asia: Persian, Islamic, Indian, Buddhist, Chinese and Japanese (Carr and Mahalingam, 1997). Asia is neither a 'cultural, religious or linguistic unity, nor a unified world' (Ching, 1998: 70). The global environmental movements and the impact of trade, religion, colonisation, war, media and migration have further complicated any notion of Asian environmental history as insular. Because of the diversity of Asia, an array of understandings of nature exist across the region, although some general key themes arise in the literature. These are: ecological and cultural diversity; historical changes to the environment; religious meanings embodied in nature; and human engagement and intervention in the 'natural' landscape.

ASIAN PERCEPTIONS OF LANDSCAPE

Each of us needs to ‘belong to’ a place, such as a retreat centre or a monastery, where each feature of the landscape, the sounds of the bell and even the buildings are designed to remind us to return to awareness...The fresh and silent woods help you to remain in awareness. When awareness is well rooted, when you can maintain it without faltering, then you may wish to return to the city and remain there, less troubled.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart* (1992: 24–5, 37–8)

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh describes above the ways in which in Buddhist practice, the natural and human environment are inseparable and together may assist in achieving mindfulness and wisdom for those who practice meditation. This reflects a particular tradition of Buddhism, the Theravada tradition, which has a historical association with monastic communities practising their spirituality in remote forests or other isolated natural environments (Conze, 1960). A great variety of forms of religious practice are associated with the word Buddhism. There are three main Buddhist traditions among Buddhist communities in Australia – the Mahayana (mainly practised in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam), the Theravada (mainly practiced in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand) and the Vajrayana (or Tibetan) traditions. Most Vietnamese Buddhists in Australia adhere to Mahayana, but will also visit monasteries which follow the other traditions as they are all seen under the umbrella of a broader Buddhist understanding of the world.

Many of the classic works of Asian philosophers and scholars reveal differing ideas about nature and aesthetics. These works include the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the works of Confucius and Mencius, all of which have subtly different interpretations of nature and its relationship to human communities (Kupperman, 2001). Likewise, artists from Asian societies have a range of ways of representing nature (Watson, 1979). To complicate this picture of diversity further, not all non-western views of nature

and the environment are available as many have not been described in writing (Simmons, 1993: 11). Many societies had highly developed understandings of the natural environment which were part of an oral tradition and are only available to us through ethnographic studies. This is the case for many of the small-scale indigenous societies throughout Asia. The world views of these language groups may be marginalised and difficult to access because of the overriding nation-states they live within, and the global religions which dominate. There is clearly no 'Asian' view of the landscape, just as there is no universal western view. Over the globe, ideas about the natural environment are contested even within a given society (Bruun and Kalland, 1995: 4). There is also no one cultural orientation to nature in Asia, which is a region of vastly different environments, cultures and economies.

It is also important not to dichotomise the differences between western and non-western views of nature. Many Asian cultures also distinguish between nature and culture, the wild and the tame, even though these are usually contextualised together as a moral unity (Bruun and Kalland, 1995: 11). It is possible, however, to argue that prior to industrialisation many Asian societies linked nature to culture as an inseparable relationship. For example, the idea of *feng shui* in China is one that sees the auspiciousness of placing human structures in particular configurations into the landscape. Feng shui also involves not only attributing cultural meaning (particularly luck or good fortune) to natural phenomena (such as the position of rivers, trees and hills), but also transforming natural shapes into ones which are seen to be more auspicious. In this understanding, natural forces are harnessed to enable productive human activities within an environment. Human success and failure are produced by the landscape and the forces of the earth which determine the ideal sites for houses and graves (Bruun, 1995: 175).

As well as feng shui, the popularity of such activities as *bonsai*, where plants are made miniature through tying and cutting, is yet

another example of the value associated with ‘taming’ or controlling nature. Bonsai is very popular in Vietnam as well as China. As one of the interviewees, Hai (aged 57), stated: ‘My bonsai garden gives me great pleasure as I can create my own trees, manipulate what’s already beautiful. It makes me happy.’ In Japan, the idea of ‘wrapping’ nature, of creating gardens rather than uncontrolled wilderness, has resonances with the Chinese and Vietnamese views of intervening in natural environmental processes. The earliest gardens in Japan were set apart from wilderness and created as private spaces in which one could communicate with the gods (Hendry, 2000: 191). As this form of control of nature spread through Japan, the general notion of ‘arranging’ nature came to be presented in a certain defined way in which certain views or landscapes were reproduced in miniature in gardens and later in ‘natural’ places throughout the country (ibid.: 192). In this way the deliberate control and transformations of nature were a model for social reality and an organising principle throughout society. In Japan, the concept of ‘wrapping’ nature appears to structure the packaging and presentation of the body, and of food and gifts (Hendry, 1993: 171).

The nature/culture opposition but enduring interrelationship is also evident in the Chinese idea of yin and yang which associates women with nature and its life-giving but also dangerous and wild potential, and men with culture, training and actions which impact on nature. Nature again in this conception is constantly undergoing human transformation and manipulation in an ongoing interrelationship. The idea of yin/yang is thus not always dichotomous or setting an opposition between nature and culture, but rather should be seen as dynamic and contextual (Bruun and Kalland, 1995: 14). Chinese cosmology including feng shui and yin/yang have influenced Vietnam as Vietnam was colonised by China for 1,000 years in its history. Although there are different terms in Vietnamese for these beliefs, the conceptual elements are

the same, as the following story from my own fieldwork notes illustrates:

When I first met Huy he was not on speaking terms with his brother Manh. Huy had chosen a house to buy for their extended family – for his parents, his wife Hoa and their three children, as well as Manh and his new wife. He had been in Australia for five years and this was his first house. However, he needed the financial support of Manh and Hoa's family to make it possible. Manh preferred to be near his own wife's family in Marrickville, in the inner west of Sydney, yet Huy's choice was near the centre of Cabramatta. Manh had refused to enter the deal and did not even want to see the house Huy had suggested. After persuasion from their parents Manh reluctantly agreed to see the house. Huy took the whole family to the site in order to persuade them. He pointed out the propitious features of the house and the block: first it was a very square block, it was on a sloping street but not at the top or bottom, its front door was hidden from the street, and it had a thick hedge along the street side of the house. It had four bedrooms and was within walking distance of Cabramatta's centre. As Manh heard Huy point out the features of the house and the block of land, which all conformed well to the prescriptions of Vietnamese geomancy, he began to change his mind. The basis for geomantic predictions are found in the cosmology of Taoism, which defines the preferred arrangements of objects in the material world as incorporating spiritual values. Manh was finally convinced and agreed to contribute money to the purchase of the house under the condition that, after one year, Huy would contribute financial support to a house in Marrickville for Manh and his wife. The argument was settled. The day Huy's extended family moved into the house Manh noticed a banana tree in the back garden that no-one had pointed out before. The tree was laden with green bananas, and one of the hands of bananas was like an enormous double hand, with more than a dozen bananas suspended from it. Manh was so excited he ran into the house shouting. 'Huy, this is the right house. This is a very lucky house. Look at the banana tree. We will have good fortune here. You were right, older brother. This is a special place.' Everyone poured out of the house to see the banana tree. Huy and Manh's parents went up to the tree and prayed to it, quietly muttering incantations for prosperity and good fortune. Here, the physical environment is

examined for signs it may bring regarding the future fortunes of the family. (Thomas, Mandy, 1999: 41–2)

Despite ideas such as yin/yang and feng shui, it is clear that where there is often a popular belief that Asian religions are more ‘ecologically’ concerned, the evidence to the contrary is abundant. It is apparent that Asian perceptions of nature have not prevented intensive environmental destruction and widespread pollution. A Buddhist heritage in Japan, for example, did not prevent its industrialisation at an environmental cost (Coates, 1998: 99). The Chinese landscape ‘was one of the most transformed in the pre-modern world as the result of its reshaping’ for cultivation, engineering, irrigation and the harvesting of wood (Elvin, 2000: 9). In the case of Vietnam, clearly the impact of numerous economic crises, war, the political system and overpopulation has had the effect of environmental devastation (as will be discussed in a later section). There are many different religious movements in Vietnam, with Buddhism the most important and widespread, yet the values of Buddhism in relation to the environment remain at the level of ethos rather than practice. For this reason, although religion forms an important background to the way in which the landscape is imagined and experienced, it has had little impact on environmental policy in Vietnam.

Although history and politics have had more impact on changes to the environment in Vietnam than religious perceptions of landscape, the social significance of pilgrimage sites and historical relics continue to structure much of the everyday experience of the landscape. Similarly, in Thailand, where Buddhism historically spread through a process of absorption of many of the pre-existing local religions, there is an ‘omnipresence of Buddhism in the landscape’ (Byrne, 1993: 25). Buddhist objects such as statues and stone stupas are seen throughout Thailand, Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. These sites are visited not just by monks, but also by a growing number of the general populace in a recent efflorescence of interest in these Buddhist places of worship throughout the region (Hamilton, 2002).

Environmental movements in Asia often indigenise elements of western environmentalism to create particularly distinctive forms of Asian environmentalism (Lee and So, 1999: 291). These forms often incorporate ‘traditional Asian religious symbols, cultural symbols, values and rituals’ to challenge dominant regimes (ibid.: 291). In Taiwan, for example, religious festivals and temples became the site of protests against the environmental pollution created by companies. In the Philippines, the ‘spirit of ancestors believed to reside in the mountains, trees, and lakes are used as claims by indigenous communities’ to prevent developers encroaching on their land (ibid.). The most obvious point to make about how Vietnam in particular is positioned within the global environmental movements is to say that ideas in Vietnam about nature have never been static, and have been influenced by both Chinese occupation of the country, French colonialism and Soviet influence more recently. The most profound environmental changes in Vietnam have taken place in the last twenty-five years through the industrialisation and modernisation processes and the move towards a market economy.

The recent environmental changes are not the only time that Asia has undergone profound environmental transformation, and therefore the easy equation between ‘westernisation’ and ‘environmental decay’ cannot be made. In China, for example, forests contracted between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC so much that forestry officials were appointed to manage the problem (Coates, 1998: 99). For many scholars, such as Ramachandra Guha, the ‘western identification of Eastern traditions as eco-friendly precursors of biocentrism is just another glib, patronising and highly selective exercise in the western construction of Oriental “otherness” which favours an elite mysticism and perpetuates the stereotype of the eastern mind as non-rational, pre-scientific and non-assertive’ (Coates, 1998: 100). This present study does not take Vietnamese attitudes towards the environment as being monolithic and unchanging, nor does it argue that ‘Asian’ attitudes towards nature

are either more ecologically correct or more destructive than those in the West. Rather, it seeks to unravel the influences on Vietnamese perceptions of the landscape both in Vietnam and in Australia, and in doing so looks at the contextual and shifting aspects of these views and understandings.

chapter 4

LANDSCAPES IN VIETNAM



I haven't encountered anything 100 per cent 'natural' in Vietnam. Human hands have played a big role in shaping the country into what it is today.

Nam (aged 23)

It's like people have added a few strokes in the painting of nature to make it look better, for it to have a soul instead of complete wilderness.

Nam Hoai (aged 23)

These comments highlight the human involvement in the changes to the Vietnamese natural environment, and the positive values attributed to this intervention. This chapter outlines the general geography and environmental background of contemporary Vietnam and describes how the human changes to the landscape are viewed by Vietnamese-Australians.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a relatively narrow strip running north-south along the eastern coast of the Indochinese Peninsula (see Figure 1). It has 3,000 kilometres of coastline with many islands stretched along it. Mountain ranges extend along Vietnam's border with China in the north and along the borders of Laos and Cambodia in the west. The highest point is Mount Fan Si Pan in the northwest of the country at 3,143 metres, although average mountain ranges are around 1,000 metres. Vietnam is currently undergoing the transition to a market economy. According to statistics issued as recently as September 2001, Vietnamese GDP per capita is approximately US\$400 (see www.dfat.gov.au/geo/vietnam/vietnam_brief.html), and leading exports are crude oil, coal, rice, coffee, textiles, marine products, shoes, tea, nuts and rubber (Wikramanayake, 1997: 4).

Vietnam is endowed with a range of habitats from temperate and subtropical rainforests in the north to tropical dry deciduous and

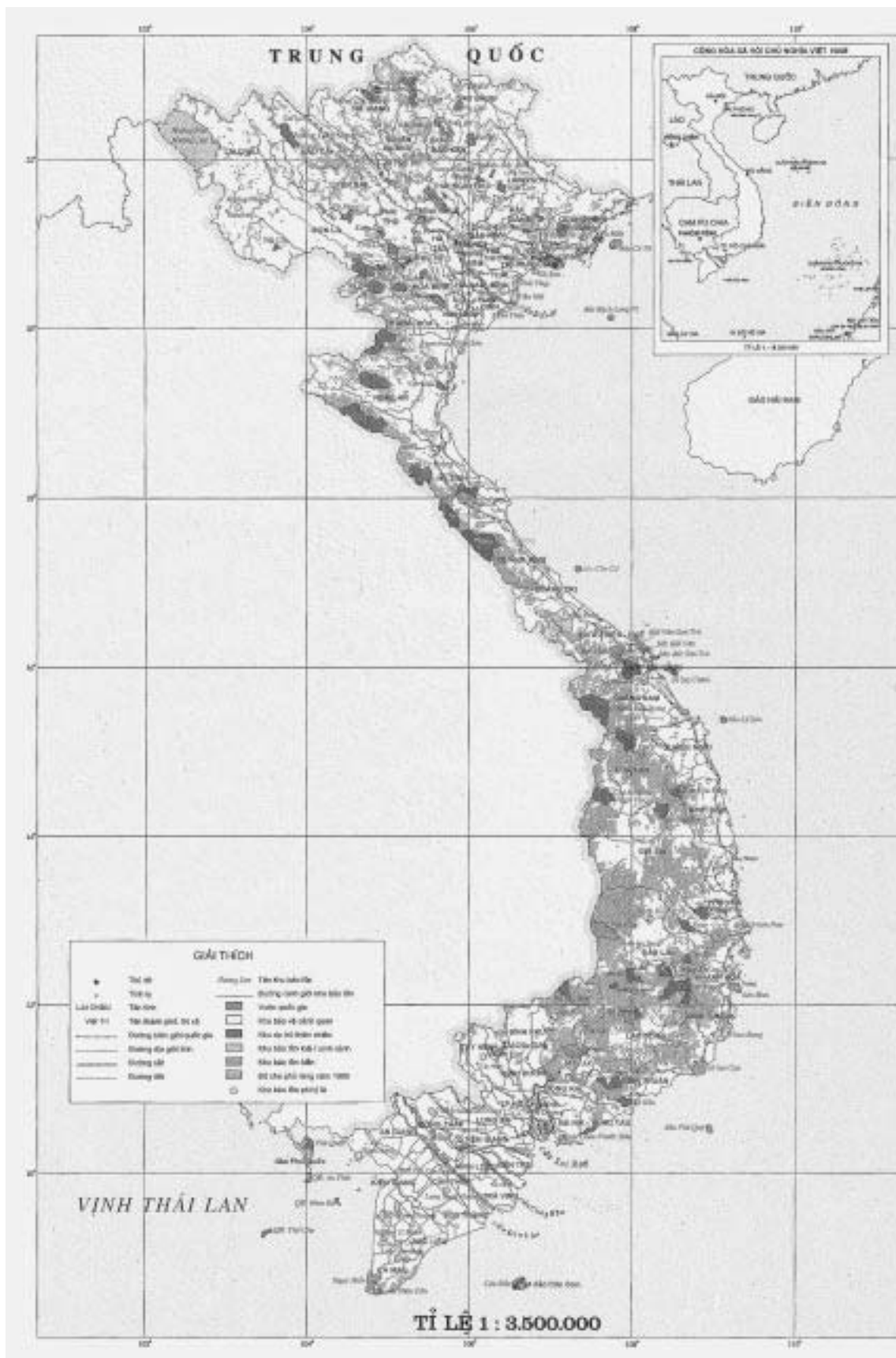
Figure 2 – Map of Vietnam



wet evergreen forests in the south (see Figure 3). There are also swamp forests, mangroves, tropical pine forests and mixed bamboo forests throughout the country (Wikramanayake, 1997: 4). Vietnam supports approximately 275 mammal species, 826 bird species, 260 reptile species, 82 amphibian species, 500 freshwater species, 2,000 marine fish species and 12,000 plant species (Le Trong Trai and Richardson 1999: 2). Recent discoveries of several new species of mid-sized mammals (a type of ox and a deer) are ample evidence of Vietnam's rich natural heritage. However, despite Vietnam's remarkable array of fauna, it has one of the highest population densities in Asia which is the primary threat to the country's natural resources and the long-term persistence of its biological diversity. Over the past few decades there has been a significant loss in natural forest cover due to wood cutting, agricultural encroachment resulting from population pressures and lack of economic alternatives, ecologically unsound land use practices, and poor protection and maintenance of natural forests and plantations (Wikramanayake, 1997: 4). Gross deforestation has been accompanied by degradation of arable land, soil erosion, destruction of water catchments, diminished groundwater sources, siltation and ecological degradation of coastal and submerged areas, and a loss of overall biodiversity (Le Trong Trai and Richardson 1999: 1). Economic growth, infrastructure development, population growth, protracted wars, and the development of agriculture, forestry and fishing industries have all contributed to an over-exploitation of Vietnam's natural resources.

The threats to biodiversity in Vietnam come from violation of fishing and hunting regulations, loss of habitat, over-exploitation, pollution and uncontrolled trade in wild animals (both local and international) (Vo Quy, 1998: 18). One of the major threats to biodiversity conservation is from the hunting and snaring of mammals and birds. Most of the hunting is for the purpose of selling

Figure 3 – Map of Vietnam showing forests (shaded areas)



the meat as a delicacy or for use in traditional medicines. Timmins et al (1999: vi) report that since snaring does not select which animals to catch but captures many large mammals that are then discarded, it has had a profound impact on whole communities of animals, leading to ecological devastation in many areas. Primates are mainly hunted for medicinal purposes and recent studies record very low numbers because even though hunting with guns has been reduced because of the recall of firearms, snaring continues unabated (Timmins et al, 1999: vi). The primate species in Vietnam are one of the most interesting primate assemblages in the world, however very large numbers of primate taxa are presently threatened. Despite the fact that primate numbers are rapidly declining and international interest has been sparked, the most recent primate surveys in Vietnam have provided alarming results, ‘suggesting that primate conservation in Vietnam is at a very critical stage, with the imminent extinction of some taxa not unlikely’ (Timmins et al, 1999: 1).

Although Vietnam’s first protected area – Cuc Phuong National Park in northern Vietnam – was established in 1968, the concept of national parks as pristine wilderness is an imported concept which

has created an uneasy set of relations between local people and the State in Vietnam wherever a national park has been declared. In national parks in ethnic minority areas, hunting animals is either for food, to keep animals off crops or to demonstrate hunting prowess. The skulls of hunted animals are kept by hunters as trophies and stored in the rafters of the homes of numerous ethnic minority groups to show one’s prowess as a hunter



Figure 4 – Advertisement 1 for Primate Rescue Centre, Vietnam

(Joanne Harding, personal communication). Snaring is very intensive in national parks and protected areas, taking place not far from villages. As Timmins et al (1999: 32–3) report, there are well-established routes to take captured animals to distant markets as these networks of people make economic gains from primate hunting. A relatively large number of these animals are eaten in rural villages (as high as 50 per cent), principally those animals which die during capture. There is also a trade in the bones of certain primates ‘to use in preparing a medicinal stock or balm (cao khi), although the meat is also believed to have medicinal qualities’ (Timmins et al, 1999:

32–3). Figures 4 and 5 are part of a pro-conservation advertisement in *Heritage*, Vietnam’s airline magazine, and show primates at the Primate Rescue Centre in Cuc Phuong National Park.

The Hanoi Zoo has placards above all of the animal cages explaining each animal’s name, habitat, life span, breeding habits and usefulness to humans. ‘Pharmaceutical value’ is listed under almost every animal. Despite this, very few Vietnamese-Australians interviewed for this study made reference to the endangered situation of wild animals in Vietnam and generally seemed unaware of either the unique range of wildlife in Vietnam or the alarming threats to it. In contrast, forest destruction in Vietnam was often mentioned:

Interviewer: Dao (aged 27) commented that wood is highly valued in Vietnam. I wasn’t sure what she meant by wood, but then she explained that tables or cupboards made from old heavy wood are very valuable. There are special pictures that are unique to Vietnam. They usually have a black background which hosts images of



Figure 5 – Advertisement 2 for Primate Rescue Centre, Vietnam

Vietnam created by the insides of shells. These are called Son Mai. The majority of the actual picture is made from wood that is lacquered or polished to make it black. Many Vietnamese homes have such pictures (including mine). It is important to note that Dao indicated that the actual useful things made from special woods are valuable, but that wood itself is not valuable in its raw or natural form. She knows that most of the trees have been cut down and sold overseas so there is not much left.

The wars in Vietnam that lasted from 1943 until 1975 caused much devastation to the environment. The United States military unleashed 72 million litres of defoliants over Vietnam's forests and arable land and also razed forests by bulldozing. Added to this, millions of bombs and shells were dropped on the country. The impact of the war on the environment was severe, but after the war ended the government's priority was to create residential and cultivable areas and to detoxify land which had been affected by war damage (Vo Quy, 1998). The rapid population growth since the end of the war, coupled with extreme poverty, has placed the environment under increasing strain. While the beauty of the landscape in Vietnam was remembered by many interviewed for this study, others recalled an unattractive landscape. Kim (aged 35) tells a story of poverty and an environment damaged by war and pollution:

I lived in a small, poor hamlet close to a 'well-known river' in Ho Chi Minh City: well-known for its dirt and pollution. Everybody in Ho Chi Minh City knows the suburb named 'Bridge Y'. The river has been running through the inner city for years, but it has no poetic associations, it just had one 'task' which was to bring the rubbish around before going to the sea. The river has always been full of rubbish, thick black in colour and very stinky when the tide goes out. I have suffered from that situation. I wish I could have got out, but how could I? We belonged to a class of poor people who had to struggle in a difficult life to survive. I lived in Ho Chi Minh City, but do not think I lived in a luxurious place. My mother had to contrive ways of getting us out of there, including going to clear wasteland for cultivation at Long Khanh in the countryside. I used to stay in Long Khanh during school holidays to farm with my mother. There, I could

see the 'natural landscape': bare hills which looked withered and faded. But surrounding the hills were the river and the small waterways which genuinely made me feel very close to nature...at least I had a place where I could be close to nature, away from the black river in the city, even though it was very hard work on the farm. Long Khanh had nothing special about it to tell. It was very hot, so after a hard day working, we usually went swimming. It was great and simple leisure over there. We could see the small forest far away, but we were scared to go too deeply into it because I once saw one of our farming neighbours get killed by a landmine. After the war in 1975 there were still a lot of remnants of bombs laying deep underground which were very hard to detect. It was a sad memory, but this was the real life of poor people as we were. We preferred swimming; that was the best activity there. My sisters and I used to cut the banana trees into small pieces to make buoys for floating on the river. We also went into the field to catch shells and crabs for fresh food.

Similarly, Cuong (aged 24) described how: 'I lived in the poor, populated, and polluted part of Hanoi. There were people everywhere, and lots of rubbish.' Says Huy (aged 25):

I lived in a busy district in Saigon, right in the central business area. Obviously there were more people and motorcycles than trees and vacant land...I suppose since it is located on the banks of the Saigon River there was a bit of a 'water feature' in the heart of the city which gave the densely populated city a bit of breathing space. At night people always take their bikes and ride along the river. But nowadays people build houses everywhere, even on the water, and pollute the water so much that the whole thing is wrecked.

When asked to describe what was special about the landscape in Vietnam, Huy-Han (aged 21), who came to Australia at the age of nine, said: 'Well, it's very flat, polluted, dirty and messy.'

These depressing images of Vietnam's pollution are most frequently conveyed by younger Vietnamese, usually aged in their twenties and always under the age of forty. It appears that older Vietnamese people tend to remember the landscape more positively, often idyllically reminiscing about the countryside, whereas younger people focus on their memories of the urban environments of

Vietnam. In both groups some memories are privileged over others, and this is most likely to be related to the differing sense of loss experienced by the two groups, enabling the younger group to be more critical and emotionally distant from their homeland.

The war and poverty also prevented movement around the country. Many Vietnamese in Australia had never really travelled much within Vietnam before their departure. The landscapes were often viewed as threatening because of the presence of the military or resistance forces. When asked how a walk in a national park in Vietnam is different to one in Australia, Loc (aged 36) said: 'I never had chance to walk in Vietnam.' Similarly, when asked about visiting pilgrimage sites in Vietnam, Lan (aged 45) explained: 'I wanted to but never had a chance to as I was there during the wartime, and it was dangerous to go to the remote areas.' Alissa (aged 46) commented:

I didn't know what a national park was in Vietnam as during the war we hardly went to the bush because it was the best place for the Viet Cong to hide and we were afraid of being shot dead or taken away by them. Now I know there are parks in Vietnam, but I'm not sure which ones are considered to be national parks.

Many of those interviewed commented that poverty had prevented them from enjoying the landscape. Visiting national parks in Vietnam is even now still viewed as only available to the affluent leisured classes. Mai (aged 49) said:

I lived in a quiet and small town far away from the city called Tan Phu, where local residents survived by selling handmade products, such as straw mats and bags, as well as making beancurd or rearing stock. Tan Phu was arid and hot. There was nothing to call landscape there. My parents had nine children, therefore the only thing on our minds was how to earn money for our living. We never thought about going anywhere.

These memories of a life of struggle in Vietnam impact dramatically on an individual's knowledge of the natural environment in Vietnam and their appreciation of it in Australia. As will be shown later, for

these people, national parks in Australia represent freedom from both poverty and political repression.



43-year-old Mai arrived in Australia with her two young children in the early 1980s. Her experiences of the Australian landscape are filtered through her family and friends as these are the people she goes with on outings. Although not particularly aware of the names of the national parks she has been to, Mai has learnt to

appreciate the pleasurable atmosphere they provide for family barbecues and recreation. Although not yet fluent in English, Mai is involved in many activities in the community, visiting Vietnamese people in prisons and detention centres and assisting women in the wider Vietnamese community. She is aware that many Vietnamese people living in Australia still do not have the opportunity to experience the full range of outdoor activities as they are caught up in the difficulties of settling into a very different society.

The following young men aged in their twenties spoke of the differences between ideas about garbage and waste in Vietnam and Australia.

Interviewer: Dinh (aged 26) told me that often newly arrived Vietnamese migrants litter profusely because they don't know any better. He referred to his experience when he first came to Australia: 'In Vietnam there were no rubbish bins. You live your whole life throwing rubbish on the streets and it's hard to change habits. But over time I learnt the rules of the new country and respected it.' Dinh said that in Vietnam people are too busy trying to make a living and so they only worry about themselves: 'If people are dumping rubbish in a place and making it smell, as long as it doesn't affect you it doesn't matter.' He remembered that when he was at school in Vietnam, they did teach the children to preserve and protect the environment, but this was only theoretical and was never observed in practice.

When asked to describe the differences between the natural environment in Vietnam and Australia, Dieu-Linh (aged 26) explained:

Well, one has a hot, humid climate while the other is dry. One has floods every year while the other has permanent drought and bushfires. Also, Vietnam is a highly populated, agricultural country, every piece of land is cultivated, the rice field is as natural as you can get. Here in Australia, everything is untouched, there are so many places where no-one has set foot. If you think with a Vietnamese mentality, this is a waste of natural resources because the land is not being put to good use.

Explaining the difference between a walk in a national park in Vietnam compared to one in Australia, Dieu-Linh remarked:

If you consider the rice fields and orchards to be Vietnamese national parks, then obviously the difference is the human factor. Everything in Vietnam has been changed by humans whereas they haven't in Australia. You'll feel closer to nature here than in Vietnam, but Vietnam will make you realise that humans can bring beauty to a piece of wasteland.

Interviewer: In Vietnam, Minh (aged 25) lived in Saigon, Quan 4. He described the place he lived at as a dump. 'The worst of the worst in Saigon.' This is an area where there was crime, murder, broken families, everything negative, nothing good. Minh says that, even now, it is still like that and people are afraid to let their children go near that area, but he grew up there. His house was quite small and whenever it rained the house would flood. His father used to put concrete on the floors to get leverage, and so they would be closer and closer to the ceiling to the point where his father had to bend over to walk through the door. He remembered getting electric shocks all the time because of how wet the house was. Houses were built very close to each other with narrow paths at the front on which only one motorbike could get through at a time. When asked to name something special about the Vietnamese landscape Minh mentioned the man-made islands made of sand with trees growing on them, located in the middle of a big bay of water that extends beyond Ben Tre. Minh said that the Vietnamese people are very skilled. They can make useful things out of almost everything that's thrown away,

including bicycles made from aluminium cans. 'As long as we can make money from it, we can do it. The Vietnamese waste nothing.' He said that while in Australia we throw things away, in Vietnam they recycle everything, including old tyres which they use to make thongs. When he was in Vietnam, Minh didn't go far away from home because it would take his parents away from making money. 'After living [in Australia] and then going back [to Vietnam] for a holiday, of course we go everywhere, we've got money. Over there they can't stop trying to make money. Many people live their whole lives not knowing anything beyond the two-kilometre radius around their home.

This range of experiences and memories of Vietnam from the perspective of these three young men who have spent half their lives in Vietnam and half in Australia is that pollution and poverty blight their image of the homeland but do not remove the romantic beauty of the country. To those who left, the Vietnamese landscape is both tainted by over-population and lack of environmental concern, at the same time as it is transformed by human hands and the ingenuity of a people skilled at making objects out of discarded materials and making 'nature' more productive as a resource.

The Vietnamese government recognised the necessity for conserving and rehabilitating the natural environment at the end of the 1970s in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Its first priority was to provide areas for settling war veterans. The second priority was chemical detoxification and remediation for human resettlement of areas affected by chemical defoliants. The third priority was reforestation, establishing protected areas and the conversion of forests into cultivated land. Only in the 1990s did the emphasis on conservation move towards protecting endangered habitats and species. Vietnam currently has proposals for 105 protected areas, about 3 per cent of the land areas of Vietnam. If these proposals are adopted there will be 10 national parks, 61 nature reserves and 34 cultural or historical sites. However, despite these proposals and the efforts of many international wildlife organisations and nature

conservation agencies, the future of biodiversity in Vietnam remains grim. Although Vietnam is party to numerous international agreements protecting biodiversity and damage to the environment from various sources, in practice it is difficult to enforce these agreements in a country undergoing rapid social change and political reform, and where an increase in the standard of living and an improvement in the health of the population are the key governmental concerns.



21-year-old Thao is a remarkable young Vietnamese woman, deeply connected to Vietnam and also engaged in assisting Vietnamese people in both Australia and overseas. A law student at the University of Sydney, she is also on the National Youth Roundtable and is committed to contributing to the emerging and vibrant

Vietnamese youth culture in Australia. Her sense of wanting to achieve social justice and recognition for the Vietnamese in Australia motivates her to work on diverse projects in many different areas of Sydney, and to travel a great deal both locally and internationally. She is a young person who loves both the landscapes and spaces of Vietnam and Australia, is highly articulate about the contrasts and appreciative of the differences.

VIETNAMESE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

In exploring Vietnam's natural environments I follow Sauer (1963: 343) by employing the expression 'cultural landscape' to refer to the relationship between society and its environment: 'the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group'. The relationship between Vietnamese people and the environments in Vietnam is strongly focused on the cultural shaping that has

impacted on those environments. The following personal account of Thao (aged 21) reveals the often profound emotional link to the environment and the way in which life is so deeply contextualised within it:

The second time I went back was indeed an unbelievable experience. My family were initially from the country areas of Vietnam, where the landscape is littered with rice paddy fields and water buffaloes. I mainly stayed in Go Dau with my grandmother. Although it was in the country, we still lived in the central business part of the village, however when dusk fell, the village became quiet and tranquil. My grandmother's house was built along the banks of a river. I used to lie on a hammock and stare out at the muddy water of the river and, although it was nothing like the breathtaking views of Canadian blue crystal rivers, it was so beautiful. It somehow was able to cast a spell of peace over me when I watched it. People live in tiny boats, raising their families and providing for them using the river. It had a sort of innocence to it, a raw beauty. That river is probably what I miss most about the landscape. It became part of who I am: my mother grew up in that house on the river; the river witnessed her marriage and the birth of my brother. Somehow, possibly inexplicably, it forms a part of my family tree and thus me. I stayed in Saigon for a while before I flew back to Australia. The hustle and bustle of the city was intoxicating at first. I couldn't stand the noise and remember having to put two pillows over my head to sleep. Constant bus and truck horns echoed throughout the day and night. The city was always alive. I welcomed going back to the country and felt so elated at the sight of lush green paddy fields and sugar-cane fields. I went back to Go Dau to say goodbye to my family, whom I had come to know and love so much. But before I left my grandmother's house, I remember standing at the back and just watching the muddy waters drift and waving to all the kids. As they played and swam in the water, their faces lit up and all you could see were smiles. This will forever remain the most beautiful image. It captured the essence of the river, it was a source of life, never was it just an idle body of water, it carried with it business, families, irrigation.

These images and memories of the Vietnamese landscape reveal it to be imbued with social relations, personal experiences and

human engagement. It is also strongly associated with poetry, myth and legend.

Interviewer: Dinh says that when he was in Vietnam he didn't get a chance to go to any forests because they were too far away. He went to Ha Long on a school excursion and he loved it because he rarely had an opportunity to see such sites. There were caves and mountains that surrounded the ocean. Dinh says he loves sites such as these because the scenery is 'romantic and is like what poetry is written about'. When he went to such places, he didn't really do any activities that involved the landscape, he just looked at it. He wasn't aware of there being any national parks in Vietnam. What was special to him about the Vietnamese landscape was the river that he lived along. He could paddle the makeshift canoes and jump into the river straight from his house. In Australia you mainly go to beaches for that sort of thing and it is very different. The waters are not quiet and calm and there are no houses built along it.

Interviewer: Thirty-minutes by bicycle from Dao's in-laws' house in Vietnam is a pretty waterhole that is square in shape. It is roughly 100 metres by 100 metres in size and is surrounded by a grass area and also trees whose roots can be seen above the ground. The waterhole has waterlilies and also fish, but people don't go fishing there. It is called *Ao Ba Om* and has been there for generations. Dao explained that the area used to belong to Cambodia before Vietnam gained control and occupied it. There is a story behind the waterhole. Long ago, there was a digging competition between the Cambodian women and men to see who could dig the waterhole first. The result would determine marriage tradition forever. If the men won, the women would have to go to the groom's house for the ceremony and live there afterwards, and if the women won, vice versa. Like Aesop's fable about the hare and the tortoise, the men were arrogant and slow in their digging and the women ended up winning. So now, on wedding days, in traditional Cambodian custom the groom has to go to the bride's house and he also lives with her and her family. Dao said that this story is not written down in any book, but is passed down from one generation to the next.

Many of those interviewed commented that their strongest memories of Vietnam were of rice paddy fields. This may well be an



Figure 6 – Rice paddy fields, Vietnam

iconic memory which comes to represent what is thought of as the essence of life in Vietnam: rice and the farming life that sustains it.

Interviewer: For Dao who arrived in Australia only three months before the interview, the image of rice paddy fields and buffaloes are what represents Vietnam to her. Her parent's house had a front yard in which flowers and fruit trees were planted. At the back of the house there were many bamboo trees that almost enveloped the house. The trees were there before even her parents were born. Her house was made from concrete, but in the village many houses were made from bamboo. The poorer people used to ask her family for the bamboo so that they could build their houses. When Dao was young, every year when the paddy fields turned golden it signalled a particular season. Dao would ask her parents for permission to go into the fields to play. When Tet (New Year) came around, there were usually strong winds. She used to go into the paddy fields and fly kites with her friends and compete to see whose kite flew the highest. When she moved to Tra Vinh, she went to the airfield to fly the kites.

When asked what image, if any, of the Vietnamese landscape is symbolic of Vietnam, Mai answered, 'the immensity of the rice-fields next to the small waterways and riverbanks', while Sang (aged 51), a Cambodian-Vietnamese man, said 'rivers and creeks with busy boats travelling, rice fields changing colour from green to yellow...I lived

in a house made from leaves. We had ponds with fish, we grew vegetables, we had pigs and chickens.’ For Luan (aged 21) the image is of: ‘The little boy sleeping on the water buffaloes while tending the rice paddy fields.’ Luan ‘lived in a fairly big bubbly suburb near Saigon with lots of people.’ When asked if there was anything special about the land, Luan said:

I was too young to remember. I lived in the town centre so people were all you saw. If you get out of town, you’ll see rice fields and vegetables farms. The land is very flat so you can see rice fields all the way to the horizon. The colour is completely green, full of life.

Interviewer: Cong Dao (aged 26) lived in the centre of her village in Ben Luc, however it was surrounded by large areas of rice paddy fields. This is what represents Vietnam to her. Because the place that she lived in was near the markets, the houses were built quite close together. She described living in an alley, off a small road. At the end of her street was an abattoir that mainly killed pigs. The path in front of her house was a narrow dirt road. But she mainly described the place where she lived in terms of the people: ‘They were friendly and your neighbours were your family.’

The rice fields are often remembered as being of a startlingly green colour in the heat of summer.



Interviewer: Minh says that the image that represents Vietnam to him is of the paddy fields. When he sees such images he feels happy. ‘When I look at this I know that it is home. Even when you’re not there and you watch it on television it makes you homesick. You can’t compare it, the greenness. It’s not like tree greenness, it’s different – more fresh. The trees over here are bushy and they’re part of the bush. Over there all the forests are gone and there are no bushes but the rice fields are beautiful.’ He can’t describe why it’s beautiful. When he sees these images it reminds

Figure 7 – Dalat Forest, central Vietnam



Figure 8 – Dalat Forest, central Vietnam

him of a mother; he grew up in the countryside and the ‘country, the land, takes care of you like a mother, it gives you rice.’

Many of the interviewees had had childhoods on farms in rural Vietnam, and these were often remembered lovingly. Huong (aged 30), for example, remembers:

I had lived in Daklak which was a rural area. It was a small quiet village with no asphalt roads; the main transport for the mountain people was riding elephants. It is 400 kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City. Our survival depended on what we planted, such as sweet potato, wheat, corn and fruit. We also planted coffee bushes, pepper trees and cashew trees. Surrounding my village were the mountain chains full of green trees, and rivers where we sourced the majority of our water for our farm development. The climate was changeable and depended on the seasons; some months were very hot, some were very cold.

When asked what image, if any, is symbolic of the Vietnamese landscape, Huong explained:

The great rivers close to the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam, the innumerable rice fields, the huge orchards of southern fruits, the small islands full of local products and the well-known rivers, Tien Giang and Hau Giang, which are the branches of the main river Cuu Long in the southern Vietnamese plains.

Said Que (aged 52): I was born and grew up in a small village about 5 kilometres from Binh Duong Town which is about 35 kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City. Actually, I lived in the countryside, because my father owned rice fields close to the bottom of the mountain chains. There were no modern buildings or busy shops there. On one side of the village was the mountain chain, with farmers living at the bottom of the mountain. We, the local residents, owned orchards of grape fruits, bananas, tamburans, coconuts, etc, so we did not need to go to the shop to buy fruits. On the other side of the village was the special thing that I really loved and still remember today: the image of the river running across the plains. It was very natural and is etched in my memory. Even when I worked full time as a taxation officer in Ho Chi Minh City (before 1975), I still made time to go back to my village every weekend. Why? To enjoy the natural smell of rice fields and the fresh air which I could not get in the busy Saigon City.

When asked what image is symbolic of the Vietnamese landscape, Dieu-Linh answered: ‘The perfect mixture of mountains and rivers were very picturesque. The image of the tiny wooden boat filled with fruits or rice manually rowed by a young Vietnamese woman wearing *ao ba ba* (a traditional shirt worn by southerners) on the Mekong River.’ Cam Dung (aged 29) remembers: ‘Many temples, every where, in the country and in the city.’ Cam Dung grew up in: ‘Ben Tre, two hours from Saigon. Neighbours were close to each other, doors were open, it was very safe. There were many coconut trees and small rivers with rowing boats.’ When asked about visiting the countryside, Cam Dung said: ‘My dad owned a farm, I went there to pick coconuts, feed and play with the chickens, and to help my grandma make cakes and cook.’

The geographical position of Vietnam has led not only to the profound impact of China on Vietnamese cultural life, but also meant a particular configuration of physical features and climate that has exposed the country to continuing natural disasters, particularly floods and typhoons. These natural catastrophes have been engraved on rural life in Vietnam where protective measures against the elements are passed on from generation to generation. Natural calamities are also manifest in legends, folktales and village traditions. Memories of

storms, floods and harsh weather in Vietnam are often deeply affecting to Vietnamese in Australia. Many sent money to Vietnam to support victims of Cyclone Linda which devastated Vietnamese coastal areas in 1997. Stories are recounted about floods, particularly in central Vietnam, in which whole houses were carried away and rice crops lost. When news of flooding in Vietnam is heard, some families live in anxiety while waiting for news of their relatives. Huy told me of his memories of bitter winters and muddy streets in the north which, he said, made poverty more unbearable. All over Vietnam, little shrines on streams and trees or other natural phenomena throughout the environment, are indicative of the need of Vietnamese people to propitiate the spirits of those around them, in order that natural disasters may not wreak havoc on their lives. The ideal relationship between humans and their environment is thought to be a harmonious one, following the cosmological principles of Taoism.

35-year-old Thuy Ai came to Australia when she was in her twenties. She is still very connected to her homeland and speaks of Vietnam with great emotion and attachment. Her descriptions of Vietnam and her hometown of Dalat are poetic and moving. In Australia she has worked to better the lives of Vietnamese women and



their families, primarily through her work with outworkers in the garment industry. This has involved her interaction with hundreds of Vietnamese families with whom she has often organised trips and excursions to national parks and other recreation areas. Thuy Ai is very appreciative of the environment, and although not comfortable bushwalking or camping, she very much enjoys outings to parks and barbecues with her family.

The romantic and spiritual views of the landscape in Vietnam are exemplified in Thuy Ai's (aged 35) comments about Dalat, the place where she grew up in Central Vietnam (pictured in Figures 9 and 14):

I was born, grew up and spent my lovely childhood in a beautiful and famous place in Vietnam called Dalat City. Dalat City is the best-known resort city in South Vietnam, and is about 300 kilometres north-east of Ho Chi Minh City. In the 1920s Dalat City was called 'petite Paris' (Little Paris) by the French. Some of the newest buildings were constructed over fifty years ago during the French colonial period, and streets, shaded with lines of trees, retain the air of a French provincial town. In the centre of the city is a lovely lake called Lake Xuan Huong, which is shaded by pine trees and willow trees, the branches of the willows drooping over the water making the view look more romantic and attractive. Dalat is situated in the middle of high plateau and is more than 1,000 kilometres higher than sea level. At this height, the climate is wonderful – it is never too hot or too cold. These conditions make the trees, flowers and vegetables in Dalat grow more easily and strongly than in other places. Therefore, the image that is most symbolic to me of the Vietnamese landscape is that of the great mountain chains full of the green colour of the pines and wildflowers. At the bottom of the mountains are the natural

valleys; some are full of water which become lovely lakes, others are full of grasses, wildflowers and colourful mushrooms. There are also waterfalls and spectacular rock outcrops. Dalat still has a variety of wild animals, including deer, foxes, hedgehogs, squirrels, wild pigs, snakes and a variety of birds.

Interviewer: Nhung (aged 36) said of her memories of Vietnam: 'The lovely beaches with the willow trees, the cool sea wind and the sound of the waves at night with a full moon. It is a peaceful and romantic image of Vietnam. The immensity of the rice paddies next to the waterways, the coconut trees lined up along the waterside. I lived in Lai Thieu



Figure 9 – Visiting a temple, South Vietnam

countryside, which is famous for its orchards full of four-seasons fruits, such as durian, sugar banana, tamburans, mangosteen, etc. The river running through was very convenient for watering plants, as well as for household use. It is about 50 kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City.'

Nam (aged 23) remembers:

I was born in a busy town in central Vietnam where the old imperial capital was located (Hue) and later moved with my family to Saigon. Hue is a small, picturesque town on the bank of Huong River (the Scented River). The city is a major tourist attraction with many significant sites, such as the old palace and tombstones of the kings and royal families. There have been so many poets and composers who have praised Hue for its gorges, tranquility, historical values and women. The landscape is so beautifully shaped, just like in a painting, with mountains in the background (Nui Ngu) and the river running through the city (Song Huong) with Trang Tien Bridge connecting the two banks. The river is filled with the little paddleboats of farmers and traders coming from nearby provinces. It is so full of life, yet still very serene and peaceful. The city is small so there was a good mixture of city life and the laidback aspects of the country.

Throughout Vietnam many people still believe that the benevolence and power of natural forms can be defiled by prominent buildings, tunnels or railway lines which may violate natural features of the landscape. However, many also believe that there are benefits in transforming the environment in harmonious ways. Thus it may be possible to increase the vitality of a crop by creating a new rice field in a certain location if it appears to be shaped as the earth is, in curves and non-uniform shapes. Not only is the natural world invested with religious meaning, it is also a source of food and spiritual sustenance. Many Vietnamese people told me that although they found much of Australia physically appealing, they could not relate to it in the same way as they did Vietnam. Quyen told me that the Vietnamese landscape was filled with people performing various activities, and that she was unable to find pleasure in the stillness, quietness and 'emptiness' of the Australian bush. She said: 'You just can't go on a bushwalk in Vietnam. Every path you take has people

carrying their produce, planting and cutting. And in Vietnam, if we went for a walk in the country we always had a destination: a pagoda, or a temple or some other ancient or religious place.' The Australian bush did not have either the historical or religious connotations that the Vietnamese landscape had. Vietnamese-Australians usually do not make many trips outside Australian cities to explore the landscape, preferring to travel to visit friends and relatives, or return to Vietnam for a visit.

Maps were not common in Vietnam. The emergence of the idea of landscape in the West was associated with mapping and picturing the environment (Hirsch, 1995: 8). The objectification of space through mapping is a means of categorising which for the most part does not include notions of the social relations embedded in space (Gill, 1999: 57). While this was true of the French presence in colonial Indochina where mapping the landscape, constructing railway lines and documenting flora and fauna were all intensively carried out, this keen desire to represent the world did not thoroughly influence the populace. Mapping the course of the Vietnam War was a strong preoccupation for the military, but even this pressure to 'know' the land through this form of representation was not generally taken up by the people travelling to and from through the countryside. What emerges from this study is the cultural experiences and social relations of places, and that these meanings are privileged over those in which space is thought of as neutral and knowable. This is clear from the way in which many of the Vietnamese people interviewed for this study did not carry maps when travelling through the country in Vietnam, nor today in Australia. One always travelled with family or friends, or on a well-known path.

Interviewer: Dinh arrived in Australia when he was 18-years-old. The image that represents Vietnam to him is of the countryside, such as buffaloes and paddy fields. It is only now that he can look back and formulate such an image. Before he left for Australia, he saw the

landscape as an ordinary, rather than a symbolic, image because he saw it every day. The place where he lived had a river and a big bridge close to the Cambodian border. There was no room to plant anything because the houses were built close together, separated by a common wall. His house was close to the village marketplace. He describes fondly how every day after school when he was little, he and his friends used to swim in the cool river. He also hired boats to go to the orchards that grew along the river to eat the fruits. Dinh likes to go walking, but not in the sense of bushwalking. Normally he goes out with a group of friends and they play sport together. Someone else organised his last trip to a national park. He rarely organises such outings. He normally visits the national parks once or twice a year. Prior to going to national parks for the first time he did not have any expectations about it other than its natural beauty. He prefers parks that have long rivers because he used to live beside a river in Vietnam. Going to such a place feels closer to his heart.

The landscape in Vietnam still has an allure for many young Vietnamese people who have spent most of their lives in Australia. The attraction is both to the social experiences within that landscape and the physical attributes of it. Other young people, by contrast, remember Vietnam as a landscape which has been damaged and desecrated by over-farming and a lack of concern for the environment. The attraction to the Australian landscape in Jane's view, is that the natural environment is conserved:

Interviewer: Jane (aged 19) says she doesn't really miss anything about the landscape of Vietnam because she doesn't find it appealing. She said that Australia is not as rugged as Vietnam. In Australia she says that people take pride in nature, they take care of the land and talk about conservation, whereas in Vietnam they don't care about the land. It is this appreciation that makes the landscape in Australia beautiful to her because it is taken care of and groomed. She says that people in Vietnam misuse the land because of social factors such as poverty. When Jane goes outdoors she prefers to sit and watch, rather than go on walks. She states that this is just a personal preference, because many Vietnamese people are quite active. She never goes with her family to national parks, only with her friends. 'I don't think the older people have an appreciation for it as much as the young people.

They don't think that this is my home and that we should preserve the land. The white people would think that they have been here longer and so they have a greater passion to take care of the environment. Then again, in Vietnam they wouldn't take care of the land either, probably because of the way they were brought up. It was mainly for survival.'

Younger Vietnamese in Australia tend to be more critical of the landscape in Vietnam, and also of the way in which the environment was not cared for. These attitudes reflect both a lack of emotional attachment to Vietnam, as well as the influence of environmental education in Australia.

CONCEPTIONS OF NATURE IN VIETNAM

One of the most striking aspects of Vietnamese relationships to landscapes is the relationship between nature and subsistence. 85 per cent of Vietnamese people live in rural areas and most of the city-dwellers have relatives in the countryside who they frequently visit. In Vietnam many people hunt, catch birds, fish, and grow fruit trees and vegetables. This experience with the resources of the landscape was apparent in many of the interviews:

Interviewer: Ha (aged 25) remembers that after a period of rain, many different sorts of animals and insects would emerge. Many people caught these animals, no matter how insignificant they were (especially grasshoppers), and prepared them as food. Her family never did so because they were religious, although they ate grubs that used to dwell in coconut trees. When people went fishing, they used nets and anything caught in the net was never thrown back. Ha believes that Vietnamese people (usually more highly educated) who grew up in the city or central business part of a province would be more mindful of the environment compared to those who actually lived in the heart of the countryside. Ha believes that you can't really change the people in Vietnam, because no matter how educated they are, if they are starving they have to find some way to live or eat, and in Vietnam this necessitates destruction.

Interviewer: Minh says that in Vietnam people are not really concerned with national parks or parks in general. ‘You don’t need to go far, your backyard is your national park.’ Minh said that there are areas full of trees that are not named national parks; a better term would be forests or jungles, most of which are now gone. No one wants to go there though, as it would be easy to get lost and be eaten by wild animals. Only woodchoppers or hunters go there. Minh does not know anything about the native animals and plants of Vietnam. ‘Anything that crawls is eaten. This is not because people are poor, rather the Asian mentality dictates that the rarer it is, the better it is to eat it.’ Minh has eaten many animals, including echidnas and tigers. When he was young, Minh’s father used to live in the jungle, hiding from the communists. The only way to get meat was to hunt it and that’s what he did. Minh said that the Vietnamese people don’t care about the native animals, they just eat them. Minh says that the difference between a Vietnamese backyard and an Australian backyard, is that in the former there are usually things that are edible or useful, such as tomatoes and lemon trees.



Figure 10 – Pilgrimage site, Vietnam

The killing of animals for meat has had a severe impact on biodiversity, as was argued earlier. The following email was sent to an international Vietnamese development list (www.undp.org.vn/mlist/develvn/032001/post99.htm) by Vu Thanh Ca, a Vietnamese-American, on 22 March 2001:

This is still not good news. I just came back from a two-week trip in Vietnam. Everywhere in our country I found wildlife abuse. You can find wild animal meat (*thit thu rung*), turtle and snake meat almost everywhere. The most disturbing thing happened to me when we had a dinner at the Thai Binh Duong restaurant in Cantho. The restaurant was run by the Local Communist Party Committee

(Thanh Uy), and I was furious when a waiter advised me to have turtle and wild bird's meat. Of course, you can find plenty of wild meats at Ben Ninh Kieu restaurant, run by local army commanders. In Camau, wild meat was cheaper than anywhere else since they are close to the Uminh Forest. In government-run newspapers you can find plenty of advertisements selling bear parts. When a restaurant run by the local communist party sells wild animal meat, and government-run newspapers advertise wild animal parts (prohibited under the law), what should we do to protect the wildlife in our country? We found almost no birds at the Camau Cape, only very few. The Uminh is cut into pieces by recently dug canals (for fire prevention). It is believed that the canals will greatly disturb the wild habitats. Thank you for reading this disturbing news. You can check the accuracy of this news at every roadside shop (*quan nhau*) in our country, especially those in South Vietnam.

What this letter reveals is the way in which overseas Vietnamese may be able to have an impact on the environmental troubles in Vietnam. The knowledge of conservation issues gained by overseas Vietnamese is likely to have a flow-on effect to Vietnam in the coming decades. Commodified relationships in Vietnam have influenced responses to national parks and forested areas. A particular idea of nature as a consumable tourist experience in



Vietnam, even for the locals, has arisen in the last few years. In Cat Tien National Park, two hours drive from Ho Chi Minh City, there are many rare and endangered animals, including elephants, leopards and rhinoceroses. In 1995 there were 600 foreign tourists to the park and 2,000 Vietnamese, but in 1999 the number of local visitors had escalated to 7,000 while the number of foreign visitors was unchanged. It is difficult to ascertain why there is such an increase in Vietnamese visitation to the

Figure 11 – Pilgrimage site, Vietnam

national parks, but whatever the reason, the increase in local tourism will undoubtedly raise environmental awareness in coming years. This increased awareness combined with global pressure from environmental groups and funding agencies, as well as the input of overseas Vietnamese, is likely to transform ideas about nature and wilderness throughout the country. For this reason, it is important to see Vietnamese notions of landscape as dynamic and continually changing.

PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage is an important activity for the Vietnamese in their homeland. Most pilgrimage sites are contrasted to the usual places of worship by being remote and distant (see Figures 10–12). Many Vietnamese who return to the country for a visit go on a pilgrimage or visit temples or historic sites while they are there (see Figures 12–13). Van (aged 22), a Vietnamese who has lived in Australia from the age of two, visited Nui Ba Den (Black Lady Mountain), the most popular pilgrimage site in Vietnam, when he returned to Vietnam two years ago. He thought that the ‘mountain was really beautiful’. He said of pilgrimage sites: ‘the land there is not sacred by itself, it is only special because someone special lived or died there or some miracle happened there, not because the land itself is special.’ Again, it is the human associations which give land its meaning.

Interviewer: Trang (aged 22) was too young when she left Vietnam to study its geography. The furthest place she went to was a temple in Chau Doc. She went with her grandmother who said you have to go really far to a place of worship to get what you pray for; you have to have a sort of sacrifice, and that would be the inconvenience and hardship of travelling far.

Interviewer: Dao is Buddhist but is not passionate about the faith. However, when she was in Vietnam, she went to temples all the time with her friends. The object was not to worship but to go out. In regard to rural pilgrimage sites, during the last Tet Dao went to a holy Catholic

site at That Si in Soc Trang. Travelling from Tra Vinh, it took her eight hours by car to get there. It was a very isolated area. The church was surrounded by paddy fields. She went there with her husband's aunt to pray for the success of her application to come to Australia. Dao finds that the history and mythology of a place is very interesting. While she was in Soc Trang, a person told her aunt about a temple within the province that worshipped a special pig. She decided to go and have a look. There was a pig there that had five toes and so the locals created a temple to worship it.

Interviewer: Lam (aged 32) believes Nui Ba Den (Black Lady Mountain in Tay Ninh) represents Vietnam to him because it is his *que* or home. When he was in Vietnam, he travelled to the mountain every year. He said that there are many special and beautiful things about the place, for example the golden pool *suoi vang*. This pool in the mountain looks like its bottom is covered in gold. The water is clear and, depending on which angle you look at it, the bottom seems to glisten and sparkle like gold. He said the mountain is beautiful because it has many things that other places do not have. For example, there are magnificent boulders on and around the mountain all the way to the top that can be seen from kilometres away. When he visits the mountain he goes with family and friends. When he was younger the history and story of the place were not significant to him, he was just interested in having fun and going somewhere.



Visiting temples is such a common outing that it appears to be an essential element on any outdoor leisure trip in Vietnam. It is also an important part of Tet (Vietnamese New Year). For Ha: 'the image that represents Vietnam to her are of the temples. She remembers that every Tet (New Year), the family journeyed to Nui Ba Den to pray for the prosperity, health and happiness of that year.' When asked about visiting rural pilgrimage sites, Doan (aged 22) answered: 'Yes, temples, temples and more temples. I must have

Figure 12 – Pilgrimage site, Vietnam

visited fifteen temples during the first two days of Chinese New Year. It's a big tradition.'

Vietnam is religiously very diverse with a significant Catholic population who also visited significant religious sites. When asked about visiting rural pilgrimage sites, Hung (aged 25) answered: 'Yes, to church, my family is a devoted Catholic family.' The mythology of sites is remembered by many Vietnamese, even young people:

Interviewer: The only rural pilgrimage site Minh has been to is Black Lady Mountain. There is a story about the statue of the lady there. Minh said that every year the statue apparently grows bigger and each year people come and offer up expensive material and tailor-made clothes to dress it. In the closet behind the statue one can see that the size of the lady's clothes have increased every year. The statue is very large, as tall as a house. People offer up only the most expensive and valuable things. Minh said that when she died, no one could carry her. She appeared to a man and instructed him to get eight virgins to carry her up the mountain. Back then, there were no sky lifts so it took Minh a whole day to get to the top. He remembers getting halfway up, falling asleep then going back down. To him, the history of a site is not so important, only if it is spiritual. And it is spiritual if you believe it and many other people do.

When asked about visiting pilgrimage sites, Loc answered, 'Yes, once a year traditionally, it's important as we believed that visiting such places would bring us good luck', while Huong replied:

Once, when I was in Dalat, I visited a famous place there called 'The Pine Hill with Two Tombs', which is based on a love story about a young couple who belonged to different classes in the feudal society. Their social difference kept them apart and finally they died for their love. Today, the tombs are still there, they look very old and the views around are still as romantic as their love story.

Thuy Ai commented on the same place:

The famous Mount Langbian's shape is of Bian, a mountain woman lying on her back, who had fallen in love with a mountain man from a different group. They struggled to overcome a lot of difficulties and obstacles to come together. But finally Bian died and the myth of the great mountain is a teary love story for couples in love.

These experiences of the landscape in Vietnam show it to be imbued with cultural meaning, linked to legends and history, and as having religious significance. Travel to pilgrimage sites, temples and pagodas is both a social experience as well as one which binds people to the landscape in significant ways, connecting it with the nation's history and cultural influences.

NATIONAL PARKS IN VIETNAM

In the 1990s Vietnam developed a leisure industry for local people which has mostly been focused on cafes and restaurants, but also theme parks and swimming centres. Most people who visit such centres have never been to a national park in Vietnam which are not viewed as popular sites for local tourism.

Interviewer: When I asked Dao, who had only arrived in Australia a few months ago, if she knew of any national parks, she named those parks that were almost like theme parks, such as Dam Sen and Thao Cam Vien in Saigon. Dam Sen is a place with children's rides and colourful boats and paddling contraptions that people can hire. There were large trees there. Most of the plants were sculptured hedges trimmed to look like the Eiffel Tower, and there are also animals. I have been there myself and wouldn't classify it in terms of the Australian concept of a national park. It is more like a local community playground. Thao Cam Vien is a zoo, but it has very few animals. It is similar to the other park, but it has caged animals. There are a lot of man-made structures there, such as resting houses and shaded areas, as well as cafes where drinks and food can be purchased. For me, it was very depressing because everything was very ostentatious and the park wasn't really natural. However, many Vietnamese people come from very far away to see these sites. Dao said that there is another addition to those parks called Suoi Tien, which is located in Thu Duc, just outside the city of Saigon. She said there are train rides there and paddling floats shaped like ducks. There are also many sculptured hedges. She generally describes it as pretty.

Dao also explained that there were many other historical sites in Vietnam that one would visit in preference to a national park.

Interviewer: Dao told me that in Vietnam, depending on your age if you go to school, you belong to clubs. Doi Vien is for those children aged under fourteen, Doan Vien is for 15 to 18-year-olds and also 18 to 33-year-olds. However, you are not automatic members. If you are seen to be good at school work and are good citizens, you are voted in by your peers. Dao belonged to the Doan Vien group. She had the opportunity to go to faraway places with this group, visiting locations of historic significance such as the Cu Chi Tunnels and also the birthplace of Vo Thi Sau (a famous Vietnamese heroine). She described this area as the ‘red earth’ area. She also went to Vo Thi Sau’s grave in Ba Ria, Vung Tau.

The concept of national parks is very new to Vietnam and not an entirely successful import in terms of conservation of biodiversity. It is reported both from surveys and anecdotally that in every national park the collecting of food and firewood and the hunting of animals takes place (Timmins et al 1999; Wikramanayake and Vu Van Dung, 1997). According to Joanne Harding (personal communication), a researcher on primate conservation in Vietnamese national parks: ‘There are lots of national parks in Vietnam, but 90 per cent are national parks on paper only. In reality, it is impossible to have workable conservation in Vietnamese national parks.’ Vietnam is presently making efforts to establish a wide variety of nature reserves to protect the major forms of biodiversity. There are presently 10 national parks, 61 natural reserves, and 34 historical and cultural sites, but only twenty of these sites have active management (Vo Quy, 1998: 18–19). There is only one well-established national park with a visitors’ centre – Cuc Phuong National Park in the north of Vietnam.

Most national parks are located in areas where there are ethnic minorities who legitimately feel that their traditional lands are being removed from them when a national park is created.¹ In most national parks local people have to be moved off the land and there has been an active policy of creating ‘buffer zones’ which provide

employment for local people and have a secondary effect of stimulating protection of the natural resources of the forests. In practice, however, the system of buffer zones rarely works. When places are gazetted as national parks they may then become denuded of wildlife and vegetation as rural people feel the government has decided to take over their land and are disgruntled. There is little active conservation as it is too expensive to enforce in a highly populated rural area. There are extremely limited resources to pay people to guard the parks against the poaching of animals. In the past, village leaders had knowledge and rights over hunting and control of the use of land. Now the head man is chosen by the government and the State's interests predominate. In most cases, those who have control over the land have little respect from local people.

Most of those interviewed for this study had never known a distinction between local parks and national parks in Vietnam, as demonstrated in the following accounts:

Interviewer: The concept of national parks to Vietnamese people – both in Vietnam and Australia – is very recent. When the Vietnamese government introduced policies to protect the environment because of illegal deforestation, it was the very first time the words *cong vien quoc gia* (literally 'national park') have been used (I think the Vietnamese government has borrowed this term from western countries). For Vietnamese people living overseas, including in Australia, 'national park' is a term they heard only after resettlement. Translated into Vietnamese, 'national park' sounds very much like a 'park of the nation/country'. A park in Vietnam means a place (usually not in the countryside) where people rest, where children play (in playgrounds), or where couples spend time, usually at night (lifestyle and accommodation arrangements in Vietnam do not give people much privacy).

Interviewer: Because Cong Dao had to help her parents every day, she rarely had a chance to go to any places outside of her home. She does not know much about the native flora or fauna of Vietnam, or of any national parks. She said that her understanding or even notice of

the landscape when she lived there was very limited as she had nothing on her mind other than helping her family make money.

In response to a question about awareness of national parks in Vietnam, My Linh (aged 19) answered:

Um, not really...although there is a place I remember being almost like a national park but it was quite artificial. They are definitely not the kind of national parks you see here in Australia. All the trees are planted and trimmed neatly, and there was a lot more concrete than plants. Everything is 'man-grown'. Residents go there to practice Tai Chi, play badminton, go jogging. These so-called parks in Vietnam are more like backyards on a larger scale.

Hung commented: 'Um, not so much of a national park but instead places people call *khu du lich* (resorts), in Da Lat, Nha Trang, Hue.'

Cuong said:

There's Cuc Phuong rainforest a few hours from Hanoi. It has been declared a national park...[I went there] on a school excursion when I was eleven or twelve. It was pretty disappointing actually. We had to sit on a bus for hours, then walked through farmland before entering the fenced forest. It was not as big as I'd imagined. But it was very green due to the rain, and there were many different types of trees and plants.

When asked if there was anything special about it, Cuong said:

Well, it was my first time in a tropical rainforest so it was a different experience. The forest was praised so much but the reality wasn't half as true as what they said in our texts. I suppose I remember the big trees being cut off by bombs the most, and the scent of the wet soil covered in leaves after a monsoon.

Huy-Han did not realise there were national parks in Vietnam: 'There is? ... Really, I didn't think there was any forest left. Although I know there are *cong vien* (man-made public parks).' When asked how a walk in a national park in Vietnam is different to one in Australia, Luan answered: 'I only know about artificial parks or theme parks in Vietnam, and obviously they are completely different from national parks. It's a different concept.'



Figure 13 – Farming life, Vietnam (showing fishing in pond)

Clearly when most Vietnamese migrants have come to Australia their knowledge and understanding of national parks and conservation is very limited due to Vietnam’s history of war, poverty, the lack of education about the native flora and fauna in Vietnam, and the absence of a local conservation movement.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Because of years of war, economic hardship and poverty, the education system since 1975 in Vietnam is frequently criticised by those who participated in it as very rudimentary. Not one of those interviewed for this study remember learning anything in Vietnam about conservation or the native flora and fauna. Knowledge of flora was often mostly confined to just fruit and flowers, and knowledge of fauna to farm animals. Although some informants knew of deer, tigers and rhinoceros, only one person mentioned the monkeys in Vietnam, because she had had a lot of contact with them where she grew up. Many informants expressed surprise that Vietnam has one of the richest variety of primates in Southeast Asia. Mai said: ‘I just knew one kind of flower in my town that was called “dried flower”.

That's it! The fauna were all those we reared, such as pigs, hens and roosters.' There was no information about national parks at school: 'There was nothing.'

An example of the common understanding of flora in Vietnam is expressed by Jane who was born in Australia, and who says she is not aware of any national parks in Vietnam nor the native flora and fauna. However, Jane mentioned that she knew the yellow Mai flower was native to Vietnam, or she thinks it is. This is because every Vietnamese New Year, many Vietnamese homes in Australia bring out the imitation Mai trees that usually blossom at that time of year in Vietnam. To many Vietnamese people the Mai flower has become symbolic of the Tet (New Year) festival.

Interviewer: Lam was in Year Twelve prior to leaving for Australia. He said that in regard to native plants and animals in Vietnam, there are none because whatever Vietnam has, some other country has it also. Lam had never been to any forests in Vietnam and has never heard of there being any national parks. He knows that the forests have all been logged. Lam said that his knowledge of Vietnam even back then was very limited because he focused his life within the village. He also said that access to information sources such as television and magazines was fairly limited.

Dieu-Linh commented:

It's hard to say what is native and what is not so I'll just say I'm not sure for this question. We were colonised by the Chinese and the French for so long, and then we had the Vietnam War, so there were many imported plants and flowers. I miss the fruits though, they have so many different kinds of fruits, all so delicious, beautifully scented and mouth-watering.

And, according to Luan:

Vietnam is fortunate to have the best of both flora and fauna. We've got some of the most exotic and delicious fruits and unique animals found nowhere else...I don't know the names, I only know that we have lots of tropical fruits that I really miss because I can't find them anywhere in Australia. There's *chom chom* (rambutan), *nhan* (longan), *sau rieng* (durian), mang cut, bon bon, sori ... I think they're native.

Interviewer: Thuy Ai grew up in Dalat. She says that the 'native flora is abundant and various. Flowers are everywhere. There are a variety of flower blossoms throughout the year, such as roses, lilies, poppies, pansies, mimosa and carnations. This is the reason why Vietnamese named Dalat the "Floral City". The main type of tree is the pine tree, but there are also eucalyptus and willow. The native fauna still exists and is very valuable: horses, monkeys in the forest, tigers (I just heard about these but have never seen one) deer, hedgehogs, squirrels, foxes, snakes, boas and wild pigs. There are also numerous birds, such as parrots, owls, eagles and plenty of smaller ones.'

Que said:

The native flora in my village was the yellow Mai flower which only blossoms in the New Year. What about the raw mushroom? Is it a kind of native flora? I just know that after the big season of harvesting rice, the local farmers all had a lot of big hay cocks in the frontyard which was the perfect natural environment for plenty of raw mushrooms to develop easily and rapidly. They are one of the freshest and most nutritious natural local foods. Thank God for that! The native fauna included the turtle dove, whose singing I really loved. Once I heard it in my backyard here; it made me miss my country deeply.

Nam said:

I think Vietnam has a variety of flora and fauna due to the warm, humid and rainy climate. In the north we have the cherry blossom (*hoa dao*), and in the South the *hoa mai* (the yellow flower for Tet), and there is also the jacaranda (*hoa phuong*) which is everywhere. We have many different kinds of fruits which are deliciously tasty.

For Doan:

There are so many exotic and deliciously beautiful fruits in Vietnam that cannot be found here in Australia. I really miss *vu sua* (milky fruit), *man* (plum), *mit* (jackfruit) and longans. The animals (more like pets) were also very unique, but it seems that most were, not surprisingly, deprived of food and nutrients. People still eat them though – even dogs – which I found really cruel.

Some of the interviewees had striking memories of the animals in Vietnam. Huong, for example, says:

The native flora in Daklak is mostly a variety of trees, including the

very old trees, the bamboo, as well as small and big trees which are all very green and beautiful. In Daklak there is only one kind of flower named *Ban*. It is white, and when it is in season my village is covered in white. There are also other flowers, such as lotus, orchid and butterfly. I have unforgettable memories of the fauna in Vietnam. When my family's farm had corn or potato, a group of up to thirty monkeys used to appear from out of the forest, led by a very old and clever monkey trying to pick the corn. One monkey carried a baby monkey on her back. She put a rope around her waist which looked like a belt, but it was very useful. When she picked the corn or the potato, she could store them around her waist, and easily run away to safety when we tried to approach them. Hedgehogs (which are as big as a big handbag) and wild pigs were also in large numbers there, and in the potato season they came out of the forest to dig and damaged our farm. There were also different kinds of deer, snakes, boas, wild hens and roosters, special birds, green parrots and eagles (which I heard are the most valuable in Vietnam). Tortoises (which weighed between 10 and 30 kilograms) lived and nested under the roots of the old trees close to the waterside. There were plenty of wild rabbits and tigers which we were warned about by the elderly people. There were elephants too.

For the most part the flora and fauna of Vietnam is equated with fruit, flowers and farm animals, and not 'wild' animals. Rather than a 'wilderness' the landscape was domesticated and viewed as a resource. As Nhung commented: 'In Lai Thieu where I lived, there was a special flower which blossomed in the New Year called the yellow Mai, and there were also a few small wildflowers around. The local residents had rice fields, hence buffaloes were the main fauna, and goats were reared for milk.'

This lack of knowledge about flora and fauna in Vietnam affects Vietnamese people's interest in the flora and fauna of Australia. Very few of those interviewed had any knowledge about Australian flora and fauna and few showed an interest. As most information about flora and fauna was remembered only when it was associated with human usage, it would be important to convey this aspect of Australian native plants and animals to the Vietnamese in any environmental educational strategy. Knowledge about this subject in Australia should



Figure 14 – Rice paddy fields, Vietnam

be introduced to Vietnamese-Australians in culturally meaningful ways, specifically focussing on the value of plants and animals to Aboriginal people historically or to settler society.

SUMMARY

The sensual textures, the sounds and smells of the Vietnamese landscape are remembered by those who have left with a strong sense of nostalgia. The lived experience of the landscape in Vietnam is one in which the social aspects of place predominate. Villages, rice paddies and pilgrimage sites are all grounded in personal and national identifications. While Vietnam is undergoing extreme environmental stress, knowledge about this tragedy, as well as about native flora and fauna and conservation issues in Vietnam, has not been passed on to the populace. This has had the effect of intensifying the social aspects of attachments to landscape. For most Vietnamese people who have arrived in Australia over the past twenty-five years, there has been a strong sense of displacement from an environment they know well to a strange one. Not only do they settle in a country with very different cultural histories, but also an utterly different notion of 'nature' and a highly developed system of

national parks and conservation education. At the same time the attitudes towards nature and conservation are entirely new concepts for many adult Vietnamese. The bewildering array of rules and regulations governing fishing, rubbish disposal, lighting fires and the treatment of native flora and fauna are often very confusing to individuals who have not experienced these forms of control previously. The key cultural disposition noted in interviews has been for Vietnamese people to enjoy not contemplating landscapes, but interacting with them.

1 The information in this paragraph was gained from conversations with Joanne Harding, Australian National University; Timmins et al, 1999; and Vo Quy, 1998.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR NPWS

NPWS recognises that the diverse landscapes it manages across NSW are enjoyed by many different communities. NPWS is required to conserve and protect the cultural and natural heritage of these landscapes, while at the same time creating access for appropriate recreational uses. NPWS commits itself to being guided by the following principles in its engagement with all communities:

- *Representativeness.* Non-indigenous Australians from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds make up a significant and growing proportion of the NSW population. To maintain future broad community support for national parks and conservation in general NPWS will need to build a strong relationship with migrant communities.
- *Learning to be multicultural.* The principled commitment of NPWS staff to the ideal of multiculturalism is not a sufficient basis in itself to give NPWS the multicultural dimension it needs. This will require an active learning program in which NPWS reaches out to the various migrant communities in order to understand their views of nature and their needs in relation to national parks and other open spaces. This learning program should include targeted research in both natural and cultural heritage but should also extend to many other learning opportunities, including the opportunities that rangers and other staff may have to talk on an individual basis with migrant visitors to parks.
- *Presumption.* Research indicates that the conservation ethic, as it is understood in the Western world, developed out of the West's own cultural-historical experience. There is considerable variation in the way people from other cultural backgrounds understand and practise conservation. As a guiding principle,

NPWS, rather than presuming that the rationale for its conservation activities (relating either to cultural or natural heritage) is already understood cross-culturally, should aim to communicate it in a clear and coherent way.

- *Views of nature.* Research indicates that different cultures have radically different ways of viewing nature. Many cultures have been resident in the landscape of the same homeland for thousands of years, have populated every corner of it and found uses for virtually every plant and animal species present in it (e.g., as food, medicine, building material). They have also endowed various aspects of nature with religious meaning. These relationships with nature are often transferred from the homeland landscape to the Australian landscape. NPWS should be sensitive to the likelihood that what may be perceived by NPWS staff to be ‘problem’ activities on the part of migrants are often practices which have a deep cultural grounding.
- *Involvement in planning.* Migrant communities should be encouraged to become more involved in park planning processes, such as through plans of management.
- *Picnic areas.* Research suggests that visits by recent migrants (e.g., overseas-born or first generation Australian) to national parks are focussed far more than average on developed recreational precincts in parks, such as picnic areas. Features of these include mown lawns, sun and rain shelters, barbecues, picnic tables, boat hire, paved paths, toilets and a range of other facilities. In a way that was never anticipated, many of the picnic areas that NPWS manages have come to be of crucial importance to migrant communities as venues for community social events. These areas – especially those in parks close to major cities – are likely to continue to be of particular significance to migrant communities and this should be factored into the design and management of the areas.

- *Fears and apprehensions.* The Australian bush – its fauna, size, wildness – may inspire particular fears and apprehensions in migrant communities in whose homelands there may be nothing comparable. On the other hand there may be quite a strong desire among members of such communities to experience the bush. This suggests a need for NPWS, along with groups committed to environmental education, to provide guided ‘ice breaker’ introductory visits to bushland for migrant Australians in which they are given a chance to enjoy the pleasures of nature in safety. The NPWS Discovery program has particular potential to be adapted for this purpose. At the same time, NPWS needs to provide appropriate safety messages to ensure that visitors unfamiliar with the real potential dangers of the bush are not lulled into a false sense of security.
- *Walking trails.* It is likely that few of the more recent migrants are aware of the extensive network of established walking trails in national parks. To a great extent these constitute the key to unlocking what may be perceived as the intimidating vastness and wildness of the parks. NPWS could consider a targeted outreach program which advertises the existence of bush walking trails in national parks in the vicinity of migrant population centres. To capitalise on the benefits of this approach, appropriate interpretive mechanisms and programs will need to be put in place, such as signage, brochures, briefings or guided walks.
- *Staff recruitment.* NPWS should actively recruit staff (particularly field staff – e.g., rangers) from migrant communities. These staff would act as cultural mediators between NPWS and their respective communities and their presence at NPWS would send a message to the migrant population in general that national parks exist for them as well

as Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic Australians. A comparable recruitment strategy has been successful with other government agencies such as Fisheries NSW and the Police Service NSW.

- *Cross-cultural training* should be incorporated into ongoing staff training programs. NPWS has the opportunity to become a world-leader in this field, with the opportunity to export this expertise.
- *Publicity* material distributed by NPWS (e.g., park guides, posters, website material) should have a multicultural dimension. This will be crucial in encouraging migrant communities to ‘read’ NPWS and national parks as catering to them as well as to others. There is scope for NPWS to convey conservation messages to particular migrant communities via leaflets written in the community’s own language. The Service also needs to be mindful about who it depicts in publicity material, and how these people are depicted, to avoid both exclusion and stereotyping. In addition, explanations of the different roles (and allowable activities) of open space across the landscape would be useful for both migrant and non-migrant communities.
- *The value of explanation*. Members of migrant communities often seem to be aware of the rules that apply in national parks without knowing the rationale behind them. In the case of rules against the taking of shellfish, for instance, people may perceive the shellfish as being there to be eaten and have difficulty understanding why this should not be allowed.
- *Multicultural media*. Community language radio and newspapers have large, avid, and loyal audiences in migrant communities and provide an ideal way to communicate messages about conservation, public safety in parks, and information about opportunities for park visitation. English

language courses may also be receptive to the inclusion of material from NPWS. Targeted presentations to migrant groups may also be helpful (including developing the concept of on-park volunteers).

- *Language interpreters.* NPWS should develop and make ready use of a network of language interpreters (including from among volunteers and its own staff). Messages addressed to migrant communities, either verbally or in writing, will have a limited reception if delivered only in English.
- *Cultural mediators.* A great deal of the contact migrant community members have with national parks happens with the aid of a ‘cultural mediator’, somebody from their own community who has previously visited national parks and who is comfortable in both cultures. These tend to be members of the ‘1.5 generation’ – born in the home country and growing up in Australia – who are fluent in both English and the community language. They have the potential to play a crucial role in any multicultural strategy that NPWS develops. Scout groups, religious groups, youth groups may also act as cultural mediators, potentially bringing NPWS into contact with the larger migrant community to which they belong, translating and promoting ‘messages’ from NPWS through to the community.
- *Aboriginal culture.* Research has shown the level of knowledge of Aboriginal history, heritage and culture to be low among at least some migrant communities. A significant number of recent migrants, however, are interested in knowing more. Interpreter-assisted guided tours of parks and Aboriginal heritage places by NPWS Aboriginal staff, Aboriginal Discovery rangers and/or local Aboriginal community members are likely to be especially well received.

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