

On the Vietnamese front line

IN VIETNAM, A RAGING BATTLE IS BEING FOUGHT TO PROTECT SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST CRITICALLY ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

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Rapid economic growth in Vietnam over the past 20 years has resulted in the emergence of a wealthy class with plenty of disposable income, and thus consumer demand for luxury foods and traditional medicines that were formerly beyond reach has also risen sharply, far beyond sustainable levels.

Vietnam's own native species are among these foods and medicines, with the first major casualty being the killing of Vietnam's last rhino in 2010. Tigers and elephants, along with the recently discovered saola and a few of the world's most critically endangered primates, are not far behind as wild populations are barely holding on. Rising consumer demand in Vietnam also threatens global populations of some species; as numbers decline in Vietnam, suppliers are pushed to source animals and products from neighboring countries and beyond.

The battle being fought in Vietnam has gained global attention in the past few years, largely inspired by the devastating loss of rhinos in South Africa and indications that Vietnamese consumers, along with those from China, are responsible for these losses. However, the fight is not new to the passionate and young team at Education for Nature – Vietnam (ENV) who have been working tirelessly for nearly 15 years to suppress rising consumer demand in their own country, and protect endangered wildlife in Vietnam and around the world.

ENV was founded in 2000 as Vietnam's first nature and wildlife-focused organisation. ENV focuses 100% of its efforts on the protection of wildlife and it has remained steadfastly committed to a strategy that incorporates three critical components; reducing consumer demand, strengthening enforcement, and working with decision-makers at the central and provincial levels to both strengthen the law and advocate for sound policy decisions in relation to

SMART APPROACH

Recognising the opportunities presented by the rise in use of smart phones in Vietnam and the need to move with technological advances to effectively engage the public, ENV has been working with developer James Campbell over the past nine months to create an application that would provide an easy and practical means for the public to report crimes to ENV.

The process is simple: for example, if someone observes a gibbon, the user only needs to open the application, snap a photo or two, fill out a few simple fields describing the violation, and then 'submit' the report with the touch of a button. The information, along with the photos and GPS coordinates of the violation, will be immediately transferred to ENV's Wildlife Crime Unit. ENV can then contact the appropriate agencies with precise information about the nature and location of the violation, permitting a more effective and timely response by the authorities.

ENV would like to thank James Campbell for his dedication in developing this app and IT consultant Nguyen Manh Canh for his support in setting up and testing the application in Vietnam. ENV also wishes to thank the Humane Society International – Australia for its support in developing this important tool, which is currently available for Android devices, and will soon be released for IOS and Windows mobiles. It can be downloaded at www.envietnam.org.

wildlife protection.

While ENV's activities are critical to the long-term protection of wildlife, social attitudes do not change overnight, and reaching the tipping point in broad societal awareness may take longer than the time some species have left, given the immense pressure they are currently facing.

As a result, ENV focuses an equal amount of attention on supporting and strengthening enforcement agencies and activities, which can have impact 'right here and now'.

No single activity in this field in Vietnam is quite paralleled in terms of impact than the development of ENV's Wildlife Crime Unit (WCU). Established in 2005, the WCU operates a toll-free hotline, through which the public can report wildlife crime. The initiative is aimed at engaging the public and securing their active involvement in helping protect wildlife by reporting crimes.

When crimes are reported, case officers immediately respond by transferring critical information to the appropriate law enforcement agencies and then tracking each case through to conclusion, documenting the outcome and results on ENV's Wildlife Crime Incident Tracking System database. Since 2005, more than 7,000 cases have been handled by WCU, resulting in the confiscation of hundreds of animals ranging from bears and otters to gibbons, lorises, and turtles. Markets have been closed, and more than 1,000 businesses have also voluntarily met compliance requirements, such as removing exotic meat products from restaurant menus, after ENV issued warnings after receiving reports of violations.

ENV also maintains an army of volunteers, mainly in prominent urban areas in 32 provinces, that serve as members of the ENV's National Wildlife Protection Network, helping to monitor business establishments in their areas and ensuring their compliance with the law.

Since 2008, the crime unit has evolved and now works on investigations in support of law enforcement agencies, organising 'sting' operations involving high priority species sales, and continually developing a growing informant network that has provided critical



information which has led to both seizures of pangolins and other wildlife. This work contributes the mapping and profiling of major criminal networks operating in Vietnam.

Perhaps the greatest achievement resulting from the establishment of ENV's Wildlife Crime Unit has been the increased level of transparency and accountability of authorities in the handling of wildlife protection. Where cases were once resolved internally with little or any external visibility, ENV's sustained focus on the outcome of each case, including the documentation of major seizures of wildlife, punishment, and disposition of confiscated animals, has succeeded in delivering a new level of transparency to wildlife protection and increased attention on wildlife crime, that has led to a steady level of improvement across the board.

Building upon ENV's crime fighting success, new campaigns to target consumer crime were developed in 2013. ENV's consumer crime campaign in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City involved inspections of all 2,326 restaurants, bars, pet shops, and

traditional medicine shops in four districts of each city, the results of which were reported to the authorities. Working with district authorities, ENV was able to secure an overall 42% reduction in consumer crime over the eight districts surveyed, with individual districts ranging from 24% to 61% reductions in violations after a four-month period. Currently, additional consumer crime campaigns are being carried out in further districts in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Hue, and Da Nang, and several other major cities.

However, the constantly increasing level of internet use in a rapidly developing Vietnam has also created new challenges and battlegrounds, as online adverts for illegal wildlife products can now be found on websites, forums and social media networks. ENV responded by initiating an internet crime campaign in late 2013, resulting in the logging of 1,039 advertisements on websites and forums offering wildlife. As a result, 849 of the links, accounting for 81% of the total, were successfully removed. A second phase of the internet campaign is now under way.

ENV is also engaging with technological advances in terms of crime reporting; in July, ENV released a smart phone application which will enable users to easily and quickly provide photos, the GPS location, and the other necessary details of violations to ENV, enabling an efficient and timely response by the authorities.

The battle to protect wildlife will not be won with a smart phone application or a successful consumer crime campaign, but ENV sees that the tide is turning. The collective efforts of many young Vietnamese people, working to protect their wildlife, and sharing in Vietnam's global responsibility for wildlife protection, are beginning to yield results. The only question remains: will the impacts arrive in time to save many of the species that are teetering on the edge of survival?

Find out more about ENV (English language website) at www.envietnam.org. Its latest newsletter can be found here: http://envietnam.org/images/Spring_2014.pdf. To donate to ENV visit <http://www.envietnam.org/index.php/how-you-can-help/donate>.