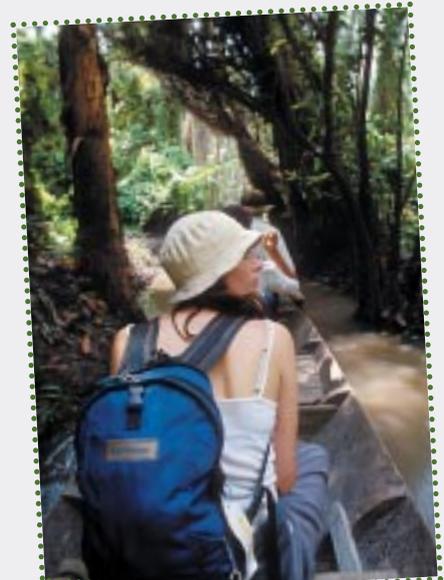


# VIETNAM FIELD NOTES

## A report by the Environmental Justice Foundation

The Environmental Justice Foundation was set up in 1999. We are unique in that we act as a catalyst for change by training and partnering grassroots organisations in the developing world. We work to build their capacity and ability to research, expose and peacefully act against threats to their own environment.

EJF regularly visits developing world countries to support and train our partners, and conduct research for our international campaigns. These field notes describe our trip to Vietnam, undertaken by Dr. Mike Shanahan and Coralie Thornton. Our goal: to learn more about the Vietnamese shrimp farming industry, as part of our campaign for sustainable shrimp production.



# VIETNAM

## An ecologically diverse country

Vietnam is a densely populated Southeast Asian country, bordering China in the north and Laos and Cambodia in the west. Its coastline extends for 3,200 km. The country's characteristic S-shape features the wide delta areas of the Red River in the North and the Mekong in the South, connected by a narrow central region. Vietnam's largely rural population of 80 million is concentrated along the coast and heavily dependent on agriculture and fisheries.

Vietnam's environmental resources are spectacular. This diverse country is home to about 10% of the world's species, many of which are endemic (found nowhere else on earth). Yet the natural environment, and those who rely on it, are under threat. In particular, pressures on coastal resources have meant that 96% of Vietnam's coral reefs are now severely threatened and more than 80% of mangrove forests are reported to have been lost. One of the most serious threats to coastal areas is posed by shrimp farming or 'aquaculture'.

### Why did EJF go to Vietnam?

We first became aware of the problems caused by tropical shrimp farming in 2001, when our partners in Guatemala alerted us to the devastating environmental impacts and human rights abuses that can be associated with this industry. Our partners asked us for help to bring this issue to the attention of the international community. Since then we have been investigating the impacts of shrimp farming in countries worldwide, including Ecuador, Cambodia, Bangladesh and Thailand.

In Vietnam, our goal was to meet scientists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on shrimp farming and gain first-hand experience of the issues and problems facing the Vietnamese shrimp farming industry. We also wanted to collect evidence and document the experiences of those that worked in, or had been affected by, the industry.

Another priority during our trip was to meet with ENV (Education for Nature-Vietnam), Vietnam's first environmental education organisation. We hoped to work in partnership with them and help develop their capacity to raise awareness through EJF's Activist Training Programme.





## Itinerary

**21 Feb:** Coralie and Mike arrive in Vietnam

**22-26 Feb:** Hanoi – Meetings with scientists and non-governmental organisations to discuss impacts of shrimp farming in Vietnam. We also met with Education for Nature–Vietnam (ENV).

**26 Feb:** Overnight train to Hue

**27-28 Feb:** Visiting shrimp farming sites around Hue (Hoa Duan Village, Tam Giang Lagoon, Phu Dien Commune) and meeting with scientists researching shrimp production. Through our contacts in Vietnam, we were able to meet with local people involved in shrimp farming. They were keen to discuss their experiences with us.

**1 March:** Train to Nha Trang

**2-3 March:** Visiting areas affected by shrimp production, Khanh Hoa District (around Trao Reef, Xuan Tu Village and Tuan Le Village); meeting with local and international organisations and researchers working on coastal and marine protection. We also met with representatives of local government.

**3 March:** Flight to Ho Chi Minh City

**4 March:** Visiting Can Gio Biosphere Reserve.

Meeting with senior government researchers on shrimp farming.

**5 March:** Bus and boat to Can Tho

**6-7 March:** : Meetings with scientists and non-governmental organisations working on shrimp production

**8-9 March:** Visiting farming facilities and Oxfam GB's project area, Tra Vinh

**9 March:** Travel to Ho Chi Minh City

**10 March:** Return to UK.



Local market at Can Tho





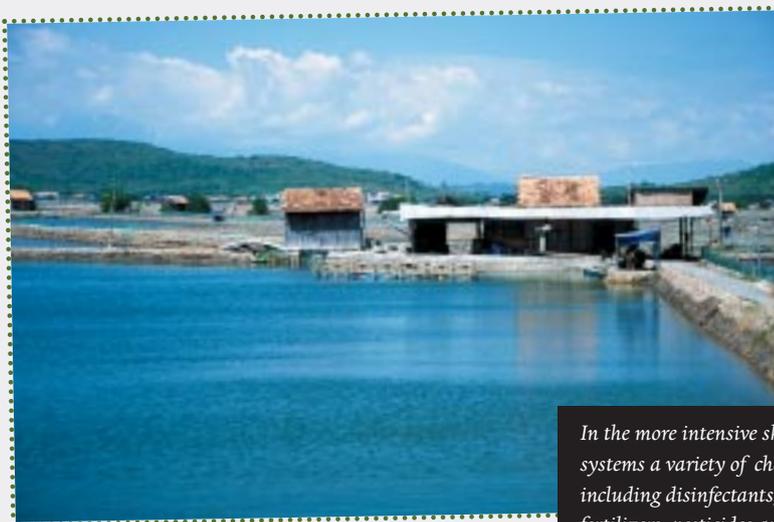
*Shrimp ponds in Hoa Duan Village: Unplanned and unregulated shrimp farming can have high social and ecological costs.*

## Shrimp farming: a risky business

Aquaculture has been encouraged by the Vietnamese Government as a way to create more jobs and reduce poverty in rural areas. While we recognised that shrimp farming had played an important role in Vietnam's economic development, its unplanned and unregulated growth had not been without serious social and environmental costs. We saw these impacts first hand in many of the places we visited.

### Shrimp farming - environmental impacts

- Destruction of coastal mangrove forests
- Pollution of surrounding ecosystems and agricultural land
- Reduction of local water supplies
- Depletion of wild fish stocks on which local people rely



*In the more intensive shrimp farming systems a variety of chemicals are used, including disinfectants, antibiotics, fertilizers, pesticides and hormones.*

### Shrimp farms degrade local environments

Shrimp farming often takes a great toll on local environments. Lush coastal forests are quickly replaced by a uniform blanket of shrimp ponds, which deplete water supplies and discharge effluent and chemicals. But, ironically, successful shrimp farming depends on a clean and productive environment. We saw many cases where shrimp ponds had suffered from pollution or disease. In some countries with older shrimp farming industries (such as neighbouring Thailand), large areas of shrimp ponds have been abandoned due to these problems. Local scientists told us that the deserted wastelands that remained would take many years to recover.



*Degraded mangroves and shrimp ponds in Tuan Le village.*

### What are mangroves?

Mangroves are coastal forests found along the shores of many tropical countries. They are among the most productive ecosystems in the world and occur in dynamic environments where land meets water. They have evolved over millennia to survive in salty, turbulent and muddy habitats, developing aerial roots to help them 'breathe' in water logged sediments. They support a diversity of animal life, including many species of reptiles, fish, birds and mammals. Local communities rely on them for their supplies of seafood, fruit, fuel, building materials and medicine. Mangroves also protect coastlines from storms and floods, and filter out many pollutants before they reach the sea.

Shrimp farming is now considered to be the greatest threat to Vietnam's remaining mangroves forests.



*Degraded mangroves in Duyen Hai.*

### **Deforested mangroves can take decades to recover**

The mangroves at Tuan Le used to be an important resource for the local community and helped to protect the village from the encroaching sea. These coastal forests were largely destroyed to construct shrimp farms in order to 'develop' the region. Sadly this ecosystem was removed for very little return: 70-80% of shrimp harvests failed here in 2001.

*Can Gio Biosphere Reserve in South Vietnam: Replanted mangroves account for almost half of this reserve.*



### **Bringing the mangroves back**

One of the highlights of our trip was visiting the Can Gio Biosphere Reserve. Although it was devastated by chemical agents used by the US in the Vietnam war, the reserve now comprises 33,000 ha of replanted mangrove forest. The scientists we met explained how many plant and animal species have returned to the area with the mangroves.

This project showed us the very real benefits of mangrove forests, and the dangers of their destruction.



Mike chats to local children in Tuan Le Village. EJF records environmental and social problems using the international language of film.

*'At the shrimp villages that I have visited, these small creatures make only strangers rich, whereas local people have earned little. In this manner they will sooner or later become tenants on their own plots of land.'*

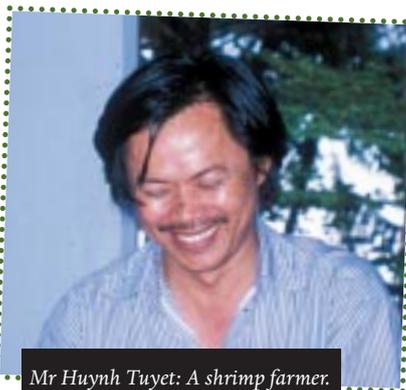
NGUYEN VAN TUAN, VIETNAMESE JOURNALIST

## A lottery for local people

Aside from the environmental costs, we found that the social problems caused by such an unstable industry are tremendous. Poor farmers are particularly at risk, and many of those we met spoke of the gamble involved. 300,000 shrimp, which had cost the farmer over 10 million Vietnamese Dong (around US\$ 650), died of disease at one shrimp farm in Hoa Duan Village in just two days. In Tra Vinh, it has been estimated that 80% of poor shrimp farmers had lost their investment, plunging them into serious debt. Many of the farmers we met here were afraid that they could lose their land if their attempts at shrimp farming continue to fail.

It was hard to see local people risking everything in the hope that they would become rich from this unreliable industry. Certainly, some small-scale shrimp farmers have been successful: Mr Huynh Tuyet (right) has been able to improve his quality of life by farming shrimp. However, the risk of harvest failures is very real – as Huynh Tuyet joked 'shrimp have very small mouths, but they can eat my wife, my house and my motorbike – if they are lost, I will lose everything!' Tuyet's neighbour (right) knows this only too well. She told us that she had lost her entire last shrimp crop to disease and pollution problems.

This loss of livelihood not only effects farmers but families dependent on their income.



Mr Huynh Tuyet: A shrimp farmer.



Mrs Vo Thi: A shrimp farmer.

### The wider impacts of shrimp farming

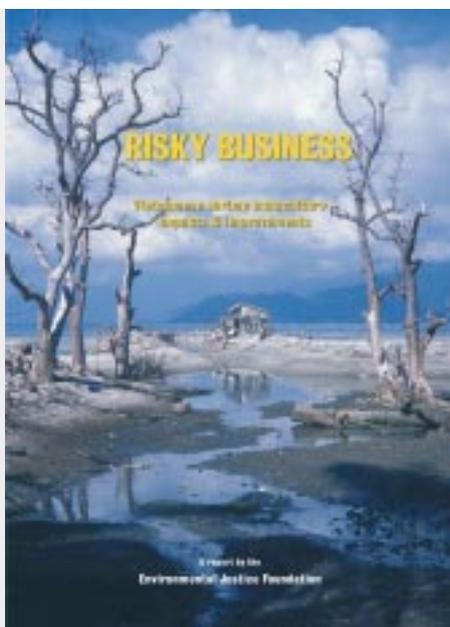
Shrimp production had also affected rice farming and fisheries in the areas we visited. These are important local industries providing food and employment for millions of people. As rice fields are progressively converted to shrimp ponds in the Mekong Delta, agricultural productivity has declined. One of the worst hit areas was the Ca Mau Province of Vietnam, where rice production fell by 460,000 tonnes in 2001.

Fishermen in the region have also seen declines in their catches, and told us of the conflicts this has created with shrimp farmers. Mangrove forests, whose networks of roots act as 'nursery areas' for juvenile fish, sustain coastal fisheries. Once the mangroves are removed, and are replaced by polluting shrimp farms, fish stocks decrease.

### What is being done to help?

We met with several organisations that were working with local communities in Vietnam to encourage a system of integrated 'mangrove-shrimp' farming (right). This involved replanting mangroves, organising farmers into groups and helping to encourage better practice. Following changes in management, local farmers told us that failure rates had fallen from around 60% in 1997 to 20%.

While some negative impacts can be solved by practical changes to farming methods, a broader resolution of the shrimp industry's problems is not always so straightforward. Our experiences internationally have convinced us that this industry is often unsustainable if left to expand in an unregulated manner. The scientists we met confirmed our fears: they predict widespread declines in Vietnam's shrimp farm productivity in the coming years. The social and economic repercussions of this are very concerning. We believe that alternative livelihoods would provide local people with more stable, sustainable and secure ways of making a living.



### What EJF achieved in Vietnam

Following our trip, we published a detailed report on shrimp farming in Vietnam: *Risky Business: Vietnamese shrimp farming – impacts and improvements*. Working in partnership with Oxfam GB in Vietnam, the report has also been published in Vietnamese and has been distributed widely to national and local government, research institutes and non-governmental organisations within Vietnam. The feedback we received from this report has been very positive, and it has encouraged dialogue amongst those involved in the industry. The issues raised in our report also provided a catalyst for the organisation of national workshops, in which potential improvements to shrimp farm management were discussed.

All of EJF's reports are available online at: [www.ejfoundation.org/reports](http://www.ejfoundation.org/reports)

### Education for Life: a partnership for change

Following on from our meeting Education for Nature–Vietnam (ENV), EJF has embarked on an exciting joint training programme: Education for Life.

Training from EJF will provide ENV with the expertise and equipment needed to develop and run high-quality environmental education and public awareness campaigns. The campaigns are aimed at combating the very real threat to Vietnam's wildlife and inspiring a new generation to conserve and protect Vietnam's precious, yet dwindling, natural resources.

*The future generation learns about the importance of environmental protection through ENV's education programmes.*



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### What can you do to help?

Industrial shrimp farming has experienced massive growth since the 1970s. Now, over 99% of farmed shrimp comes from developing countries like Vietnam. As a consumer, you have considerable power and responsibility. With your help, unsustainable methods of prawn production can be eradicated. You can:

- Read more about the problems of shrimp production at [www.ejfoundation.org/shrimp](http://www.ejfoundation.org/shrimp). Here you will also find further information on shrimp fisheries.
- Spread the word.
- Cut down on eating shrimp – or cut it out altogether.
- Tell your supermarket/restaurant/fishmonger that you only want to buy shrimp that has been produced in an environmentally sustainable and socially equitable way.
- Sign the Environmental Justice Foundation petition online at [www.ejfoundation.org/shrimp/prawn\\_stop\\_it.html](http://www.ejfoundation.org/shrimp/prawn_stop_it.html). The petition will be delivered to leading shrimp importers, distributors and retailers in Europe and North America.



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