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CONVICTS & CONSERVATION:
CON DAO NATIONAL PARK, VIETNAM

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Introduction

The phenomenal growth of tourism experienced by the East Asia-Pacific region in the 1990s, nearly double the world average, has played a formative role in reuniting and empowering countries long fragmented by conflict and genocide. Stimulated by an increase in disposable income and leisure time, greater political stability and openness, and aggressive promotional campaigns, tourism is further credited by proponents with discouraging unsustainable practices in environmentally sensitive areas, while simultaneously creating greater opportunities for women and ethnic minorities to participate in the development process. As a result, governments throughout the region are now busy (re)positioning their countries as “authentic” destinations for visitors interested in local culture and nature (Ringer, 1998; World Tourism Organization, 2000).

However, not every country or community in Asia will succeed as a tourist attraction, and those that do may discover the economic benefits less consequential than the social costs, as residents find their governments more intrusive and traditional practices rendered inauthentic for tourists’ consumption. Further obstacles include the tarnished image associated with the sex tourism industry in Bangkok; continued land-ownership and use conflicts; ill-defined jurisdictional roles and boundaries; ethnic and gender disparities; a lack of coordination between participating agencies, and a preference for large-scale development projects financed by international donors (Bank of Hawai’i, 2000; Cohen, 1996; Cook, *et al.*, 1996; Houston, 1999; Howe, *et al.*, 1997; *New Zealand Herald*, 2000; Phongpaichit, *et al.*, 1998; Rigg, 1997; Seabrook, 1996; Sittirak, 1998; *The (Rotorua) Daily Post*, 2000).

The challenges of balancing such development with environmental conservation – and the possibilities offered by tourism in reconnecting an area long defined by its history of conflict, through expanded networks of travel and communication – are the topic of this case study on Con Dao National Park (CDNP) in southern Vietnam. Both strategy and process, the practices initiated on Con Dao establish a framework for community and government leaders who truly wish to:

- successfully market *and maintain* protected areas as destinations for both foreign and domestic visitors;
- create long-term funding support for environmental conservation and education projects that united both parks and communities;
- generate and support economically and socially sustainable employment opportunities; and
- develop meaningful, collaborative partnerships among the diverse stakeholders.

In achieving these goals, initiatives on Con Dao seek to balance tourism’s promised benefits with the ecological significance and fragility of the park’s marine and terrestrial environments. They also seek to affirm conservation as the primary function of a national park, yet acknowledge the economic needs of the destination community. In a landscape where resources are finite and political conditions uncertain, the proposed pathways additionally serve to reinforce the belief that sustainable tourism requires a sustainable community.

Background

Hoping to capitalize on the boom experienced by its neighbors in the Greater Mekong Subregion (Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and China's Yunnan Province), Vietnam has recently taken significant steps to attract more international visitors. Plans to introduce single pricing at 21 tourist sites to remove the distinction between local Vietnamese and foreign travelers are expected to facilitate visitation and investment, as are simplified visa regulations and greater access by foreign airlines. In addition, sixteen cities and provinces have established local tourism promotion boards, and the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism has recently (1999) opened an overseas information bureau in France. Added to these efforts, the Vietnam State Steering Board, with an estimated total spent approximately 14.5 billion Vietnamese dong (US\$1.05 million) in 1999-2000 to market the country's tourist attractions through a web site and electronic newspaper.

Not unexpectedly, given the pro-tourism stance of the Vietnamese government, there are now many innovative developments taking place in the tourism area, amongst which is the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) -funded ecotourism "demonstration project" administered by the World Wide Fund for Nature-Indochina Programme (WWF) in Con Dao National Park. The site of an infamous prison complex originally constructed by the French in the late 1800s and subsequently used by the U.S.-backed Saigon government during the 1960s to intern political prisoners, the island supports a diversity of flora and fauna that are increasingly prized for both their ecological and their economic value (Ringer and Robinson, 1999; Ross and Andriani, 1998).

Con Dao

Located in the South China Sea, approximately 160 km offshore from the "Nine Dragons" of the Mekong Delta, the Con Dao archipelago consists of Con Dao island and 13 smaller islets (Figure 1). Con Dao town, with a population of approximately 4,200 persons – 75 percent of whom are military – is the district capital and headquarters for the national park. Considered both a political and an ecological "hot spot," CDNP is the second largest marine park in Vietnam with 14,000 ha of marine habitats and 5,998 ha of protected terrestrial forest land (Figure 2).

The park's waters are famed for their ecological diversity, including endangered green sea turtles and dugongs, and reputedly, the highest collection of giant clams in the world. The island's forests are equally noteworthy, including nearly 300 species of trees, of which 44 are found nowhere else in Vietnam. Because of this high level of biodiversity and the presumed potential for ecotourism, Con Dao is designated an "Area of Highest Regional Priority" in the World Bank's Global System of Marine Protected Areas (FIPI, 1999; Ross and Andriani, 1998).

The ADB, in consultation with Vietnam and WWF, selected Con Dao NP for their demonstration program. Along with similar experimental programs in southern Cambodia and central Vietnam, the intent of the ADB "ecotourism demonstration" project is to showcase practical options for sustainably managing tourism in protected areas throughout Asia, by identifying processes and methodologies that prove effective in conserving

resources and stimulating greater public participation. Based on input received from the participating agencies, marine ecotourism was made a central component of CDNP's *Five-Year Management and Investment Plans (1998-2004)*, and both the District and Provincial governments emphasize the need to encourage and subsidize local tourism enterprises owned by community members, women, and ethnic minorities, rather than external operators alone (Hulse, 1999; Ringer, 1997).

Destination Analysis

As a prelude to discussing in detail sustainable tourism initiatives on Con Dao it is useful to examine in more detail its attractions and infrastructure base along with the challenges it currently faces. It is essential to keep in mind, however, that tourism development on Con Dao is still in the incubation stage, and both preferences and practices continue to evolve as managers and residents assess the impacts and changing dynamics of travel to the island.

Attractions

The islands of CDNP remained relatively undisturbed until recently, due largely to their use as a prison, distance from the Vietnamese mainland, and their mountainous interiors. As a result, forestry researchers from the government planning institute in Ho Chi Minh City have discovered a diverse range of mammals and marine life throughout the archipelago, including deer mice, the rare black squirrel, macaque monkeys, the giant water monitor lizard, butterfly and parrot fish, giant clams, and the endangered green sea turtle and dugong. Seasonal migrations of dolphins and "black whales" (*Prodelphinus malayensis*) have also been recorded in the coastal waters of the park by staff from the Institute of Oceanography in Nha Trang and the Institute for Environment and Sustainable Development at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Indeed, studies conducted in 1997-99 suggest that the islands may offer the highest species diversity of corals found in Vietnam – and the most attractive in all of Vietnam in terms of ecotourism (Ringer and Robinson, 1999; Ross and Andriani, 1999).

Though the natural environment is certainly the primary attraction – and concern – of park managers, it is difficult to discuss development options for CDNP without consideration of the cultural attractions that exist on park and district land. Among the most significant is an extensive prison complex initially constructed by the French colonial government in 1862. Further expanded by the former Saigon government in the late 1950s, the prisons include the infamous "Tiger Cages," where many of Vietnam's current leaders were held captive until the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. A national cemetery situated nearby includes the grave sites of 2,000 former prisoners, including Le Hong Phong and Vo Thi Sau, both nationalists executed by the French, yet still revered by the Vietnamese people (Giang, 1996; Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 1998).

Con Dao town also contains an historic district centrally located adjacent to the prison complex and hotels. Among the remaining buildings are the former head office and residence of the local governors, constructed in 1873. Considered to be the oldest surviving building on the island and unchanged for nearly 126 years, it now houses the Con Dao Museum. In close proximity are a number of other culturally significant sites, including Pier 914 (the name refers to the number of prisoners who died during its construction); the remains of a road and

stone wall near Cau Ma Thien Lanh (Bridge 350), where nearly 350 prisoners reportedly died under the French; the Phi Yen temple; and the Salt Prison. Some smaller sites are located inside the park itself, including a small house on Hon Cau where Pham Van Dong was held prisoner, and the ruins of a former French plantation (Con Dao Historical Museum, 2000).

Infrastructure

At present, entry to Con Dao for most non-residents is available only by boat or helicopter, weather permitting. A Malaysian-owned cruise ship from Star Cruise Lines formerly stopped at Con Dao each week while en route to Thailand. However, the port calls, which began in October 1999, ceased in September 2000, reportedly because the passenger load averaged only 200 persons per sailing, or less than 1/3 of the ship's total capacity. As a result, visits to Con Dao remain relatively small in number, totaling less than 3,000 annually, based on admission records maintained by the park office and the Con Dao Historical Museum (2000). However, construction is already underway to upgrade the airstrip to accommodate 70-passenger prop jets operated by Vietnam Airlines, and there are plans to launch an inter-island ferry from Singapore in the near future (ADB, 2000; Phuong, 2000).

Additional data provided by the two largest government tour operators, Saigontourist and Vietnam Tourism, indicate that 46% of the international ecotourists who visit southern Vietnam – and by extension, Con Dao – are from East Asia, followed by Europe (7%), North America (3%), and Australia / New Zealand (1%). Most arrive during the brief dry season (April – July) when travel by boat is more reliable and less expensive for Vietnamese nationals. As a result, there is increasing overuse of certain sites during this period, despite the limited numbers (Dào, 2000). Yet, the quest to assure adequate conservation measures remains fraught with difficulty, for Con Dao and the other “Jewels of the Mekong” compete for tourists in a region where conflict and misperceptions still prevail. As a result, the central goal remains focused on attracting more visitors (CDNP, 1999).

To stimulate greater visitation, the Ba Ria-Vung Tau provincial government announced plans to launch a high-speed boat in early 2002, capable of carrying 200 passengers from the provincial capital of Vung Tau to Con Dao island in only seven hours. A similar boat will transport guests to a South Korean planned, 500-room hotel complex located near the park entrance. The district government is also extending the 27-km paved road connecting the airport, Con Dao town, and Ben Dam port to eventually encircle the entire island. This construction project is designed to facilitate access to the west coast for day visits and for security patrols by the military (Con Dao District, 2000).

Challenges

While efforts at growing visitation may benefit the local economy, they might also cause extensive environmental degradation. Soil erosion and the dumping of hazardous waste now threaten sensitive marine environments along the route of the road construction, as do the harvesting of coral and turtles for sale and consumption. The runway expansion and a proposed casino on the island's north will result in the elimination of significant bird-nesting sites and possible contamination of nearby beaches. The potential shortage of drinking water in the future (particularly during the dry season) is also an environmental challenge that must be addressed.

On Hon Bay Canh, where the park maintains a guard station, freshwater must be supplied by boat – though the Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2000) has voiced his intention to construct water cisterns on each of the islands where ranger stations exist. In Con Dao district, the local government is already constructing additional storage facilities, prompted by the accelerated loss of the island's freshwater and mangrove systems to development. It is therefore not surprising that it is worried about the consequences should the island's population total 15,000 persons by the year 2010, as projected in the district's Master Plan (1992). Given the limited amount of land available outside the park, such growth would also place tremendous pressure on the island's other resources and likely necessitate further importation of food and supplies by helicopter or ship.

Limited electrical capacity on Con Dao is also a major issue and inconvenience, since the system is shut down completely between midnight and 6:00 AM except for hotels and private homes with generators. Waste disposal presents an additional challenge. Although trash is collected by the district, most residences rely on poorly-maintained septic systems for human waste, and solid waste is frequently abandoned on parklands contiguous to inhabited areas.

Additional stopovers by cruise ships, as some tour operators desire, and the completion of a proposed hotel where the island's only source of freshwater now lies, will only generate further conflict between businesses who favor "high-end" tourism and proponents of smaller scale attractions and facilities. In addition to the total number of visitors, the current mix of Asian and Western tourists has other implications for the nature and level of development on Con Dao in terms of facilities, attractions, and activities. Interviews with self-labeled Asian and Western ecotourists in 1999-2000, for example, established that many Asian visitors to Con Dao prefer to travel in larger groups and to stay in local hotels or other comfortable accommodations. The majority of Western ecotourists, however, opt to travel independently and seek more direct, cross-cultural experiences and a simpler standard of accommodation. Information concerning such experiences and services, nonetheless is not easily obtained as the island lacks a formal information center, and interpretative materials are only available in Vietnamese. While the Historical Museum does offer informal referrals, neither staff nor the displays provide information on the park or tourism-related facilities nearby, and the guides who lead tours of the prisons speak only Vietnamese (Ringer and Robinson, 1999; Sage, 2000).

At present, almost all of the money and operating equipment for CDNP comes from international donors and lending institutions or visitor fees, with very little contributed by the government of Vietnam itself. This dependence on foreign aid, while certainly necessary because of the lack of adequate funding from the national government, has impeded some innovative park efforts because staff feel hindered by the stipulations that accompany this assistance. The lack of adequate finances has also forced the park director to selectively manage certain natural and historical resources, while ignoring the conservation and protection of other heritage sites (CDNP, 1999; Ringer and Robinson, 1999).

Political challenges also exist. As many of Vietnam's current and recent leaders were incarcerated on Con Dao, the national government must formally approve all development related to CDNP (the current *1993-2010 Master Plan* was finalized at the Prime Minister Level, an event unique for a district level plan in Vietnam). In addition, consent from the

military and Border Army is often required before entrance into certain areas is permitted, and visitors must surrender their passports when traveling between islands within the park.

Sustainable Tourism Initiatives

To respond effectively to the socioeconomic, political, and environmental challenges it faces, a number of critical steps have been undertaken by park officials since 1999. Some of the actions are institutional, while others are more personal in scope but equally constructive. Each effort, however incremental, is designed to foster greater cooperation between government agencies at the district and national level, and to broaden decision-makers' appreciation of the crucial role played by the park's ecosystem both ecologically and economically.

Among the more wide-reaching measures undertaken are those by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), in collaboration with WWF-Indochina, to build more decision-making capacity at the local level, and to promote the sustainable use of coastal and marine resources in the western portion of the South China Sea (or "East Sea" in Vietnam). An ecotourism planner and a marine biologist hired by WWF assisted local staff in preparing an environmental and educational assessment of the park's biology and tourism resources in 1999-2000, and additional staff training in ecotourism practices, interpretation, and guiding is planned or already underway. Meanwhile, capital investments are being solicited for conservation, interpretation, and the construction of ecotourism-related facilities on Con Dao, Hon Bay Canh, and Hon Cau islands (CDNP, 1999; Ringer and Robinson, 1999).

Aware that conservation also depends upon the cooperation and support of the local population, officials from the park and district government now support greater community awareness and use of its resources. On Con Dao, the Minister of Agriculture & Rural Development has plans to develop a small agricultural site within the park to provide fruits and vegetables for residents, and local schoolteachers are encouraged to participate in conservation activities that enable students to appreciate the park's biodiversity and the challenges facing protected areas in Southeast Asia. In Ho Chi Minh City, the Faculty of Tourism at Van Lang University has implemented an internship program on the island for Vietnamese students and residents interested in acquiring practical experience in ecotourism and natural resource management (Huong, 2001).

A second training program jointly developed by CDNP and the Provincial Tourism Department, with the cooperation of the Border Army, is also now underway to license local boat operators to ferry ecotourists to islands for camping, wildlife viewing, swimming, and snorkeling. This will provide economic and educational benefits for local residents and hopefully, encourage them to support conservation efforts in the park. The combined steps will also enable the director of CDNP and district officials to identify and manage the issues of highest priority (Ringer and Robinson, 1999).

To further minimize any unintended ecological impacts, the environmental management plan recently prepared for the park by WWF staff (Robinson, 2000) designates specific restricted-use zones to protect Con Dao's coral reefs, sea grasses, and mangrove forests. These areas are the primary habitats for most of the 44 endangered plant and animal species listed in the

Vietnam Red Book for CDNP (UNEP, 1999). As part of that zoning activity, 7 functional areas for managing the marine and terrestrial areas according to use have been proposed:

- strict protection, scientific research, and limited ecotourism
- turtle nesting beaches
- dugong/sea grasses
- rehabilitation of the natural environment
- marine ecotourism areas
- limited natural marine resource development
- port / harbor development.

A zoning group has already been formed to collect relevant scientific and biological information to determine the specific functions and site locations of the designated zones. Upon completion of the analysis and boundary maps, the park managers will propose specific regulations to govern permissible activities in each area according to their intended function: resource protection, scientific research, or ecotourism and port development. Until such information has been obtained and approved, maximum daily limits on visits to sensitive sites have been established. These limits range from a high of 30 visitors (including 18 overnight campers) for Hon Cau, to a total of only 6 hikers (subject to district and military approval) on the trail to Nui Thanh Gia. These restrictions are intended to assure a quality experience for ecotourists seeking to enjoy nature, while minimizing disturbances to wildlife and marine life. They also reflect the park staff's limited ability to manage tourists and to simultaneously perform their conservation and enforcement duties.

Further Management Recommendations

To support the park's efforts to conserve biodiversity, and the district's efforts to develop alternative sources of income and employment for local residents, the following activities and guidelines are suggested for consideration in Con Dao's final management plan. The suggestions acknowledge the financial constraints that currently impede the park director's efforts to provide more meaningful interpretation of Con Dao's history and resources. They also take advantage of the human and environmental resources currently available, and the attention and assistance available through international organizations, such as the ADB and WWF.

Funding

As it is difficult to distinguish between visitors who come to Con Dao as ecotourists and those who come for other purposes, all nonresidents now pay a single, multi-tiered entrance fee on arrival (students are exempt to encourage greater use of the park for educational purposes, while foreign residents pay more than Vietnamese nationals). Along with concession fees charged private operators within the park, and a proposed one-time Conservation Development Charge levied against all new construction on district land, all such income would go into a Conservation Fund. This money would then be used only for environmental education and protection in the park or Con Dao district.

The Conservation Fund would be jointly administered by representatives of CDNP and the District, with earnings divided equally. This single fee would replace the separate admission

fee charged by the Museum, as well as entrance fees to the national park. However, “user fees” would continue to be charged for any activity within the park that requires a park ranger who provides a service beyond his/her normal duties (such as interpreting natural and cultural features, guiding along an unmarked trail, or leading a group of snorkelers). Other recreational programs offered by CDNP or private businesses may also require the payment of additional user fees, including boat trips to the outer islands, overnight accommodations, bicycle rentals, snorkeling, and diving. All tourism-related revenue, including the visitor entrance fees, concession fees, and Conservation Development Charges, would be deposited into the Fund. This money would be used only for the construction, maintenance, and operation of facilities related to ecotourism, biodiversity conservation, and environmental education. Permissible areas of expenditure might include:

- opening a park interpretation and environmental education center,
- exhibits and operation of the Museum;
- training of guides for CDNP and the historic district;
- purchase of environmentally-sensitive natural areas, which may be privately owned;
- preservation of historical buildings; and
- the design and preparation of educational activities and displays for local schools.

To address any concerns that tourists might have with the fee structure, information given to them on arrival would describe specific projects financed with visitor revenue so that they know they are directly contributing to the protection of Con Dao’s natural and historic resources. This process also helps assure residents that the costs and benefits of tourism development are fairly distributed.

Interpretation and Conservation

Mechanisms for educating visitors to Con Dao’s about its history and marine environment are currently lacking. Perhaps the most important requirement in this regard is a visitor interpretation/environmental education center. Such a centre would contain informative multi-lingual displays of Con Dao’s natural and historic resources as well as maps and other visitor information needs. As regards maps, they would act to highlight scenic, cultural, and recreational attractions, as well as major walking trails, lookouts etc.

For visitors and residents interested in participating more directly in conservation efforts, opportunities to actively assist park rangers in protecting sea turtles and mangroves in the park are needed, as is a system of trails for hiking, bicycling, and wildlife viewing. The park and district could also act to co-sponsor the development of a Youth Conservation Group in the form of a local non-governmental organization, whose objectives would include increasing environmental awareness in that target group, as well as providing them with specific conservation-related projects that would be of benefit to the park and the district. In addition, youth members could be enlisted to help post signs throughout the park, supplemented with self-guiding brochures in several foreign languages, identifying significant natural features and cultural artifacts.

Accommodations

At present, there are three hotels on Con Dao island; however, several traditional Vietnamese bungalows are planned for the smaller islands of Hon Cau and Hon Bay Canh. Utilizing renewable materials and authentic building practices wherever feasible, these accommodations will be simply constructed, elevated on stilts to minimize environmental disturbances, and built to blend into the natural environment. Self-composting toilets will be a feature of these properties and hirers will be responsible for removing non compostable rubbish when they leave.

Camping facilities on each island could be constructed and operated by private concessions selected by the park manager. Capital for materials and construction would be provided by the concessionaire and all specifications must be approved by a park-designated architect. Although the bungalows will be privately-funded, ownership would remain with the park. In exchange for providing the capital to construct the bungalows, the concessionaires would be granted an exclusive, long-term lease (not to exceed 10 years) to use the buildings for ecotourism-related accommodations only. The concessionaires would also be entitled to 90% of the gross revenue (10% of the gross revenue would be contributed to the Conservation Fund described elsewhere). Upon satisfactory completion of the initial lease period, concessionaires would be required to submit a competitive bid to renew their leases but may – at the discretion of the park director – receive preference in the selection process. All construction and tourism activities would be supervised by park rangers to ensure that they do not negatively affect the vegetation, water quality, or turtle nesting areas on each island.

Conclusion

The central task for residents, tourists, local governments, and the tourism industry on Con Dao, is to develop and market a model of tourism that supports continuing visitation, while at the same time maintaining and enhancing the natural and cultural resource base upon which such visitation is based. Anxious to take advantage of the opportunities – and fully cognizant of the challenges – park managers and local residents of Con Dao have taken the first steps. Though the actions outlined in the preceding sections are still preliminary, the initial impressions of staff directly involved in the planning and design process – including those from WWF, CDNP, the Forestry Planning Institute, and the Ba Ria-Vung Tau Provincial government – are that it is possible to create a community-based tourism program that is:

- sensitive to community concerns to maintain the cultural and natural heritage by limiting the number and character of visitors;
- inclusive, by mandating local participation in the planning and management process,
- capable of providing a mix of simple, efficient services to international visitors and Vietnamese residents alike; and
- ecologically and socially sustainable, incorporating both behavioral and biological parameters (Ringer and Robinson, 1999; Robinson, 2000; Sage, 2000).

Indeed, so persuasive are the initial results and institutional support, the national government has now adopted Con Dao as a model for tourism in the country's other national parks. Thus, while the long-term outcome remains uncertain, the preliminary success of this community-based tourism program is certainly benefitting, not only southern Vietnam but the whole of the country. Already, a number of regional tour operators have expressed interest in adding

Con Dao to itineraries that include boat travel on the Mekong between the cities of Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City, and there is increasing evidence of greater communication and cooperation among resource managers and tourism officials in highlighting the shared history and culture of the “Jewels of the Mekong,” and the ease of travel to “4 Nations, 1 Destination” (AEI/PATA, 1996; Associated Press, 2000; TAT, 2001).

Should Con Dao’s experiment with alternative tourism prove successful over the long-term, it may help stimulate similar projects in the Mekong and thereby, create the basis for ongoing “interdependent subregional growth [and] a firm foundation for sustainable development” (Matoba, 1997:88).

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Figures

1. The Mekong Delta
2. Con Dao National Park