

## Chapter IV

### Community-based Forest Management of Van Tien Village

The so-called village forest has been existed for a long time, presenting a close relationship between forest and villagers as well as the villagers' "ownership" to the forest.

The forest area, situating on the hill of tortoise-shell shape that borders with the village resident and is separated from the other forest areas by the running-around footpath at the bottom of the hill, has been called the village forest. The forest area is the source of water for cultivation in the village. The villagers have had the awareness of protecting this forest area for a long time. This awareness was originated from the belief that this area is the place sheltering the Spirit who is Jade Emperor's Daughter, and therefore the villagers built the shrine to worship the Spirit in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which has remained until now, and that water from this forest is a "gift" from the Spirit for the village. Until early 1960s the practices were just simple that the villagers spontaneously did not go into and exploit the village forest. They respected the forest as a "security" for the village, any distortion on it by villagers was considered to bring the village to great disaster. So villagers didn't dare to do any things that disturb the forest. Along the boundary of the forest, the village erected signal board with its content such as "this is the forbidden forest area", "no exploiting", "must not go into forest", and etc. These boards were mainly to warn and remind the non-villagers not to reach the forest. Through many generations, the village forest was strictly protected, especially against the non-villagers.

Not to exploit the village forest does not mean that they ignore their needs for forest products for livelihood, but rather these needs are met by appropriating the alternative forest areas around. In that period of time, with small population plus rich resource endowments of the whole forest, the forest was more than enough to meet villagers' demand for forest products. The natural streams from the forest without any

man-made dam or irrigation system also were more than capable to supply water for the inconsiderable paddy field of the village as a whole.

When the population increased leading the increasing needs for forest products, and the alternative forest areas was gradually degraded, there were distortions on the village forest by mainly the non-villagers especially in the late 1950s. In spite of being protected by the villagers, the village forest was rather destructive. The degradation of the forest around and the village forest as well depleted the water source and hence natural streams could not adequately supply water for cultivation.

Coping with this situation, the villagers, in 1962, with their own common efforts, diverted some streams from this forest to make a lake right at the bottom of the hill as a "water pool" to be enough water for cultivation. This work later was improved by the government supports. The role of the village forest for water supplying now became more important and it also gave more incentive for villagers' forest protection. The increasing pressure on the village forest made it more vulnerable, which in turn negatively affected villagers' lives. The protection of the village forest based on everybody's voluntary and spontaneous spirit was no longer strong enough to prevent distortions from the forest. It was necessary to have the organizational management with specific rules. In response to this requirement, some staff of the administrative board of the co-operative (Hop Tac Xa), particularly its chairman, who was a villager, appeared the initial ideal to protect the forest of the village. Following this ideal, the administrative board, in 1967, undertook to organize forest management, from which the local institution on forest management was arisen.

The primitive Co-operative was administratively equal to the village unit. The whole commune had three villages, so that it had three corresponding Co-operatives. The Co-operatives were legally considered as economic production units at the local level. They were put under the centralized planning management of district and provincial authorities as well as that of the contemporary state. As an economic production unit, the Co-operatives had the right to use and manage certain areas of land and forest. Land was collectivized. Productive materials, labor and technology

were designated common property. In the Co-operative, working time was counted by "cong diem" system. The farmers worked together in the Co-operatives and shared the products of their working time. Their tax duties to the state all deducted from their share. Playing the important role in economic, the co-operatives affected almost aspects in the life of people.

The important purpose of managing forest in that time was to protect water source for cultivation rather than spiritual belief. Firstly, the administrative board contracted with one villager who had prestige in the village as a protector. Lately, the number of protectors increased to 2 persons. At the same time it imposed the strict sanction, say, 10 kg rice each time for anybody who made distortion on the forest. Although the management mechanism was too simple and top-down, the forest was protected well. The reason was that rules of penalty were highly effectively enforced because the penalties for violators were deducted rightly from their benefit share with the Co-operatives. This management operated only within the village forest. The remainder still was under management of the state forest enterprise and district administration.

This management regime existed together with the existence of the Co-operatives. In about 1986, the "Khoan 10" (Resolution ten) of the state was adopted, remarking a reformation in the agricultural sector in particular and the whole economy in general. Under this policy, the agrarian land was reassigned to households who become a production owners, so that the cooperative's important function as a economic production unit was gradually faded once it did no longer possess agrarian land because it was not be suitable with people' practical needs. The Cooperatives really dissolved in 1988. The disappearance of the collective does not mean that the forest management is abandoned but the commune authority otherwise took it on.

During the past time, although the village forest was managed well, on the whole, the forest of the commune was heavily degraded. The "open" forest was exploited and exhausted partly because of poverty and incapacity of the state forest enterprise and district administration to manage, while the village forest was well protected. In the late 1980s, the movement to exploiting land for cultivation happened made

considerable forest-covered areas become barren hills. These impacts caused depletion of water sources. Consequently, the serious droughts frequently came to the local people, especially in the year 1982, 1986, 1988 and 1989, which caused destruction of crops, threatening local people's livelihood. Facing with such situation, the commune authority expanded the traditional forest management to the open forest around in 1993. Since then, the forest has gradually recovered.

From 1993 now, with changes in forest management strategies, the state has paid especial attention in involvement of people in forest management. The precise evidence is promulgation of decree 327, that allow to contract with the locals as forest custodial, application of 1993-land law and the policies such as Decree No. 02, 202 and 661 on allocation of forestry-land and forest to individuals, households and organizations. The forest management of the commune, therefore, have been suitable with both the practical necessity and the state policy and got much support from the government in term of financial investment and legislation. However there have still been many challenges.