



Biodiversity and cultural diversity - key elements for sustainable development

In our world today of rapid changes, biological diversity and cultural diversity are increasingly recognized as key elements for sustainable development. Dedicated to strike for a balance between conservation and development, biosphere reserves serve as testing sites to seal the link between these two keys. In Vietnam, eleven recognized World Biosphere Reserves is also the home of many people including thousands of people belong to different ethnic minority groups. Each group has their own ways of living, which reflect their unique understandings and interpretations of the nature accumulated through their hundreds of years residing in these sites. While these minority groups are often vulnerable to the pressure of development from outside, their identity and cultural values embrace with a rich knowledge of the nature are foundation not only to their endogenous development but also to the conservation of these sites as our common home.

PROMOTING THE VALUE OF VIETNAM'S BIOSPHERE RESERVES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Up to date, Viet Nam is home to eleven Biosphere Reserves (BRs), second only to Indonesia in the number of Biosphere Reserves in Southeast Asia. The ecological makeup of these Biosphere Reserves has been integral to the lives of not only millions of Vietnamese people, but also countless endemic plant and animal species. Promotion of their utility for climate regulation, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable human-nature coexistence have been of paramount importance to national policymaking.

Biosphere Reserves, of which early designation and network was launched in 1971 by UNESCO, are regions of natural and cultural landscapes extending over vast areas of terrestrial, wetland, or coastal/marine ecosystems or their amalgamation. Biosphere reserves are 'learning places for sustainable development', for "testing interdisciplinary approaches" to understand and manage changes and interactions between social and ecological systems, including conflict prevention and management in biodiversity conservation. This is a prime example of human-nature balanced co-existence where the preservation of nature goes hand in hand with the sustainable socio-economic lives of local communities.

BALANCE BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The complexity of different individual parts of nature forms the web of life as the foundation for the existence and development of humankind as a part of it, that no alternative is yet foreseen. Biodiversity offers fundamental conditions for livelihoods and human well-beings which are extremely important for poor people whose livings depend much and directly on the availability of natural resources. In developing countries where



▲ Cat Ba World Biosphere Reserves



is often rich on biodiversity, it is the essential resource for tackling poverty, building resilience against natural and artificial shocks as well as a vehicle for sustainable development.

As much important as biodiversity for the nature is cultural diversity for human beings. Defined as “the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression”, the diversity of these expressions and their dynamic allow human beings as individuals and groups to develop, exchange and accumulate understandings and interpretations of life, including the nature. Cultural expressions, therefore, encompass rich knowledge of biodiversity, which are valuable in both scientific and spiritual terms for individuals and groups of humankind. Cultural diversity is the reflection of biodiversity in our human society. At their inter-link, a loss of a species or the degradation of an ecosystem can lead to the destruction of a way of living, or to a great extent, the collapse of a civilization. On the other hand, a loss of a cultural expression can take away important threads to invaluable knowledge of the nature. The modern path of development, however, resulted in severe loss of biodiversity and cultural diversity with irreversible consequences. This threat to the loss of diversity as our most universal quality is increasingly recognized and addressed through several instruments and collective efforts. The framework for world biosphere reserves was set up as one innovative approach toward sustaining human development based on and for both biodiversity and cultural diversity.

INTEGRATING BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF BIOSPHERE RESERVES

Biosphere reserves are the model designated to realize a vision of which man coexists in a more harmonized relationship with the environment. One of three goals for biosphere reserves as set in the Seville Strategy (UNESCO, 1996) is to conserve natural and cultural diversity. Actions are taken to integrate biological and cultural diversity in the management of biosphere reserves, especially through enhancing the role of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. Vietnamese biosphere reserves: initiatives to seal the linkage between cultural and biodiversity

The network of eleven Vietnamese biosphere reserves covers diverse natural settings, from marine and coastal ecosystems to the rain forest, which is also the home of many people. Thousands of these residents belong to many ethnic minority groups. On the other hand, like most indigenous groups, they have developed invaluable knowledge and spiritual values toward the natural environment, which is important not only for their own group but also for the wider community. Addressing their special needs and aspirations needs a flexible approach, while Vietnamese biosphere reserves were recognized based on the national legal framework

for protected areas where the conventional approach focusing on strict conservation dominated. Moving towards the vision designated for Biosphere Reserves, therefore, requires efforts on capacity building, testing and demonstration of models that harmonise conservation and human development.

Such initiative demonstrated that sealing the linkage between cultural diversity and biodiversity can bring in positive solutions for conservation and development in biosphere reserves. It was also confirmed that nurturing dialogue and participation requires more time and effort from all relevant stakeholders. In a context like Viet Nam where economic development has high pressure on conservation, ensuring sustainable outcomes from introducing a new approach to these biosphere reserves requires continuous investment both technically and financially in improving capacity for better management of these sites.

COMPLETE THE MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment is making efforts to develop policies and legal frameworks to further strengthen the management of World Biosphere Reserves in Vietnam. Regulations on Biosphere Reserves have been institutionalized in the Law on Environmental Protection and Decree 08/2022/ND-CP guiding to implement the Biosphere Reserve Management Regulations that have been developed and approved by authorities.

The 3 Biosphere Reserves of the BR project have also completed the Biosphere Reserve Management Plan for the next 5 years and are developing an Environmental Protection Management Plan for the Biosphere Reserves.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment has also completed the document guiding the nomination and management of Biosphere Reserves. It is expected that in 2024, this guidance will be applied to nominate at least one new Biosphere Reserve. The Ministry has also completed guidelines for preparing a Biosphere Reserve Management Plan aiming to facilitate integrated management of natural resources and guidelines for applying biodiversity impact assessment