



# Preserving biodiversity in the Van Long Nature Reserve

**V**an Long Wetland Nature Reserve in Gia Vien district is one of the largest wetland areas in the Red River Delta and the 9<sup>th</sup> Ramsar of Vietnam, with rich natural resources and unique ecosystem. Apart from exploiting tourism potential, in the past few years, Gia Vien district has also paid due attention to preserving biodiversity in the Van Long Nature Reserve.

## RICH NATURAL RESOURCES AND UNIQUE ECOSYSTEM

The Van Long Nature Reserve covers a total area of 2,700 hectares, spanning over seven communes of Gia Vien district. It boasts rich biodiversity resources and an attractive landscape with limestone mountains, rivers and caves.

Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve is one of the few intact lowland inland wetlands remaining in the Red River Delta, and also the largest wetland nature reserve in the northern region. It is home to two ecosystems, the wetland environment and the limestone ecosystem.

According to the latest survey in 2020, Van Long is home to 722 species of flora, 15 of which are listed in the Red book of Vietnam. It has 39 species of animals; 100 species of birds, 38 species of reptiles, 43 species of fish and 132 species of insects. In particular, Van Long is home to a large population of Delacour's langurs.

Van Long holds two national natural records - the nature reserve with the biggest group of Delacour's langurs, a critically endangered species at home and abroad, and the area with the "largest picture of nature". These are great potential and advantages for Van Long to develop tourism in combination with ecosystem preservation.



Thanks to the cooperation of local authorities and people, the biodiversity preservation has been carried out effectively, thereby wild animals live safely in the nature. In 2000, there were only 40 Delacour's langurs living in the nature, to date, the number has risen to over 200, and they live in separate groups.

The reality shows that preserving the nature landscape will bring about dual results: protecting the environment and becoming an important resource to develop tourism and services.

Gia Vien has implemented numerous measures to fully exploit biodiversity in a bid to develop tourism in a green and sustainable way, thus fulfilling the task of turning tourism into a spearhead economic sector.

With diverse natural resources and rich ecosystems, Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve in Gia Vien district, the northern province of Ninh Binh, has many advantages and potential to develop a service-based economy, effectively contributing to local socio-economic development.

Protecting the landscape, environment and biodiversity of Van Long plays an important role in the district's tourism and socio-economic development, helping to create jobs and improve incomes for the locals. The authorities and locals at the nature reserve have made efforts to implement measures to protect its environment and natural beauty. In order to promote the locality's advantages, the province needs to strengthen education, research and development of specific tourism products associated with biodiversity conservation and environmental protection.

Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve receives a large number of visitors every year. Between May and September is the best season to explore the reserve. The nature reserve is among various attractions in Ninh

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Binh province, which is blessed by nature with a wide range of beautiful natural landscapes and ecosystems. Other sites in Ninh Binh that have become familiar to tourists including Tam Coc - Bich Dong, Cuc Phuong National Park, and particularly the Trang An Landscape Complex. The Trang An complex was recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural and Natural Heritage Site in 2014 - the first in Vietnam and Southeast Asia to receive the honors.

## CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Government recognition and local involvement have made species conservation a success and an ideal tourist attraction. Van Long Nature Reserve has been one of the most successful examples in Vietnam of a unique conservation model between community-based tourism development and species and habitat conservation. The Van Long Nature Reserve Management Board and local authorities need to continue to work together, share benefits from tourism activities and reinvest in protection efforts in order to have better management of the wetland and karst ecosystem and its unique biodiversity.

The successful recovery of Delacour's langur population in Van Long Nature Reserve is a great story in itself. It has inspired other Protected Areas, as it provides an effective Protected Areas-based conservation approach. With good management and protection, as well as better law enforcement, introduced by the establishment of the Nature Reserve, the karst and wetland ecosystems in the area were well maintained and rehabilitated. In the last 20 years, the limestone forest cover has rapidly increased by up to 30%. While habitats improved, the number of wintering waterbirds has significantly increased, making Van Long an interesting birdwatching site that is attracting significant bird-watchers every year. Local communities have new livelihoods from eco-tourism. Being aware of the benefits from conservation of the Nature Reserve, many of the local people now actively participate in conservation work, such as patrolling and environmental education activities.

Van Long is thriving both in terms of conservation and ecotourism development. With the close cooperation between the local communities and the new official management authorities, Van Long has wiped out the threats from forest fires, hunting, firewood exploitation. Local people are directly involved in the tourism operations and many families are earning much higher incomes from farming. Even some of the external tourism ventures still hire local people and use local services. Training for tourism has greatly benefited the local people. The success of biodiversity conservation has been a phenomenal, especially in the context of a national decline in most areas and species. Van Long is developing a new conservation management plan for further restoration and possible expansion of the reserve into the forested hills further to the North. Van Long Nature Reserve is highly valued by the Provincial level as well as the Central level. Van Long is also used for the International Wetland Day celebration ceremony by the Ministry of Environment. The local communities are proud of the importance of Van Long.

Management Board surveys have shown that the local community have an increased appreciation and value for Van Long, and they care much more for the protection activities carried out by the reserve and community staff. As such, the management objectives are achieved, and tourism is flourishing. The core area of biodiversity conservation in Van Long is proving very effective in conserving biodiversity. This is demonstrated through the increasing number of water bird colonies in the area and the increase in number of groups and population of the Delacour's langur.

It is therefore crucial to have funding from the Government and outside to support conservation activities. There is a need for research activities, communications and education activities, community development, but there is no budget for any activities rather than bare functions of patrols and law enforcement. There is a huge need to support local communities in improving livelihoods. The support from the Government is important to create an equal benefit sharing mechanism. Community development projects are needed to support local people improving their incomes. These should be funded in part by revenue from tourism ■

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