Constraints and Opportunities for a Nature Trail and Visitor Centre within the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve, Sa Pa District

A Feasibility Study

Frontier Vietnam 1998
Report 15

Constraints and Opportunities for a Nature Trail and Visitor Centre within the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve, Sa Pa District

A Feasibility Study

Grindley, M. (ed.)

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
Forest Protection Department

Frontier-Vietnam
Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources
Society for Environmental Exploration

Hanoi
1998
Technical report citation:

Section citations:


© Frontier Vietnam

ISSN 1479-117X
A Nature Trail and Visitors Centre in the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve: A Feasibility Study

Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources (IEBR)
The Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources (IEBR) was founded by decision HDBT 65/CT of the Council of Ministers dated 5 March 1990. As part of the National Center for Natural Science and Technology, IEBR’s objectives are to study the flora and fauna of Vietnam; to inventory and evaluate Vietnam’s biological resources; to research typical ecosystems in Vietnam; to develop technology for environmentally-sustainable development; and to train scientists in ecology and biology. IEBR is Frontier’s principal partner in Vietnam, jointly co-ordinating the Frontier-Vietnam Forest Research Programme. In the field, IEBR scientists work in conjunction with Frontier, providing expertise to strengthen the research programme.

The Society for Environmental Exploration (SEE)
The Society is a non-profit making company limited by guarantee and was formed in 1989. The Society’s objectives are to advance field research into environmental issues and implement practical projects contributing to the conservation of natural resources. Projects organised by The Society are joint initiatives developed in collaboration with national research agencies in co-operating countries.

Frontier-Vietnam
Frontier-Vietnam is a collaboration of the Society for Environmental Exploration (SEE), UK and Vietnamese institutions, that has been undertaking joint research and education projects within the protected areas network of Vietnam since 1993. The majority of projects concentrate on biodiversity and conservation evaluation and are conducted through the Frontier-Vietnam Forest Research Programme. The scope of Frontier-Vietnam project activities have expanded from biodiversity surveys and conservation evaluation to encompass sustainable cultivation of medicinal plants, certified training and environmental education. Projects are developed in partnership with Government departments (most recently the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources and the Institute of Oceanography) and national research agencies. Partnerships are governed by memoranda of understanding and ratified by the National Centre for Natural Science and Technology.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Forestry Protection Department
Block A3, 2 Ngoc Ha, Hanoi, VIETNAM
Tel: +84 (0) 4 733 5676
Fax: +84 (0) 4 7335685
E-mail: cites_vn@fpt.vn

Frontier-Vietnam
PO Box 242, GPO Hanoi, 75 Dinh Tien Hoang, Hanoi, VIETNAM
Tel: +84 (0) 4 869 1883
Fax: +84 (0) 4 869 1883
E-mail: frontier@netnam.vn

Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources
Nghia Do, Cau Giay, Hanoi, VIETNAM
Tel: +84 (0) 4 786 2133
Fax: +84 (0) 4 736 1196
E-mail: Lxcanh@ncst.ac.vn

Society for Environmental Exploration
50-52 Rivington Street, London, EC2A 3QP. U.K.
Tel: +44 20 7613 24 22
Fax: +44 20 7613 29 92
E-mail: info@frontier.ac.uk
Internet: www.frontier.ac.uk
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface iv
Acknowledgements v
List of acronyms and abbreviations 1
Introduction 2
Research findings 6
Outline proposals 14
Recommendations for the development of eco-tourism in Sa Pa 22
References 24
Appendices 25
PREFACE

Frontier-Vietnam is a British-based NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) with a history of involvement in biodiversity research, community-based development and forest conservation and management in Vietnam.

Since 1993 Frontier-Vietnam has initiated and managed eleven research projects in nine forest reserves in northern Vietnam. Frontier-Vietnam operates under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources (IEBR) which is part of the National Centre for Natural Science and Technology. Scientists from IEBR as well as from other Vietnamese and international bodies collaborate on Frontier-Vietnam projects. Frontier-Vietnam also offers training possibilities for Vietnamese students in the various fields in which we work, under the HongKong Bank sponsored Graduate Training Initiative (GTI).

Since October 1997, Frontier-Vietnam has been focused on establishing a long-term Ecological Monitoring Programme (EMP) in Sa Pa District, Lao Cai Province. Under agreement of the Forest Protection Department, Frontier-Vietnam is working in the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve to note changes in the forest habitat and fauna over a number of years. Monitoring will allow the identification of key threats to the HLMNR, and the ecological importance of the habitats and species it represents. As part of Frontier-Vietnam’s work, various research has also been directed at assessing the local pressures on the HLMNR, and devising practical projects to aid conservation and augment the value of the EMP.

This report is based on field work conducted by Frontier-Vietnam during the first six months of 1998, examining whether a nature trail and/or visitor centre within the HLMNR would be viable means of directing tourism to aid conservation and a more sustainable tourism sector.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the culmination of the advice, co-operation, hard work and expertise of many people. In particular acknowledgements are due to the following:

SOCIETY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EXPLORATION
Managing Director: Ms. Eibleis Fanning
Development Programme Manager: Ms. Elizabeth Humphreys
Research Programme Manager: Dr. Damon Stanwell-Smith
Operations Manager: Ms. Amy Banyard-Smith

Research for this report was conducted as part of the Frontier-Vietnam Integrated Environmental Education Programme (IEEP), which is supported through funding from the Royal Netherlands Embassy, Hanoi
## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DCP</td>
<td>District Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPC</td>
<td>District Peoples Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP</td>
<td>Ecological Monitoring Programme (Frontier-Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTI</td>
<td>Graduate Training Initiative (Frontier-Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLMNR</td>
<td>Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEBR</td>
<td>Institute of Ecological and Biological Resources, Hanoi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEEP</td>
<td>Integrated Environmental Education Programme (Frontier-Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCTTC</td>
<td>Lao Cai Trade and Tourism Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sa Pa town is the administrative centre of Sa Pa District, situated within Lao Cai Province high in the mountains of north west Vietnam (see map, Appendix 1). The town itself lies just to the north of the Hoang Lien mountains, the tail end of the Himalayan chain which is the defining physical characteristic of this area, passing through Sa Pa District on its descent south east from China to eventually level out in the flood plain of the Red River valley. The major summit on the Hoang Lien mountains, Fan Si Pan, is distinguished by being Indo-China’s highest, at 3,143m above sea level. The combined effects of the mountain chain, the flora and fauna assemblage that is found there, and the climate these give rise to have been a major attraction to visitors since the French first began to develop Sa Pa as a hill station in the 1930s.

Sa Pa has grown in wealth and status since then, to become the busy district centre for over 30,000 people (Sa Pa DPC 1994). The pressure that these people and others put on the natural resources of the area has been a concern for some years. In 1986 the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve (HLMNR) was designated to cover around 30,000 hectares of the remaining forest on the slopes of Fan Si Pan. Meanwhile, a central feature of Sa Pa’s development, linked both to the minority peoples and the natural resources that the HLMNR represents, has been the massive growth of tourism over the last few years. Indeed, after agriculture, tourism is now the second most important economic activity in Sa Pa District.

The physical features which form part of the tourism product or attraction in Sa Pa, touched upon above, are outlined in Box 1 (see over). More general observations regarding the current nature of tourism in Sa Pa have already been made elsewhere, and the reader is referred to these sources for a fuller review (Kemp et al. 1995; Witty & Hamilton 1996; DiGregorio et al. 1996; Grindley 1998a). As a brief summary, the distinguishing features of the type of tourism that Sa Pa receives of import here are based on the division between the foreign and domestic tourists and their respective reasons for visiting.

Based on this previous work, it can be seen that in general Western visitors are coming to see the minority villages and people of the area, and to see the scenery. Their trips are based on information from guide books, fellow travellers and from cafés in Hanoi offering tours to Sa Pa. Most speak English. Vietnamese people are visiting mostly during the summer months, to escape the heat of the lower elevations and also to enjoy the scenery. Sa Pa is a well know domestic tourism destination, which many Vietnamese will have studied at school, where the ethnic minorities as less of an attraction. One important distinction that can be made is that the domestic tourists are on more of what would traditionally be regarded as a ‘holiday’ than the foreign nationals, many of whom describe themselves as ‘independent travellers’. Despite this perception, most visitors are making their own way to Sa Pa, and have fairly flexible itineraries in that they have few plans before arrival. However, the organised ‘tour’ is a very important feature of the Sa Pa tourism industry.

Typical tours on offer include:

- One day spent visiting Lao Chai commune and surrounding villages in the centre of the reserve, taking lunch and visiting some minority houses (without pre-arrangement)
- A tour to some of the remote villages in the south east end of the reserve for three days, taking local porters from villages near the road, such as Ta Van and Ban Ho. Food is also taken, and nights spent in houses with a reputation for putting up visitors in Ta Trung Ho or Seo Mi Ti.
- A three to five day trek to the summit of Fan Si Pan, with a Kinh guide from Sa Pa and local porters (wages for porting are normally between 50, and 100,000 VND per day). Minority guides can be hired independently of the cafés, but it is likely that this possibility is limited to Vietnamese

1 As one gauge of the rate of this development, in 1990 there was only one place to stay in Sa Pa (Lonely Planet 1997); in 1994, 7 guest-houses provided 165 beds (Kemp et. al 1995); a recent study by Frontier-Vietnam gives at least 46 hotels and guest houses open for some part of 1998 (Grindley 1998b, unpublished).
speakers, i.e. domestic tourists. Fan Si Pan is not a popular destination, since it is too large an undertaking for the average, unprepared, tourist with little time in Sa Pa.

Sa Pa’s tourism boom, however, has occurred on an ad hoc basis with little forward planning. A strong cultural bias in the industry tends to marginalise the natural heritage of the area as an attraction. Both of these issues are pertinent to the future of Sa Pa’s tourism industry, and possibilities for sustainability. There is considerable scope therefore for shifting the emphasis of Sa Pa’s tourism industry towards the natural attractions as a means of achieving both sustainability and conservation ends.

RATIONALE

The assertion that tourism in Sa Pa has potential to assist in the conservation effort, and that this could have benefits for sustainability, is an ideology central to this study. In recent years, conservation and development theory generally have seen a new emphasis given to non-coercive strategies for conservation and economic returns from protected areas. This in turn has given a revitalised role to tourism. Where pressures on protected areas are greatest, that tourism can provide a non-consumptive use of resources has been recognised as a boon to conservation. The new wisdom is that protected areas can and should provide direct economic benefits to local people through tourism - a well accepted argument (Eidsvik 1990; KWS 1994). In the past tourism was seen as a source of foreign exchange for redistribution via government (through taxation). While this is still true, the current emphasis is on associating tourism more directly with conservation.

However, despite this general atmosphere in favour of tourism there is still a wide appreciation of the problems that tourism can bring. This is especially true in developing countries, where cultural, social, moral and economic differences between visitor and host have much greater potential for negative impacts than for tourism between the developed countries. The effects of these inherent differences can be compounded by a lack of experience of tourism planning and control, as well as by a lack of skilled tourism professionals (see Ankomah 1991). The environmental effects of certain types and/or levels of tourism need little elaboration (see Mathieson & Wall 1982; Lea 1988), and have been experienced in a diverse array of destinations all over the world. What we can conclude from this is that the relationship between tourism and conservation is not a simple one, and ideology alone is not enough to ensure a direct link. Issues of the type and scale of tourism that is being developed, and the

---

2 The Ham Rong (‘Dragon’s Jaw’) project is run by the Provincial Lottery Company, and aims to develop six different ‘sectors’ on 140 ha of the eponymous hill just east of the centre of Sa Pa town. These will include a mock minority village, rock garden, fruit garden, high altitude species garden and orchid garden, the latter of which is almost complete.
way that this integrated with protected area management aims, all help determine the success or failure of tourism in protected areas; these are discussed now.

**Type of tourism**

The rationale for this study is based on two aspects of the type (and scale) of tourism in Sa Pa:

- that the emphasis of tourism should be shifted away from the current cultural focus to reduce cultural impacts, and to help ensure the longevity of the industry (see Grindley 1998a)
- that tourism could contribute to the conservation of the HLMNR

The first aspect is one which relies on fostering an image of Sa Pa as a ‘nature tourism’ destination. The cultural impacts of tourism are notorious for the fact that they are observed with some delay after tourism is originally developed, and occur amongst those in the host society least able to exert control over, or reap the benefits of, tourism (Tourism Concern 1992). It is acknowledged that domestic tourism is an important sector, accounting for around half of all arrivals (Grindley 1998b). The fact that foreign visitors are much more attracted by the culture of the area (a main selling point in guide books and in the promotional material of local and Hanoi-based café tour operators) is a concern however. Sa Pa is in competition with other areas offering a similar ‘product’, and there is evidence that it may not be long before Sa Pa loses its ‘authenticity’ and remote feel, and these visitors begin to go elsewhere (Grindley 1998a). Local tour operators have been looking for new destinations since the industry took off, and are now having to go farther and farther afield. Promotion of the natural heritage of the area would help by removing the cultural bias and changing Sa Pa’s image, giving the industry a more diverse base. It is believed that as the situation stands, any major decline in the industry would remove a potentially (if not actually) important source of income for local people and the HLMNR.

The second aspect - that tourism could benefit the reserve - is based on experiences from other protected areas around the world. The key issue here is ‘could’, and is something that requires a great deal of thought and political will. It is not difficult however to imagine a tourism industry in Sa Pa based on offering visitors access to and information about the reserve, with a possible direct role for local (minority) peoples. This would be a form of ‘nature tourism’, with revenues going to the reserve. For the promotion of the conservation of HLMNR however, there would need to be something more than this - a type of tourism which is contributive in terms of the impacts of visitors on the host society and the environment. In the language of tourism theory this is true eco-tourism (see Ceballos-Lascurain 1996, pp. 19-29), regarded widely as something very difficult to achieve. Without becoming bogged down with the problems of definition, there are several fundamental characteristics of ‘eco-tourism’ relevant here which are generally accepted in the literature:

1. it does not degrade the resource, and therefore considers waste disposal, noise and so on in addition to more direct possible negative impacts
2. it promotes environmental awareness and positive environmental ethics amongst participants and local people
3. it is oriented around the environment in question, and does not seek to modify this resource for the convenience of tourists
4. it concentrates on the intrinsic interest and value of the resource (rather than associated facilities and services)
5. it contributes to the maintenance and/or improvement of the quality of the resource - i.e. it benefits wildlife and the environment
6. it provides a direct encounter with the ‘natural’ environment, with interpretation centres and other facilities as an adjunct but not substitution for this
7. in protected areas, it is planned and managed in conjunction with wildlife and habitat conservation measures
8. it demands in-depth knowledge on the part of leaders and participants

---

3 In this context ‘nature tourism’ is used to refer to a type of tourism where sites of natural interest are important attraction, in contrast to the current cultural bias amongst western visitors.
4 “There’s more to the Northern Highlands than over-touristed Sa Pa. Head to nearby Bac Ha market for a glimpse into another world” recommends a leader in the Vietnam Investment Review’s ‘Time Out’ magazine (issue 100, March 16-22 1998, p. 3).
5 The issue of whom should be involved is discussed more fully in Section One.
9. it actively involves local communities, as one element of the environment, and therefore the tourism resource in question

Eco-tourism is therefore not adventure tourism, and measures enjoyment on the part of the visitors “in terms of education and/or appreciation” (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996, p.28), though there may be an element of adventure and physical achievement involved. It will also involve a great deal of preparation and planning, as the qualities above will be difficult to achieve. The benefits for all stakeholders, including the tourists, will however be much greater if these objectives are met.

The scale of tourism
The impact of current tours around the minority villages is difficult to quantify, not least because official figures for the number of visitors taking part in tours offered in Sa Pa are unavailable. The same is true of official figures for the number of tourists arriving in Sa Pa. However, based on estimates of occupancy by hoteliers in Sa Pa, a supporting Research Report by Frontier-Vietnam (Grindley 1998b, unpublished) calculates that there were between 60,000 and 80,000 visitors staying overnight in Sa Pa during 1997. This estimate is very much at odds with the official position, which put Vietnamese arrivals at 20,000 and foreign arrivals at 12,000 during the same period. There is thus a large potential market for any tourism developments, and scale becomes a critical issue when considering the issues already highlighted.

Indeed, importantly the scale of any type (or sub group) of tourism is one which is influenced indirectly by the type of tourism being pursued. If the above eco-tourism criteria are taken on board, then certain physical and social ‘carrying capacities’ become central to tourism planning. This is especially true for a trail, where the physical and social impacts, level of enjoyment, ability to educate and the overall impact and quality of the experience are all determined by the number of people being accommodated. It is therefore essential to establish, either prior to development or after practical experience, a level of trail use which meets the objectives in the optimum way. Post hoc control is obviously less desirable as it requires the will to effect change on the part of management, and implies that negative impacts have already been observed. Thus it is much better to start small and increase numbers with time, if appropriate, rather than the opposite. A related issue is whether eco-tourism should then become elitist - a view held by the World Tourism Organisation with regard to ‘quality’ tourism (WTO 1994, pp. 7/8). Price is certainly an effective means of controlling tourist numbers, and is perhaps most attractive as it would deter managers from encouraging too many visitors simply to increase revenues. Price and the number of visitors are to a large degree inversely related.

Integration with protected area management
This topic has already been touched upon above, since it is impossible to discuss tourism development in protected areas without considering their overall objectives. Originally, the human enjoyment of nature was central to the rationale for protected areas (see Hales 1989), but the legislation which defines many modern forms of protection has evolved away from this. Strict Nature Reserves for example, in the accepted international definition, would require exclusive protection, with access to the area in question severely limited, perhaps only to officials and the occasional specialist. In many situations this is not possible, and in many protected areas from the United Kingdom to the developing world, the central importance of people - tourists or residents - is a fundamental management consideration.

---

6Sa Pa District People’s Committee Annual Report 1997.
Section One: Research Findings

This report is based on research conducted in Sa Pa between January and June 1998, designed to answer several questions pertaining to the consideration of ‘nature trail’ and ‘visitor centre’ developments. As the trail would be a development with larger ramifications than the centre, most of the research was focused on evaluating what the most viable proposal for a trail or trails would be given the objectives already outlined. Both the trail and centre proposals are presented in Section Two.

To begin, there was a need for market analysis to better understand the demand side of the proposed developments. This was conducted through via a formal questionnaire collecting data from over 80 tourists, in addition to numerous informal interviews. Interviews were also carried out with local tour guides and café owners to investigate their possible relationship with the proposed developments.

Furthermore, it was important to consider local feelings towards tourism. Since any trail development would almost certainly pass near minority villages, research sought to establish how this would be regarded, what opportunities might then be afforded, and what input local people might want. Interviews were conducted with a diversity of people from communes already exposed to varying degrees of tourism.

The question of physical location was addressed according to ideas developed during the interview-based research above, especially regarding what a ‘nature trail’ and ‘visitor centre’ might be. No fixed ideas in answer to this question were held at the beginning of the research, and therefore the study was to a degree about defining these terms. Developing an appreciation of the possibilities for trail and/or visitor centre developments involved detailed discussion of specific aspects of each with the District Peoples Committee, the District Communist Party, the Nature Reserve and others. It also required the gathering of information from the Province regarding its plans for the future of tourism in Sa Pa.

MARKET ANALYSIS

Questionnaire interviews were conducted on different days of the week during January/February and May/June, to arrive at a good diversity of respondents. In total, 48 foreign national (FN) and 42 Vietnamese (VN) tourists were questioned during the survey. The questionnaire used sought to identify the motivations for visiting Sa Pa and perceptions of the experience, and to encourage feedback concerning the proposed trail and visitor centre. The results are summarised briefly and their relevance discussed below.

- what attracted the respondent to Sa Pa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FN</th>
<th>VN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority people</td>
<td>26 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery</td>
<td>11 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trekking</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minorities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This confirms the generalisation of visitor types given in the introduction, with VN visitors coming for a holiday in a relaxing environment, and foreigners coming to visit minority groups predominantly.

The survey of VN visitors was conducted by some Frontier-Vietnam associated tourism students, and the questionnaires used followed a slightly different format to those used on the foreign nationals.
undoubtedly coming for bird watching, or to work in the forest (researchers) for example, these people are very few in number.

- **what was enjoyed most/so far?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(From 48 respondents)

At the moment people appear to be enjoying those things which originally attracted them. The same appears to be true of the Vietnamese visitors, who probably have a better idea of what to expect anyway, though this is based on informal interviews rather than questionnaire results. ‘People’ - the category that 60% of the respondents identified as (one of) the most enjoyable aspects of their visit - is a broad category. It includes both the minority peoples and the Vietnamese they encountered, and was applied almost equally to those in the tourism industry and those not. The H’mong girls who spend a lot of time in Sa Pa town and who speak some English are definitely an asset in terms of the added facet their presence offers to a visit. It is also encouraging to see that visitors are leaving with a positive attitude towards the people they are encountering in Sa Pa, especially when one considers that for the minority people-tourist interaction is hindered by language and cultural barriers. The informality of the current situation still seems to be affording visitors something positive from their point of view.

- **were people aware of the HLMNR?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the lack of publicity the reserve receives, or employs, it is hardly of surprise that visitors are not aware of its existence. It is perhaps also fair to say that to the casual observer there is little or no conservation of the Fan Si Pan range, since there is no physical evidence that there is protective legislation applied to it (although there are now some fire risk signs in Vietnamese at strategic points of access to the remaining forest). This lack of awareness obviously explains why the HLMNR is not regarded as part of Sa Pa’s attraction, although the ‘scenery’ it represents is (see what attracted the respondent to Sa Pa, above). This is also true to some extent for the minority people, 7,000 or more of whom live inside the reserve boundary (Kemp *et al.*, 1995).

- **is a trail a good idea?**

46 out of 48 foreign respondents said they would use a nature trail of some description if it was available, although this is obviously based on simply the general idea. Including the Vietnamese interviewed, there was unanimity over the question of whether people would be prepared to pay to use a trail - 89 out of 90 respondents in total agreed. However people expressed concern that the quality be high enough (12 VN respondents said they would only pay if it was ‘a good service’), and the foreigners particularly wanted to know where the money was actually going before they would pay. There were also general comments made about the need for good information about the reserve and the trail, to help people make an informed decision about whether to participate or not (this applied to the content of the trail as well as expected duration, type of terrain etc.).

- **willingness to pay**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 3 USD per day</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5,000 VDN</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Nature Trail and Visitors Centre in the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve: A Feasibility Study

The question regarding what people would be prepared to pay was again open-ended, and designed to get estimates based on the maximum payable for a good quality product. From the results, it is clear that the foreigners would be prepared to pay more for the trail than would the Vietnamese, though somewhat surprising by how much. Other national parks in Vietnam charge up to 50,000 VN Dong for entry, many a lot less, and these are places with some facilities and infrastructure. Given that currently almost nobody is paying entry to the HLMNR, this willingness to pay on the part of foreign visitors is reassuring. As for the domestic tourists, the much lower prices offered may well be a result of the different product they were considering (see below). However, in the event of such a clear split between the foreign and domestic tourists on the issue of price, it is an important point that 65% of the FN respondents said they would not be opposed in theory to a tiered pricing system differentiating between domestic and foreign visitors, and students (15% said they would, and 21% gave no answer).

- **length and difficulty**

How long/far would you be prepared to/like to walk on a trail?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FN</th>
<th>VN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; ½ day</td>
<td>&lt;2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>½ - 1 day</td>
<td>&lt;4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&gt;4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3+ days</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(60% of FN respondents) (40% of FN respondents)

The questionnaire as applied to the FN visitors was open as to estimates of how long people would like to walk on a trail, and it appears therefore that 41% of those that gave a duration rather than distance would like to go for more than 1 day - i.e. sleeping within the reserve. Similarly, although the distances suggested should be treated with caution due to the difficulty of the terrain, they are still indicative of a willingness to participate in fairly long walks, adding to the impression that there is a definite market for long trails. On this theme, only 21% of all 90 interviewees said they would be put off if the terrain were difficult. This is one example of the way that the notion of what a ‘nature trail’ might be has been defined by the brief market analysis here.

However, the results of the survey of Vietnamese visitors shows a different picture. That only one person would have been prepared to walk for more than four hours is perhaps indicative again of the brief ‘holiday’ experience in which this sector of the market is participating. Given that around half of the visitors to Sa Pa are Vietnamese, combined with their general interest in the idea of a trail there is thus evidence that there would need to be quite a diverse trail product on offer to appeal to both Vietnamese and Foreign visitors.

- **information requirements**

One theme that kept reappearing during the questionnaire and informal research was the paucity of information available to visitors. Almost everyone spoken to, especially the foreign nationals, admitted a desire for more information on every aspect of the area:

**FN**
A Nature Trail and Visitors Centre in the Hoang Lien Mountains Nature Reserve: A Feasibility Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural history</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>63%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites of interest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Everything’</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (‘maps’)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(From 48 respondents)

LOCAL PARTICIPATION

There appear to have been some problems with tourism in Sa Pa District in the past (see Recent Developments, below), and there are certainly changes occurring in the behaviour of minority women and H’mong girls particularly as they become more involved with tourists in Sa Pa town. Whether this is positive or negative still remains to be seen, but it is certain that it has happened with little thought or planning, or indeed input from the minority people themselves. Although these changes have been examined briefly in the past (Witty & Hamilton 1996; DiGregorio et al. 1997), until now little work has been done with regard to the general attitude of local people towards tourism, especially in the villages that are receiving increasing numbers of visitors.

After the market analysis discussed above, it became clear that the simplest location for a trail (or component thereof) would be within short distance from Sa Pa. Thus interviews were undertaken in two villages close to Sa Pa; Cat Cat, which receives by far the greatest number of visitors; and Sin Chai, where visitor numbers were believed to be quite low (the top end of the valley is not a popular destination). Both are H'mong villages, and both are very close to some of the best remaining forest so close to habitation.

Summary of results of interviews in Cat Cat village

Eight people were interviewed on two separate occasions (17/11/97 and 20/5/98) in the Cat Cat area concerning their attitudes to tourists and tourism in general. The later set of interviews also tried to ascertain their views on the possibility of a nature trail and the resultant increase in tourist numbers. The results of the interviews were broadly similar, suggesting patterns in attitude and experience within the village.

Concerning the number of tourists seen, estimates varied between two and twenty people per day, although one interview in the main area of Cát Cát gave it to be around five hundred per week. Others interviewed simply said that they see many tourists and were unable to put a figure to it. This is hardly surprising when the tourists follow such a regimented route through the village, such that some households will see all of them whilst others will see none. People agreed that the busiest times of the week for tourists are Friday, Saturday and Sunday, with summer being the busiest time of the year.

When asked what they thought of tourists all replied positively, although also apathetically, with most giving no definite reason why they liked them. Furthermore none stated that there were any times of the year when they would not like to see tourists. As to the benefits of tourism, some of those interviewed sold items (drinks and knives) and provided other services to tourists (such as trips up Fan Si Pan) while others expressed an interest in doing similar things in the future. Aside from this some stated that tourists gave sweets and, sometimes, money for their children and families. However these issues were never identified as problems, simply observations, and there appears to be no animosity towards tourists despite the large numbers that are observed passing by some houses in Cát Cát.

When asked about the idea of the nature trail and the possibility of an increase in tourist numbers, all showed a generally positive attitude, but without any clear indication of why they felt this way. Indeed the only real negative comment made with reference to trail was made by one individual who expressed a concern that its development might result in a loss of some of his farmland.

Summary of results of interviews Sin Chai in village

Nine interviews were carried out over one day (21/5/98) in two areas of the village, the first being in the close vicinity of one of the potential trail routes (see Section 2, page 13), the other in the main area of the village. The questions asked were broadly similar to those for Cát Cát, although more was asked with reference to the trail.
In general those interviewed had little opinion, positive or negative, towards tourism and the idea of the trail in a similar way to those interviewed in Cát Cát. Of the people interviewed outside the main village, most commented that they had seen very few tourists in the immediate area and that although they liked the idea of more visitors they were unable to say why. Furthermore this overall lack of contact with tourists left them unable to comment on tourism’s benefits and problems. Interestingly, many did express a desire in the future to sell goods to tourists, though with few definite ideas.

None of the interviewees reported receiving any paid employment during the year, so the cost of local labour is difficult to establish, although one said that tree planting (presumably for the reserve) earned 10,000 VND per day. Most of the interviewees expressed a vague interest in helping in some way in the construction of a trail if it were to be built, and this would obviously be one important step in the involvement of local people in the project. Other implications of this research are elaborated in the Conclusion (page 11).

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF TOURISM IN SA PA

Several more comments on the present tourism situation need to be made. Firstly, from discussion with tourists and with key informants from the tourism industry in Sa Pa, combined with observation, it is clear that the vast majority of visitors to Sa Pa are entering the HLMNR, albeit unwittingly. The main justification for this statement comes from the observation that the most popular ‘tour’ amongst visitors by far is the short walk to Cát Cát village on the outskirts of Sa Pa town, a section of which crosses the into the reserve (see map, Appendix 1). Many of the other tours also visit villages within the reserve. Thus we can be confident in saying that even if visitors only participate in one tour available from Sa Pa, they are highly likely to have entered the HLMNR, although as the current situation stands they will not have paid directly for this access. Putting a figure on how many people enter the reserve is practically impossible, but as a gauge, on a busy weekend in May over 700 visitors were recorded passing on the Cát Cát path. The proportion of a possible 60,000 to 80,000 visitors per year (see Rationale, page 3) using this and other trails within the reserve is likely to be incredibly large, and the fact that they had entered the HLMNR without knowing they had done so (see were people aware of the HLMNR? in Market Analysis, page 2) is obviously important for this study. This is especially true if one considers the opportunities this might afford for an enhanced role for tourism in local conservation efforts.

Secondly, there is a big local problem of competition; local tour and hotel operators compete for visitors, and are under pressure to offer new and cheap trips to more remote villages in answer to demand from Westerner visitors. The domestic market is perhaps less demanding in this respect, though provides a ready supply of customers for orchids and medicinal plants, many of which come from the HLMNR. With such a driving force to the tourism industry, the lack of any checks at present (though see Recent Developments, page 11) means that discussion of the future of tourism in the HLMNR needs to take on board this role of local tour operators. Policing of entry into the reserve would be incredibly difficult if the local industry were not ‘on side’. Similarly, integration of local people, tourist information and so on are all aspects of tours which guides currently do not provide, but could do relatively easily. If one accepts that the local tourism industry must, practically speaking, be the basis of future development, it would be much better to try and make the local economic imperative favour the objectives outlined in Rationale (page 3).

Lastly, other characteristics to be borne in mind are:

- that good quality forest is difficult to access and can involve up to a days walk
- the topography of the area means walking can be incredibly hard, and that trail possibilities are limited (perhaps in practice to those currently in use). Opening new trails would improve access to undisturbed areas and therefore lead to further encroachment
- the climate is highly seasonal, with frequent low cloud and very low temperatures (even snow) during the winter months, and high temperatures and heavy rains during the summer. Poor quality paths become very dangerous in these conditions

---

8 Based on observations made by Frontier-Vietnam from half way round the trail. People that visited Cat Cat village directly from Sa Pa and returned the same way will not have been included, so this figure will be lower than the actual.
opportunities for involving local people are constrained by the heavy workload dictated by their mode of subsistence agriculture, low levels of literacy in Vietnamese and a lack of understanding

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Certain elements of the Sa Pa tourism industry are beginning to come under scrutiny from various local actors. The previous lack of tourism planning is now slowly being addressed, as ideas and proposals are increasingly finding expression. The District Peoples’ Committee (DPC) sees Sa Pa’s weakness as a lack of infrastructure, and has been busy trying to attract Provincial funding for several projects for some time. Their most obvious achievement is the construction of a tourist path through Cat Cat village, designed to offer visitors easy access to Sa Pa’s nearest minority village. In the vicinity of these steps there is also going to be a ‘cultural showroom’, which is under construction at present. Due to be finished later this year, Provincial money has been used to construct a two story building for which the Provincial and District Departments of Culture will then supply interpretation. This construction is the first part of a DPC plan to make the villages of San Sa Ho commune into a working ‘cultural showroom’, already approved by the Province, with improved paths and more information. As with all DPC plans, lack of local funds will mean that the Department of Planning and Investment will need to come up with a proposal on their behalf for submission to the Provincial Peoples Committee in Lao Cai.

Another development currently being initiated by the DPC is for a system of entry fees to be charged for access to the most popular attractions; Cat Cat village, the Thac Bac (Silver Waterfall) on Highway four between Sa Pa and the road pass into Lao Chai Province, and the ancient stone carvings near Ta Van village. At the time of writing (June 1998) a barrier has already been erected over the road from Sa Pa which meets the tourist path described above. Foreign nationals visiting this site are already being charged 5,000 VND, Vietnamese 4,000 VND and Vietnamese children 2,000 VND, and these rates are likely to be extended to the other sites once infrastructure is in place (booths and barriers). The rationale for this attempt at raising revenue for reinvestment directly from tourists appears in part a reaction to fears that if not implemented by the District then some outside interest will do so. How these changes will affect the quality of the tourism experience for visitors does not appear to have been considered, but they are undoubtedly another small step in the shift in Sa Pa’s tourism product away from an informal tourism towards one which is more controlled.

Legislative change occurred recently when the Sa Pa DPC passed a bye-law that made overnight stays for visitors to villages illegal. This is in part a response to fears, possibly based on direct complaints from the DPC administration in Ban Ho commune where it had already been experienced, that Protestant missionaries were likely to try and preach to small minority villages in the District. This contravenes both national policy towards education (especially of minority peoples), but also appears to be unpopular in the villages. The DPC therefore effected a legal change to prohibit anyone from staying overnight in the villages as a means of regaining control over this perceived threat. It seems that San Sa Ho commune (the nearest to Sa Pa, and including Cat Cat village) has been excluded from this, perhaps since the new bye-law would then interfere with future action on the cultural village plan. Although this new regulation has yet to be effectively enforced, it shows a new desire (and ability) to use political fiat to control the tourism industry. This change in attitude could make the development of a more sustainable tourism in Sa Pa significantly easier, especially as cafés become aware that they will need to co-operate with the authorities over the way they operate their previously unchallenged operations in the future.

The last development worthy of note here is within the HLMNR. Since the beginning of 1998 the reserve has completed a new office just outside of Sa Pa town, on the trail to Cat Cat village, overlooking most of the northern end of the reserve. There are currently plans to extend this site to include an additional building in which to house an herbarium and museum providing information about the flora and fauna of the Hoang Lien mountains, and the activities of the reserve. This is indicative of a more general interest in the economic potential that the reserve has, especially through

---

9 This term has been offered as a working translation from Vietnamese of what the DPC has plans for.
10 Interview with Mrs Ng Thoan, Vice Administrator of Sa Pa DPC, May 1998.
11 The Provincial Trade and Tourism Company has already been denied access to make similar investment by the DPC; also from interview with the DPC in May (note 10).
CONCLUSION

To recap, previous research has highlighted some important points for consideration here:

- a heavy bias amongst foreign tourists towards cultural tourism, with domestic tourists being more attracted by an agreeable summer climate (‘travel’ versus ‘holiday’)
- little control so far over the industry at the District or Provincial levels
- almost no direct minority participation in tourism, except through the sale of handicrafts in Sa Pa, some sale of beverages in the more popular destination villages, and irregular employment for some men as guides/porters
- high degree of competition between local café tour operators over price and to some degree destination
- high tourist seasonality, with vast over capacity of accommodation during the off-peak period (November to March)
- little experience of tourism generally (reflected in a strong local desire for business advice)

(including findings from DiGregorio et al. 1996; Grindley 1998a; 1998b)

Research conducted during this study brought several more important points to light:

Demand side

Firstly, in terms of the consumer, virtually all the survey respondents were in favour of the proposed nature trail and were prepared to pay to enter the HLNR, particularly if revenue could be shown to be directed into conservation projects within the reserve. Only a small minority of respondents were aware of the HLNR as a managed conservation area, but almost 100% said that they use a trail if it existed. Although one must be dubious of peoples’ ability to predict if they would in practice use a trail, the sheer number of visitors Sa Pa receives suggests that there is still a large market. Any trail would need to incorporate a diversity of interpretation for visitors, and also to provide a justification for the entry fee - some said they would like to see direct evidence of trail receipts being used productively. More importantly, any trail development would need to combine a variety of route lengths if it were to appeal to the foreign and domestic tourist market, with more challenging terrain kept for the longer route. Trails longer than one day would likely have appeal only to foreign visitors, a significant number of whom are already taking part in similar activities though through Sa Pa and Hanoi based café tour operators.

Pricing would depend on what was offered, though it appears that the foreign and domestic markets could in theory be accommodated easily without problems arising. Access for students could be encouraged in this way, as could environmental education among local school children through the waiving of any entry fee, with obvious benefits to conservation.

More generally tourists identified the need for more formal information on the area, and traditional methods such as an information centre or sign board were all mentioned. Co-ordination of tourist activities and better information are two ways Sa Pa could encourage longer visitor stays, better awareness, and differentiate it from other mountain areas with whom it currently competes. While this is not of direct benefit to conservation it is nonetheless a prerequisite for a tourism which does support conservation and therefore presents a valuable first step. A visitor centre or similar again becomes an urgent requirement (see Grindley 1997a), though needs to consider the cultural showroom and nature reserve museum currently on the way.

12 Interview with Mr Tran van Phi, Vice Director of the HLMNR, May 98
13 This is mostly due to the administrative problems that would be involved in trying to charge an entry fee to everyone who went into the reserve, given the number of people doing so and the subsequent question of enforcement.
Supply side
The most important aspects for consideration here are the integration of local people and the physical constraints that the environment imposes on trail development. In terms of local people, there is little evidence of any actual negative impacts from tourism in the villages thus far, and little concern that there might be. Indeed, minority people appear to be either apathetic towards tourists (even with high contact, as in Cát Cát village), or indeed positive, despite the low numbers of people actually benefiting directly from tourism. In interview, many people from a variety of villages have expressed a desire for more visitors, without any definite explanation being given apart from a vague notion of possible economic benefits. Although the potential problems of tourism should not be ignored, it appears that there is a sound rationale for developments as far as local attitudes are concerned. The question however is how best to bring benefits to the village level.

One way already suggested is through local labour being used for the construction and maintenance of the trail. Employing people local to each section of the trail (almost certainly ethnic minorities) would bring direct economic benefits, and would also encourage a ‘stakeholder mentality’. It would therefore be wise to discuss any trail plans with local representative - village and/or commune leaders. There is obvious awareness of the economic benefits that a trail could bring, mostly through the possibility of selling refreshments to tourists, and local collaboration would be an effective way of establishing if, how and where it would be appropriate. It is also possible that local initiatives - especially local tree planting and regeneration initiatives - could be supported by making them features of any trail(s), and thereby making local people aware that their efforts are of interest to outsiders. This would depend on the route under consideration.

The most difficult problem to be addressed for a trail to be considered as a small-scale ‘eco-tourism’ (as defined in Rationale, page 3) project would be how it directly contributed to conservation. While income generation for local people might well reduce resource use, as is commonly accepted, the scale and localised nature of a trail mean that benefits could well be limited to a small number of people. Furthermore, positive environmental action on the part of the beneficiaries or the wider community would still not be a direct consequence of tourism-generated income, or vice versa. The main way for the trail to be contributory would be through the direct application of park entry receipts to conservation initiatives involving local communities, and for this to be made explicit. Thus a tree planting scheme funded from trail receipts could show local people that tourism was helping them improve their environment whilst also increasing the attraction to tourists. As has been shown, this is something that foreign tourists at least would want to see.
Section Two: Outline Proposals

1. RECEIPTION CENTRE

As has been shown, plans currently held by the HLMNR for a museum and herbarium and the DPC for a cultural showroom are both intended to provide visitor information. There is an obvious need for both these facilities, given the feedback from current visitors and the need for awareness raising to help mitigate against negative impacts of tourism and increase the profile of the reserve. Thus these developments, once completed, would provide some of the interpretation that is required. It is believed that further proposal that sought to duplicate these efforts would therefore be unwise, using valuable resources and creating a confused information strategy for Sa Pa.

Any ‘visitor centre’ would also have another role however; that of providing an introduction to Sa Pa and the tourism product it offers. Thus ‘visitor centre’, as the term has been taken to understand here, combines both interpretation and reception services. Although few survey respondents expressed a desire for the reception element of any tourism information facility, it is also true that a dedicated ‘reception centre’ would be a positive development for several reasons:

- It would be a means of direct contact between the visitors and whichever body ran the centre - the DPC would be the obvious candidate considering its stated interest in better controlling tourism and tourists, and its statutory authority
- It could provide a service to the local tourism industry, for which the operators could then expect future co-operation on the development of more sustainable tourism
- It would have the potential to encourage longer stays, by promoting a more diverse and developed image for Sa Pa
- It would be the means of advertising Sa Pa as a distinct product
- It could provide guidelines for tourists regarding sensitive tourism (awareness raising)

Whilst many of these could be achieved through other means, it is also the case that currently there is nobody with responsibility for this. Given that funding questions would need to be addressed, a reception centre would be a valuable facility for Sa Pa, and would be on a considerably smaller scale to a traditional visitor centre. A smaller development would be cheaper and quicker, both of which are important considerations given Sa Pa’s current situation.

DESCRIPTION

Options for possible locations for a reception centre are limited by available infrastructure. New construction would delay implementation and require a larger investment. Fortunately, after discussion with the DPC it was in theory agreed that the new (and currently unused) market place in Sa Pa town would be suitable. Obvious benefits of this site are its centrality and the fact that it belongs to the DPC already. Keeping the development at the District level affords greater local control.

As a small scale answer to the tourist information deficit in Sa Pa, the reception centre would need to provide only a basic information service. This would include details of attractions, prices, accommodation information and so on. It is recommended that the centre also provide a point of distribution for tickets for access to specific attractions, such as the DPC is already planning (see Recent Developments, page 11). The option of purchasing tickets giving access to multiple sites would be far more acceptable to tourists likely to be put off if required to pay for each separately. The justification for these fees should also be considered as a necessary role of the reception centre.

Frontier-Vietnam has already produced a variety of tourist information in easily copied format, as examples of the kind of thing that could be distributed through a reception centre. With DPC approval (e.g. by authorising leaflets with their official stamp), these leaflets would be far less liable to appropriation by local business for adaptation for their own purposes. A discussion of the danger of
this would need to be integral to any plan for a reception centre, though the fact that private individuals might copy material could be positive in terms of wider distribution.

A last consideration is whether a centre alone is the ideal way of achieving the information aims in question. A centre could obviously be responsible for the production of new materials - for example site specific background information or map boards for placement in the centre of town. But it would also be useful to have another fixed outlet to support the centre. The most viable option for this is the main post office, closer to the main tourist arrival route, which is under the control of the DPC. The post office could therefore easily become a supplementary information source, as it currently is on an informal basis, by providing a map and leaflets.

All of these options have been used to great effect in other parts of the world, and indeed Vietnam. These past experiences have shown how important it is to consider how different information sources can be managed to provide the coherent image required. A Tourism Committee, Association or even DPC Department could fulfil this role, all of which are potential near future developments in Sa Pa. While a reception centre would undoubtedly fill an urgent need in Sa Pa, the problems that an uncoordinated approach could bring should not be underestimated.

**Financing**

If the DPC could be sure to retain exclusive control over any materials it sought to distribute, there would then be the possibility of charging a small fee for these items, thus potentially making the reception centre self financing after the initial capital investment. This initial outlay would be small in comparison with any larger proposals (see Costs, below). Furthermore, if the centre were integrated with the sale of tickets to specific locations (e.g. they were accounted for collectively), then the role of the centre in promoting these attractions would then justify its cost in terms of the increased revenue it would create. This would also offset the opportunity cost of the centre in terms of lost rents from market traders. An additional advantage of ticketing is that it would furnish the first accurate data regarding tourist nationalities, activities and so on, of obvious benefit for future planning.

It is envisaged that the centre would only need one member of staff on duty at any one time, although the exact details would need to be arranged as experience was gained. Whilst Vietnamese and English are obviously the most important languages for visitors (see Introduction, page 2), the provision of information in these and perhaps some other languages would lessen the need for this. However, there are enough local English language skills that staffing the centre should not be a problem. The training of reception staff is an issue that cannot be addressed in this proposal, but would be highly advisable. An effective reception centre would need to source outside training possibilities, and there are several non-governmental organisations who might be able to help with this.

**SCHEDULE OF ACTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Further discussion with DPC :</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the market an acceptable location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration with cultural village (standard information format)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➔ Whose responsibility - decide committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

14 Although in a slightly different context, Frontier-Vietnam has first hand experience of the pirating of material that would be protected by copyright in many other countries; the Sa Pa Guide produced by Frontier-Vietnam in 1995 is now widely available in copied format, somewhat reducing its contribution to minority peoples’ incomes, as was originally planned.

15 Visitors like to see a coherent and ‘simple’ tourism product: Other research by the author has show visitor dissatisfaction in Uganda when multiple demands are made on their finances from the same source (Grindley 1997). The centre would be one way of encouraging a healthy image.
The successful development of the reception centre requires the support and willingness to develop a proposal on the part of the DPC. While other bodies might be able to implement the centre, the DPC has obvious advantages, especially as it already sees the provision of a similar facility as its own responsibility. This desire was a fundamental justification for the current study, which should help guide the DPC in the development of a more sustainable tourism industry in Sa Pa.
2. RESERVE TRAIL

Following the research findings and conclusions already discussed, it is felt that any nature trail would need to have several key characteristics to be both economically viable and to achieve the Rationale objectives. These can be summarised as follows:

- Small to medium in length (perhaps combining 3-4 hour walks with longer options). Longer trails would need much more planning, local participation and market research.
- Easy to moderate terrain, especially for the short stage.
- Good interpretation, including description of the ‘cultural landscape’.
- Guaranteed reinvestment of receipts into conservation, including information for visitors on what their contributions are being used to achieve.
- Local labour during construction (and perhaps maintenance).
- Consideration of the physical and psychological carrying capacities of any route, to determine acceptable numbers.
- Tiered pricing, including free entry for school groups. Entry fees would need to be calibrated in line with the capacity of the trail, with flexibility for adjustment.

It is believed that with these considerations in mind, it is not currently feasible to develop long treks in the reserve. The trail to Fan Si Pan, whilst being of quite low quality, is still a reserve feature which offers the possibility of several day’s trekking in a diversity of habitat types. Some tourists are also making two or three day treks in the south of the reserve, although with proper enforcement of the bye law prohibiting overnight stays in villages this may decline. For all of these reasons the question of longer routes is a much more complicated issue than for short reserve trails, and is thus not addressed by this proposal. Discussion of how longer trails could relate to the future development of eco-tourism or similar in Sa Pa is made in Section Three.

DESCRIPTION

Due to the above considerations, a network of paths is suggested. In total these provide access from Sa Pa to the Thac Bac, climbing from roughly 1300m to 1900m. The trails are centred around a small hill feature above the most north westerly part of Sin Chai village, roughly four kilometres from Sa Pa town (see map, Appendix 1). This area is very close to some good quality undisturbed forest, since topography and the low number of immediate residents mean that it has not seen levels of resource use that have other parts of the reserve. Because of this, there is also the possibility of walking from here into some attractive forest at the top of the reserve.

The total length of the trail shown on the map is around 15 kilometres. Appendix 2 shows how this is divided between the existing O Qui Ho to Cat Cat path through Sin Chai, and the other local trails which enter the forest and provide the most interesting feature. For clarity, it has been divided into four sections:

Section 1 - Path from the Muong Hoa Ho River onto the ridge running up the valley, passing by several H’mong houses. Steep at the start and very muddy, levelling out after 1km and passing through open scrub with views of better forest to the south. The two alternative paths are very similar, and both take about 1 to 1½ hours (up).

Section 2 - Alternate access to the loop of section 3, and also possible means of return. Passes over exposed limestone, and is fairly steep. Joins the Sin Chai path and provides access to hamlet of Sin Chai, though these houses can be bypassed. Top section passes through young regenerating forest.

Section 3 - Loop around a 1760m hill feature, with the best views on the trail (undisturbed forest, Sa Pa and O Qui Ho from the same point). There is also one good view of the Thac Bac, showing its true size. Easy walking through treed scrub/disturbed forest, and a pleasant atmosphere with several glades that could be good rest places. Little used by minority people.

Section 4 - Path following the valley side up to Highway 4, initially across some open scrub, then into forest. Passes though a cardamom plantation and some natural bamboo. Can be very wet and muddy, and consequently would require the most improvement. The last 200m is very steep.
Section 5 - Picnic area just under 1km off Highway 4. This is just below the highest road pass in Vietnam, which at over 2000m affords spectacular views into both Lao Cai and Lai Chau Provinces. 20-30 minutes by xe om from Sa Pa. The walk in follows a degraded trail that would need some work, but the area itself is near some quite good forest with views up at the north western flank of Fan Si Pan. Feels quite remote. This location could possibly be developed into a small walk at a later date.

Existing physical infrastructure
The route described is based entirely on existing paths for two main reasons; firstly, because this will keep any development fairly simple, and; secondly, because the trail will then do little to encourage further forest encroachment. To connect these paths together in a coherent way, and make circuitous routes possible, it is also necessary to include the main path from Sa Pa to O Qui Ho. This is predominantly used by minority people, passing directly past many of the houses of Sin Chai, and is in poor condition at the top of the valley. This provides access to the reserve trail proper, and indicating this to visitors will help remove the impression that minority people are a feature of the trail. Indicating it to the minority people will help them see the reserve as the attraction rather than themselves.

The other obvious section of pre-existing infrastructure is Highway 4. This is a good quality and well used road, and offers the possibility of road transport on one section of the trail. It would be possible for example for visitors with limited time to take motorbike taxis (xe oms) to the Thac Bac, from where they could walk back down to Sa Pa in about two or three hours. The inclusion of xe om drivers in any plan would definitely need consideration, especially as a means of ensuring visitors were happy to use them. This could be achieved for example by certification, and/or putting standard xe om prices on trail information. Other trail permutations using the road fortunately tend to reduce the need to use the path through Sin Chai village, which people would possibly otherwise have to walk twice.

All of these trail sections would require some work, especially if they were to be used in the rain. Visitors are unlikely however to want to the use the trail in large numbers under these conditions, not least because views are obscured. The most important areas for improvement are on section 1 where it leaves the main path, section 2, section 3 where it joins the 270° view to section 4, and about half of section 4. Combined this comes to around 1.5km of poor condition path, although the trail would need to be surveyed in more detail before work started. Similarly, construction techniques would need to be investigated further, although there is a great deal of exposed limestone which has been used effectively on more heavily used paths by minority peoples. This material has the advantage of retaining a ‘natural’ feel to the path.

Existing administrative infrastructure
Administratively, there is only one main issue concerning the implementation of any trail, and this is whether the reserve can charge people for using it. It is clear that many tourists as well as local people are currently entering the reserve, but almost nobody is paying for this. Charging for a trail, as things currently stand, would require permission from the Provincial level (or possibly higher). While this would not be impossible to get, it makes the whole process more elaborate and slower. It is entirely possible however for the agreement to be made at the District level as to whether the HLMNR could sell information and so on direct to tourists. Given this, it is suggested that the map and interpretation that would need to accompany the trail should be sold in place of a ticket; purchasing the map would be a requirement of entry. Thus instead of paying entry and then receiving the free map, people buy the map and receive entry. This negotiates the legal situation, whilst still keeping things simple. An added advantage is that maps would always need to be available, and people could not be charged to enter the reserve without being supplied the map and interpretation, which is one of the requirements of a safe, educational trail. It also means that less information would need be provided on the trail itself (particularly signs and markers), reducing costs and the possibility of people guiding themselves round without having paid for the map.

---

16 Indeed, it also agrees in physical characteristics with an idea already being loosely considered by the reserve, but on which they currently have no resources to act.

17 Interview with Mr Nguyen an Toan, Chairman of the District Communist Party, February 1998; Mr Tran van Phi, Vice Director of the HLMNR, May 1998
If little information is provided on the route itself, then people will need to buy the map to use the trail. This has the advantage of encouraging a one-way trail, avoiding too many visitors crossing over each other. But the question of where to administer map sales and monitor people entering the reserve is not so simple. There appear to be two possibilities, both shown in Appendix 2. The first potential location, labelled ‘A’ on the map, is the reserve office. This would be the easiest to set up, and is also in the ideal position to control entry via the Cat Cat path. However, the trail proposal here does offer the possibility of finishing in Cat Cat as well as starting there. Given that many tourists visit Cat Cat village for a short walk, it would be very difficult to determine who had used the trail and who had not. If people are already paying to use the Cat Cat road from Sa Pa (see Recent Developments, page 11), it would be unacceptable to charge yet again to use the small section of this popular trail which crosses into the reserve. The second option - potential site ‘B’ - takes advantage of the fact that the small part of the Cat Cat circuit which lies in the reserve does not link to the longer trail. This means that a booth placed where the trail splits for Sin Chai from the Cat Cat road will capture only those people intending to use the trail.

Potential site ‘C’ is slightly more complicated as it requires two ticket/map outlets, one at each point of access to the trail from the Sa Pa-O Qui Ho path. Ticket/map administration in these places would have several advantages over the first two options:

- Clear distinction between where the trail is, keeping it separated from the Sa Pa-O Qui Ho path. This would minimise any conflict between the DPC’s toll gate on the Cat Cat path (see Recent Developments, Page 11). It also means that the trail administration is actually exactly at the point of entry into the reserve, the boundary of which follows the Muong Hoa Ho river; thus sites ‘A’ and ‘B’ discussed above are outside of the reserve.
- It allows more involvement of minority people, perhaps in the sale of tickets/maps. A system would need to be in place which encouraged accurate accounting; e.g. stubs from tickets (or receipts) issued by the reserve had to tally with the revenue returned. The potential for mal-administration is reduced further as visitors could possibly pass by both ticket buildings, whereupon they would need to show they had been given the receipt upon entry.

Once the reserve begins providing information from its office, people only visiting Cat Cat will still be aware that the Hoang Lien mountains area designated a protected area. The popular Cat Cat loop would thus appear to some degree as a trail within the reserve. It would be very easy to build upon this, and provide similar signing on this path as for the longer trail, helping raise awareness and encouraging a healthier approach towards local minority people in Cat Cat from tourists.

CAPACITY AND POSSIBLE INCOME

With trail developments there are always some difficult questions to answer regarding carrying capacity. The elements of the idea which are important here are; How many people can the trail support without physical damage becoming too great (or irreparable during the off season)?; How many people can the trail support without the quality of the experience being too greatly reduced?, and; How many people can the trail accommodate before local people find it unacceptable?

Providing that locals are involved with the plan development stage and are seeing benefits from the trail receipts, then the ambivalence shown so far towards tourism may well remain or even become a positive view. Physically, with improvements to the worst sections of the trail then the rocky nature of most of the rest of the proposed route would help ensure that large-scale erosion was avoided. Education of visitors should help avoid other negative environmental behaviour such as picking flowers or leaving waste. Thus the limiting capacity is likely to be the psychological one - i.e. based on what visitors expect.

Research has shown that remoteness and isolation are currently important themes amongst foreign nationals visiting Sa Pa. Vietnamese visitors may well not be concerned about high numbers, but foreign nationals will demand a low number of trail users. However, conservation and respect for the environment are both promoted by engendering a sense of privilege in visitors - that they are lucky to be able to walk in this area of high conservation value, and through peoples’ farmlands. Low numbers
also mean low impacts, and as has been mentioned it is easier to increase numbers to the optimum than to reduce them.

There is around 7 km of trail within the reserve, some of which is in quite open areas. It is expected that four hours would be a realistic amount of time for the average visitor to spend on the trails, although a slow walk with many stops to the top of the reserve could take nearly a whole day. Bearing this in mind, some rough calculations need to be made to estimate how many people could be accommodated without users feeling crowded. For groups or individuals to be sure of feeling fairly isolated they would need at least 30 minute intervals between them. If people could start the trail between 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. then that gives 16 groups per day. Groups should be capped at around eight people maximum, though experience suggests that two, three or four will be the average. If 16 groups of eight people is the maximum for a quiet, enjoyable reserve experience, then this gives a maximum of 128 people per day. This is obviously only a very rough guide, which does not consider that some times of the day will be busier, or the problems of enforcing a maximum group size or a minimum group distribution. But if a large proportion of the total number of visitors who come to Sa Pa expressed interest in the reserve, then there is certainly the danger that any trail could easily become over subscribed.

For these reasons prices at the higher end of those reported as acceptable are favoured, at least initially. A tiered pricing system seems to be acceptable in Sa Pa, despite experience suggesting that foreign visitors are sometimes offended at having to pay more than Vietnamese for the same service. In combination this suggests fees in the following ranges for different groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visitor type</th>
<th>Trail fee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>15,000 - 20,000 VND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>50,000 - 60,000 VND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local residents</td>
<td>5,000 VND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local schools groups</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A quick look at the figures suggests that the reserve has the potential to generate a considerable income from tourism. Given the need for local people to benefit directly and indirectly from the reserve, there needs to be a transparent administration of trail receipts. Proper and separate accounting of trail income is of benefit for future management, but also shows what resources tourism is bringing directly into the reserve. There would need to be a formally agreed division of funds contained within any final trail proposal, with a substantial proportion of income going to community based or initiated conservation projects. Given the current lack of this type of activity in Sa Pa, there is enormous scope for tourism revenues to be applied to practical conservation measures, including rural development projects. The simplest means of achieving this would be through reserve administered grants for local (Commune or village level) projects, considering the limited resources of the reserve. There are many other possibilities which need to be considered if eco- or contributive tourism is really to be pursued.

**SCHEDULE OF ACTIONS**

The most pressing issues for consideration before the implementation of any nature reserve are twofold:

- Clarification of how visitors can be required to purchase a map of the reserve before they can enter - this is especially important given the informal guiding currently provided in Sa Pa. Café tour operators could use the reserve trail for private gain unless there was a good reason not to.

- Consultation with the local minority people about trail administration: Could they administer ticket/map sales?; Is the proposed trail location acceptable, and how far from houses should the trail be?; How can the trail best benefit local people?; What possible uses for revenues are there (community-level suggestions, or proposals)?

Bearing in mind the need to address both of these, a trail development schedule is offered here:
### Action and Time Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion at Commune level re:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- how to take this proposal forward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- how to use receipts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- what support do local people want/need to generate direct benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- options for administrating entry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion at District level:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- avoiding illegal entry; liaison with café tour operators/political</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiat/Tourism Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourcing of outside management advice/experience?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafting joint proposal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourcing of funds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section Three: Recommendations for the Development of Eco-tourism in Sa Pa

In addition to the proposals presented in Section Two, research findings have illuminated many other issues in relation to the development of contributive tourism in Sa Pa (cultural, eco- or otherwise). These issues are particularly important at the present, when political action to exert control over the tourism industry and District based tourism development are both beginning to occur. There is also the possibility of a tourism committee or similar being established in the near future, with the assistance of the IUCN (the World Conservation Union) and Frontier-Vietnam. The exact details have yet to be decided, but the objective of establishing this group is to build local capacity to manage tourism in a sustainable way. For these reasons some more thoughts on future possibilities for tourism in Sa Pa are presented here.

A big question is that of how any tourism committee, if established to help achieve a more sustainable tourism industry in Sa Pa, could be relied upon to pursue this aim rather than its own agenda. The committee would not be a move towards sustainability *per se*, and indeed could simply hasten the development process but in an unsustainable way. The likelihood is that a diverse board will be sought, to stifle the tendency for strong single interest groups to dominate the committee. This would be very important, as would transparency in decision making, for as things stand there are large changes looming for Sa Pa in terms of tourism, and some check on the *ad hoc* development characterised so far needs to be enacted soon.

One example of a role for a tourism committee is possible future eco-tourism development within the HLMNR. This would have to take into account the important role of the local cafés. It would be unrealistic for the reserve to try and manage its own tourism industry, given their limited resources and the impracticality of limiting access to an area with so many inhabitants and the associated means of ingress to the reserve. In this context the best option would be for a combination of a few dedicated eco-tours operating under a different system to those already on offer.

All of the tours currently available could become more nature-oriented without vast changes needing to be made, although the cultural aspect of these tours would have to be integral. There would need to be regulation of the tours within the reserve, and an understanding amongst tour operators that non-adherence to regulations would have mean that ultimately they could loose the right to enter the reserve with paying guests. How this could be set up still needs some thought, but a tourism association within Sa Pa would be a valuable tool for its establishment. Regulations would be along the lines of a fixed entry fee for various duration of visit, a code of conduct regarding what is expected of tour operators and how they behave towards minority people, and a requirement for certain information to be passed to clients about different aspects of the area (Frontier is currently producing example tourist information brochures which will be vetted by the local authorities).

One idea that has proven effective elsewhere for the control of an previously informal tourism industry is for an initial training workshop to be run for guides, with a subsequent guide accrediting system. Identity cards showing ‘official’ approval could be issued to guides who pass a test at the end of their training, and tourists informed of the importance of this as a guarantee of quality. Guest houses and cafés offering tours could be similarly certified, and any break of the code of conduct could result in a tourism committee revoking certification. It would be important to combine this with efforts to provide better tourist information, and a collective image for Sa Pa (similarly formatted information leaflets for example, and an identifiable district ‘logo’). This would effectively result in industry self-regulation, depending on the make up of the controlling body (ideally non-statutory), rather than being coercive on the part of the authorities.

Dedicated and specialist eco-tours would need either to be operated by the reserve itself, using trained employees as guides and providing all the necessary information, or by outside (specialist?) tour operators being somehow encouraged to the HLMNR. Both of these options have their problems, especially when there will be only limited specialist interest (bird watching is an obvious possibility).
Given the quality of the environment within the reserve, as described above, the other option is for the development by the reserve of a system of trails with interpretation on paths not currently being used by tourists. New tourist trails within the forest would avoid conflict with café operators over who should be allowed to guide, and could be fairly easily managed without fear of custom being poached (especially if an understanding was reached with any tourism committee/accredited tour operators).

Local peoples’ involvement in new tourism developments would start through the way in which any tour operators’ code of conduct was desired to bring benefits to them: For example, it might be agreed that porters could only be taken for one day, so that several villages have to opportunity to find work; Local guides could be the only people allowed to take visitors off the main paths, and could then provide information about aspects of their environment (in Vietnamese). Further involvement could occur, perhaps through village leaders, with villages making requests for tourist-related development being put to the Sa Pa tourism committee. A formal link would need to be established for this, and it would probably take some time for changes to sufficiently prove to local people that village participation in tourism could bring benefits. If the body that controlled the tours however had obligations to the villages that formed the central feature of the tours (which they would indirectly even if the natural environment was being promoted), then there would be communication both on the ground (guide/tourist - villager) and at the management level (committee - villager). Once the link was established then there would be capacity for input, and outside agencies could simply provide a support role. At this stage therefore it might be very difficult to try and determine what local people might want to see in the future.
References


Grindley, M. (1997) - Tourism For Conservation?: A critique of current tourism development planning in Uganda’s protected areas, using the example of the Mount Elgon National Park, MSc research dissertation, University of Aberdeen Department of Geography (Rural and Regional Resources Planning), September 1997, unpublished


Sa Pa District Peoples Committee (DPC) (1994) - Population statistics

Tourism Concern (1992) - Beyond the Green Horizon: Principles for Sustainable Tourism, WWF, Surrey, UK


Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View point</th>
<th>View point</th>
<th>View point</th>
<th>View point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thề c Bôc (Silver Waterfall)</td>
<td>View point</td>
<td>View point</td>
<td>View point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamboo bridge</td>
<td>Sin Chai village</td>
<td>Sin Chai village</td>
<td>Sin Chai village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA PA</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
<td>Possible trail route</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cxt Cxt village</td>
<td>Cxt Cxt village</td>
<td>Cxt Cxt tourist steps</td>
<td>Cxt Cxt tourist steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cxt Cxt tourist steps</td>
<td>Lao Cai</td>
<td>Lai Chau Province</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cxt Cxt (H’mong)</td>
<td>Sin Chai (H’mong)</td>
<td>Ta Fin (Mien)</td>
<td>Ban Khoang (Mien)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su Pan</td>
<td>Y Linh Ho (H’mong)</td>
<td>Ban Ho (Giay, Tay)</td>
<td>Sa Pa (Kinh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui Ho (Kinh)</td>
<td>Ta Van (Giay)</td>
<td>Ta Trung Ho (Mien)</td>
<td>Seo Trung Ho (Mien)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seo Mi Ti (H’mong)</td>
<td>Fan Si Pan (3143 m)</td>
<td>Den Tang (H’mong)</td>
<td>Gieng Ta Chai (Mien)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone Tablets</td>
<td>Thề c Bôc (Silver Waterfall)</td>
<td>‘Ham Rong’ (Dragon’s Jaw) orchid garden</td>
<td>Lai Chai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao Cai</td>
<td>Muong Hoa Ho River</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>Trail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>Trail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX 1: Map of proposed trail route and key features