

## Mushroom production as an alternative livelihood for farmers in Vietnam's Ramsar site

### *Background*

Xuan Thuy National Park (XTNP), the country's first Ramsar site, is located in Nam Dinh province, Vietnam. The park is home to abundant aquatic resources and served as a source of livelihood for communities. Livelihood activities in the area include rice-farming and grazing buffalos in the core zone in addition to collecting fish, crabs and mollusks.

In the past, raising buffalos has caused great concern in Xuan Thuy National Park as the increasing stock grazed almost all of the mangrove forests in the core zone. The resulting overgrazing and lack of management among buffalo-owning farmers have caused destruction of habitats for important aquatic resources. While the XTNP officials issued a policy to reduce the number of buffalos owned by the communes, this has implicated the livelihood of farmers who depend much on these animals. As a result of several consultations facilitated by CORIN-Asia, farmers requested XTNP that they be given support for their mushroom production activity as an alternative livelihood. Mushroom production gave buffalo farmers in Nam Dinh an alternative livelihood opportunity to buffalo- raising.

### *Process and mechanism*

Throughout the establishment period, CORIN-Asia in coordination with XTNP officials, Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DoNRE) of Nam Dinh and vocational training center of Nghia Hung district provided strong facilitation for the local community to organize hands-on trainings, cross-site visits, market exploration trips, and regular meetings to continuously build their capacities in terms of livelihood technique, organization, production and small enterprise management. Mushroom farmers learned culturing techniques and skills for different types of mushroom such as straw mushroom, button mushroom, and oyster mushroom to suit different seasons. Thus, varied mushroom species can be rotated throughout the year to sustain their livelihood and income. Farmers have utilized indigenous materials like rice straw as a substrate in mushroom culture and using its by-product as fertilizer for gardening.



Local partners of Nam Dinh have further organized capacity building programs to develop the farmers' technical and management skills. As a result, a "Mushroom Group" was organized. A management board was established from the group, mechanisms were set up for the local initiative fund (LIF). In addition, production and marketing strategies were developed. A market exploration activity was undertaken by their group last December in big

cities like Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Hai Duong, and Quang Ninh. Three officials were selected from members of the management board to formulate a comprehensive management guideline and regulations for the mushroom group. Thus, the mushroom farmers group was formally recognized as, “Xuan Thuy National Park Mushroom Club” with support from the XTNP.

## Results

Mushroom culture helped to improve living conditions of the members and eased the pressure on natural resources in XTNP. The average income per household from selling mushroom is about 1 million VND per month, which apparently is a good profit for plain farmers. This made mushroom culture become so attractive to the local people. As such, from only 8 members at the beginning, the group has attracted 60 people and many households intend to undertake the same activity. The introduction of mushroom culture to the local commune diversified ways of making money, which increased sustainability of household activities. The local people have found an additional source of income and have reduced their propensity to exploit resources in the wetlands. Currently, the mushroom group has set up working stations and facilities. They always collaborate by learning together, sharing experiences, and mutually helping each other. This is the key milestone to change local people's attitude about teamwork and cooperation in managing wetlands.

From four households in August 2008, the mushroom group (MG) have grown to 31 households composed of 60 people (men and women, young people and the elderly) in Giao Thien, Giao An and Giao Huong communes. Majority of these households were poor and often have unstable jobs or had family members working far from their homes. By February 2009, membership was increased by almost 7 times and income from mushroom reached an average of more than one million VND per month.



Other communes in the buffer zone and surrounding areas in Giao Thuy District see the benefits and impacts and expressed interest to work with XTNP. This can lead to the further development of a common framework for local capacity building to manage National Parks, Ramsar sites, and other wetlands and conservation areas in Vietnam and in the region. It is also expected to contribute to policy modification or policy formulation particularly to the self-sufficiency (VAC) model which is implemented in Vietnam.

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