

Empowering Women and their Livelihood in Vietnam's Ramsar Site

Background

For most women living close to Nam Dinh's Red River Delta, collecting aquatic resources around Xuan Thuy National Park's (XTNP) mangrove forests has become their primary livelihood. Hundreds of them flock to the mangrove area daily and a lot more work seasonally to catch fish, crab, shrimp, shellfish, etc. in the mangroves, mudflat, sandy areas and riverbeds. Most of these women were unskilled and had to use their hands in digging the mud or use rudimentary tools such as hoe and rake to capture aquatic animals. They could be seen any time of the day walking in the mud or battling through the weather in the hope of getting anything that could be sold or for their household consumption.

Situation of Women Working in the Mangrove Area

Survey done by XTNP in 2008 showed that out of the 500 aquatic resource collectors, about 70% of them are women aged 20 to over 60 years old located in nine communes. They form different groups based on where they work, working tools used and type of animals captured. Each person can only use a specific tool to catch one or several types of fish or crustacean.

Fish and mollusks collected are mostly for sale and women only keep the ones rejected by middlemen. In a particular day, these women could earn an average of 50,000 VND each (about 3 USD after working 7 hours in the mud). Thus, aquatic resource collection contributes an average of 8

million VND per year (about 550 USD) for the household which is higher than the average income from rice farming (about 400 USD), but lower compared to boat fishing and shrimp farming (about 2,000 USD).

While they contribute economically to the household, these women often face hardships and constraints in their work. They usually have to contend with the cold weather during winter time and the sweltering heat in summer. There are times that women have to travel alone at night time and start working from midnight until dawn. Women also face competition with other collectors and as such would lead to unsustainable collecting practices in the mangrove area and to the eventual decline of resources.

Improving Work Environment

Local partners around Xuan Thuy National Park have identified these women collectors as vulnerable groups and should be given support in terms of providing alternative livelihood, increasing their awareness on sustainable aquatic resources collection and ensuring security and safety to their working area. Those who chose to undertake alternative livelihood work were trained on handicraft making and were given support for cattle breeding and farming or other training that they collectively see the need. Elderly people, particularly the women, were encouraged to join existing livelihood activities such as mushroom culture.

A co-management guideline was developed by XTNP in cooperation with other institutions and communes

in terms of aquatic resource collection and mangrove conservation. Women collectors were likewise given support to improve their work conditions as well as rights to utilize resources around the mangrove areas as long as they ensure sustainable practices in aquatic resource collection. Organizing a mangrove protection team was also suggested by XTNP and local authorities to monitor and survey activities around the area. A future plan of the park is to develop eco-tourism activities that will support the products of the aquatic collectors and their communes around the buffer zone.



(Top) Women manually capture fish in the mudflat area. (Bottom) Scavenging in the mangrove forest for fish and mollusks could take 10-15 hours per day.