

Forest Exploitation Puts Endangered Rhinos at Risk

The residents of two villages near Cat Tien National Park in the Central Highlands province of Lam Dong, Viet Nam, where a group of endangered one-horned rhinos live have yet to be relocated out of the area, despite a government programme that called for their resettlement.



In 2003, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) approved a project to move local residents out of the national park's core. Conservationists said illegal logging and the activities of locals in Phuoc Cat Commune were affecting the food supply of the rhinos. The park is the Javan rhinoceros' only known habitat in Viet Nam.

Local authorities, however, have allowed all 52 families to remain in the area, blaming the delay on reduced budgets. The authorities say that allowing the locals to continue to live in the area would help raise awareness and involve residents in conservation tasks. But the villagers continue to survive by exploiting the forest environment.

The forests surrounding the two villages are two of the most severely damaged areas in the national park, according to a report sent to the MARD and authored by Tran Van Mui, director of the Cat Tien National Park. "Illegal logging is well organised and occurs in the park's core areas," he said.

"Local residents have cleared paths through rhino habitats. These actions have pushed them into very inhospitable eco-regions where there is a lack of food and natural salt licks, which are crucial to the rhino's survival," Mui added.



If efforts aren't made to set aside protected areas within Cat Tien where the rhinos can live undisturbed, then the animals may become extinct, according to conservationists. The one-horned rhinoceros, or *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, is one of the world's most endangered large mammals.

The Vietnamese Red Book has given the pachyderm an E classification, meaning on the brink of extinction, while the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources has placed the rhinos on the list of critically endangered mammals.

The World Wide Fund for Nature helps Cat Tien Natural Park to monitor animal numbers by way of camera traps and local zoologists keep tabs on the animals as well. But conservationists say the rhinos' future is bleak.

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