

Visit to Vietnam

J.D. Constable

During a two-week visit to Vietnam the author was able to take one 200-km journey into the countryside, and to talk with the Foreign Minister as well as several scientists. He found that both people and government were concerned about wildlife and that the government would be receptive to offers of help with field surveys. Fortunately the only national park lies outside the areas affected by the herbicides in the war. Elephants survive on the Laos border, but there is no news of kouprey. Rhinos may not be extinct, and tigers have increased, but several of Vietnam's many species and sub-species of monkeys are endangered.

The countryside of Vietnam is only just recovering from nearly forty years of intermittent war with the French, the US-supported Saigon regime, and China. In addition to suffering the more usual effects of bombs and military movements, much of the land in the South has been exposed to the new hazard of herbicides.

The very limited hotel and transport facilities in Vietnam restrict the issue of visas to invited guests and a few tourist groups, mostly from Russia. I was fortunate to be able to accept the invitation of Dr Ton That Tung, the country's best known surgeon, to carry out a two-week medical survey in Hanoi-Haiphong and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) and to expand this into an ancillary but determined wildlife inquiry. We made one long drive into the country – the 200 kilometres from Hanoi via Haiphong to Ha Long Bay near the Chinese border – and my information comes from this excursion and from interviews.

I spent some time talking with the Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thatch. Although wildlife conservation is outside his direct responsibilities, he was firm in his assurance that *en principe* Vietnam is committed to the maximum preservation of its wildlife heritage and resources, but that finance and other obvious priorities, including a real lack of food, prevent any major implementation of active conservation at present. I was also able to interview Dr Dao Van Tien, Dean of the Faculty of Biology in Hanoi and the senior zoologist in the country, who received me in his laboratory-office, reminiscent of that of Cuvier or Darwin, where we were surrounded by books, reprints, skeletons, horns, and piles of great tin boxes containing skins, with here and there a few live animals, including a tortoise and a squirrel. Dr Dao Van Tien was particularly helpful in offering specific information as to the probable current status of a number of primates. In Ho Chi Minh City I talked with Pham Hoang Ho, Professor of Botany at the University, who was personally well known to me from previous work that we had done together on the effects of herbicides. I also talked to several recent visitors to the only national park or forest in the country, Cue Phuong, and picked up whatever other relevant information I could.

Any potential for significant preservation of Vietnam's rich wildlife lies in the hills. The Red River delta in the north has been intensively cultivated for

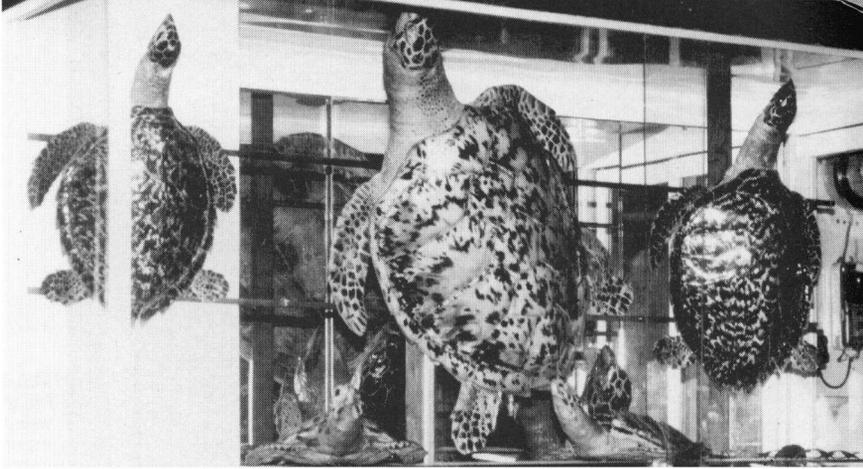
centuries, as has the narrow coastal plain connecting this and the Mekong Delta in the south. Until the very extensive French canalisation programme of the last hundred years had been completed, the Mekong delta swamps were largely uninhabited by man; now the area is almost as heavily cultivated as the Red River delta, and the larger wildlife has been essentially eliminated. Fortunately, however, the Vietnamese landscape is characterised by very steep mountains both inland and in occasional isolated 'islands' in the coastal plain or in the sea, and these, although often very small in area, are steep enough to preclude any cultivation. Having served historically as homes for hermits, they still offer a refuge for monkeys and other smaller animals, and plants. Dao Van Tien, said that the Government has plans for controlled forest-cutting of the inland mountain areas in the centre of the country, but the academic zoologists have filed briefs for game and wildlife reserves, and these have been sympathetically received by the government. None has yet been gazetted, but it is to be hoped that appropriate wildlife reserves will soon be set aside.

The Cue Phuong National Park, which preserves some 100 sq km of mountainous forest about 100 km from Hanoi, is apparently fairly well protected, although subject to some bow-and-arrow poaching. Fortunately the park was far north of the limits of herbicide use, and was described to me as still containing numbers of enormous trees. In a single day one visitor with a guide saw several groups of monkeys, described as being large (one metre), thin, brown-bodied animals with thin black legs, small faces and long tails, that were possibly brachiating; he also saw flying squirrels, bats and flying lizards.

Continued forest cutting is undoubtedly a severe threat to the largest animals: elephant, kouprey, tiger, rhino (if not extinct), but for the primates and birds the steepness of the rock massifs may be some protection. Sport hunting is rarely pursued by the Vietnamese, although there is some deer hunting. There is a dearth of game birds of any kind, and guns are not widely seen in private hands. Hunting for food threatens primates most in the areas occupied by Montagnards. Everyone I talked to about the effect of armies moving through the forest agreed that rhino and elephants were traditionally not shot by the Vietnamese, and that other animals would not be commonly used for target practice, though certainly sometimes shot for food. Tigers are said to have increased as a result of military activity and the resultant casualties.

The use of endangered or rare species as a source of medicines is a special problem in the Orient. The Republic of Vietnam Health Service has made a firm commitment to a return to traditional medicine, although fully integrated with Western methods. Most of the traditional medications are derived from plants, nearly all of which are cultivated. The few animal products used include deer horn and snake, and monkey jelly (principally from the bone) is traditionally valued in the treatment of arthritis – Dr Dao Van Tien considered this one of the most serious threats to the macaques, especially *Macaca arctoides*. At the traditional medical centre in Hanoi, the director, Dr Tran-Thuy, agreed as to the popularity of monkey extract, but said that none is used through the government health system, nor would rhino horn ever be prescribed, even if it could be obtained. More careful inquiry as to exactly what wild animal derivatives are used might be important since this is one aspect of exploitation that could easily be controlled. A lurid green gecko extract is offered in the 'dollar' shops for export, I believe as an aphrodisiac, but the

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SHOP IN
HO CHI MINH
CITY

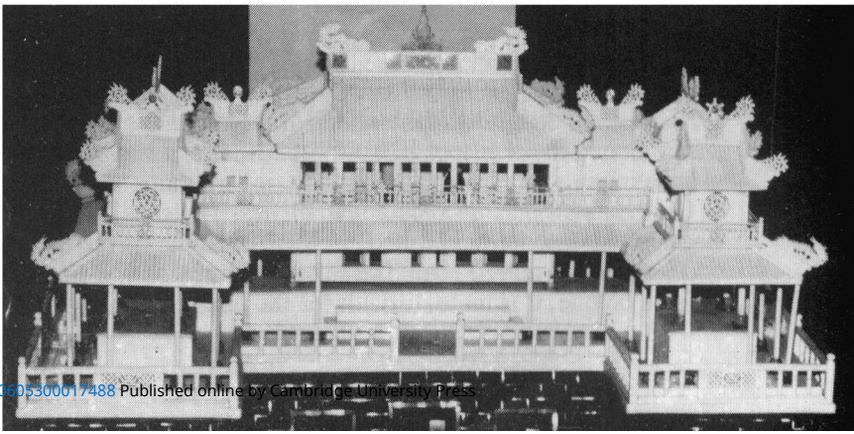


population of house geckos does not seem to be affected.

There is no control on the sale of wild animal products in Vietnam. The former Saigon regime signed the CITES convention in 1973, but never ratified, and the present government is not yet a signatory. Although life in the North is quite spartan and little beyond necessities is available in the shops, Ho Chi Minh City is, at least superficially, remarkably little changed from its appearance during the war, and vast amounts of consumer goods, including luxuries and souvenirs are offered for sale. I saw very little snake or other reptile skin and essentially no wild animal fur, certainly never that from a tiger, but both government-run handicraft and private shops offer ivory products, presumably of African origin, and even more goods made of tortoiseshell. This is another aspect of wildlife exploitation that could be modified by the government; I cannot believe that the total value of these products actually sold is very significant to the economy.

The exhibition of animals in zoological gardens is not important in Vietnam. One Hanoi park had a few birds and tortoises, though other animals may have been exhibited elsewhere, and the zoo in Ho Chi Minh City, which has changed little since 1967, displays a couple of elephants, a few monkeys, none I believe particularly rare, except possibly a single rather surprising *Callithrix*, received by way of California, some deer, and a rather remarkable number of large birds of prey. It is, incidentally, a tribute to the triumph of science over politics that not only does the botanic garden, associated with the zoo, retain its Latin inscription, but a large obelisk dedicated to its French founder seems to be the only laudatory public French inscription remaining in the city.

The pet trade is relatively unimportant. At least in the city there seems to be no great tradition of keeping wild birds or animals in the house, and in



PALACE CARVED
IN IVORY
IN A GOVERNMENT
SOUVENIR SHOP



The enormous tortoise *Pelochelys bibroni*, weighing 550lb that emerged from the central lake in Hanoi City in 1926

extensive walks I saw only a few caged birds. At my hotel a visiting Russian had a 'cai-li', a lesser slow loris *Nycticebus pygmaeus*, which he hoped to take back to Russia. My Vietnamese friends were surprised that he had obtained it and knew of no market source for such animals. The hotel at Ha Long on the coast near the Chinese border had a healthy-looking macaque (*Macaca nemestrina* pig-tailed macaque) in an adequate cage which had been there for some years.

What has been the effect of the use of herbicides? The toxic effects of the arsenical Agent Blue, used patchily for crop destruction, is not long-lasting and was not used extensively enough to have much effect on the wildlife. Agent Orange, however, the defoliant that in fact killed so much of the forest and mangrove, remains an open question as much for its effects on wildlife as on man. The mangroves are re-vegetating, but the most desirable species have to be hand-planted. The inland forests, some of which lost as many as three-quarters of their older trees, seem to have retained seedlings capable of regenerating as long as the clearing, originally the result of herbicide destruction, is not maintained by cultivation. For some species the destruction of the large trees and consequent increase in undergrowth has probably been beneficial, and even in the most extensively defoliated areas there were usually skip zones that could serve as refuges for the larger or more wide-ranging species.

In the North the traditional semi-religious role of the turtle/tortoise is impressive. The supports of monumental memorial tablets are often large stone tortoises, and the hero's sword which saved Vietnam long ago was brought from the lake in the centre of Hanoi by a large turtle. The size, at least, of these creatures is not legendary. At Quoc Tu Giam, the first place of higher education in Hanoi, an immense turtle skeleton is preserved. In the temple on the central lake is the stuffed body of another that emerged from the water in 1926 allegedly weighing 550lb and 5½ feet long. These are *Pelochelys bibroni*, surely among the largest of all freshwater turtles; it is astonishing to find them originating in a smallish city lake.

Elephants *Elephas maximus* apparently exist in small numbers near the Laos border. They are neither hunted nor used for labour by the Vietnamese. About the kouprey *Bos sauveli* I could obtain no information or even opinion. Perhaps being a bovine, it is more difficult for the non-scientific observer to identify.

PIG-TAILED
MACAQUE



The Javan rhino *Rhinoceros sondaicus* is considered by many to be extinct in Vietnam. If so it disappeared fairly recently. Dr Loc of the Ho Chi Minh City Health Service saw one killed near Dalat in 1963 and saw footprints in 1964, and there are many more recent definitive reports. Much more exciting to me is Professor Ho's statement that at Lam Dong military men, whom he considers reliable, report that there are still rhinoceroses at Blao. Tigers are agreed to be present in significant numbers.

Primates are one of Vietnam's major wildlife assets, with some twelve full species and a large number of additional subspecies and geographical races. The douc langur *Pygathrix n. nemaeus* is widely distributed inland in the mountains more or less from the centre of the north to the delta; Dr Dao Van Tien believes that it is probably not rare despite its endangered status in the IUCN Red Data Book. The other race *P. nemaeus nigripes*, distributed more locally and centered near Tay Ninh, is believed to be not rare, but there are no recent reports, and the original range is in a heavily defoliated area in which at least one previously vegetated mountainside is now bare scree.

The stump-tailed macaque *Macaca arctoides* (= *speciosa*), distributed irregularly over the north down to the level of Quang Tri, but excluding Hanoi and the Red River delta, is very much at risk. According to Dr Dao Van Tien, macaques, never common, are the most threatened of Vietnam's primates, being hunted both for food and medicinal use. *Presbytis f. francoisi*, the most widely distributed of the four subspecies of François's leaf monkey, persists in good numbers over the north part of the country north of Hanoi. *P. f. poliocephalus*, which since historic times has been restricted to a group of islands in the extreme north-east, is now to be found only on the Isle de Catba, where a fair population needs protection. *P. f. delacouri*, originally distributed in the middle part of North Vietnam, is no longer continuous with the distribution of *P. f. francoisi*; Dr Dao Van Tien considers it to be rare or very rare. *P. f. hatinhensis*, first described in 1970 from specimens collected in 1942 and 1964, occurs in the southern part of North Vietnam, and is believed to be not very rare. It is of some interest that Dr Dao Van Tien described a new geographic race of the silvered leaf-monkey *P. cristatus* (*P. c. caudalis*) as late as 1977 from an example in a zoo which was of unknown origin, but lived until at least 1963.

Rhinopithecus avunculus, the Tonkin snub-nosed monkey which is eaten by the mountain people, is found only in the North in a range somewhat similar to that of *Presbytis f. francoisi*, but much more limited. Although extremely scarce in world collections, with only a handful of specimens, Dr Dao Van Tien considers them fairly rare, but still definitely present.

About birds, I could obtain very little information or even opinion. Very few wild birds are to be seen, except smaller birds and birds of prey in the steep rocky areas. As the original home of some the rarest pheasants in the world, including the imperial *Lophura imperialis* and Edwards's *L. edwardsi*, the status of these is of particular interest. I could obtain no reliable reports, but it must be remembered that they have only rarely ever been seen since their original description. Whether or not herbicides have had significant effect on their status may be critical.

I was much encouraged by finding some real interest in wildlife among the Vietnamese. The Government would welcome assistance in a field survey of the more important species, and it might well be possible to found a Vietnamese Wildlife Society.

Another Giant Panda Study

A team of Chinese and American zoologists, the Americans from the National Zoological Park, Washington DC, is to study the ecology of the giant panda in the Tang Jia He reserve in Sichuan. The reserve covers 100,000 acres in the Min Shan mountains of north-western Sichuan, up to 9000ft. Pandas are common, and 23 other protected vertebrate species include the golden monkey *Rhinopithecus roxellanae*, takin *Budorcas taxicolor*, golden pheasant *Chrysolophus pictus* and giant salamander *Andrias davidianus*. The study will complement that being undertaken by the New York Zoological Society and the World Wildlife Fund at Woolong reserve, under the leadership of Dr George Schaller, which began in late 1980. The NZP study is to begin in February 1981.

Crane's World Population of 150

The discovery by a Chinese zoologist, Fu-chang Chou, in the winter of 1980/81 of about 100 Siberian cranes in the northern Jiangxi Province has made it possible to give a fairly accurate estimate of world numbers. This is the flock that nests in the Yakutia tundra of the USSR, formerly estimated at about 200, but very difficult to count on its nesting grounds because the birds are widely scattered. Unless more are found in this flock, the world population now stands at about 150: 100 in this eastern flock, 34 wintering at Bharatpur in northern India and 16 reported in 1980/81 to be wintering in Iran.

Japanese Crested Ibis Breeding

Last July two breeding pairs of Japanese crested ibis *Nipponia nippon*, of which only 14 birds were known to exist, were discovered in Tsingling in central China. One pair hatched three young. Chinese ornithologists, according to James Hancock who visited Beijing last year, believe that more ibis will be found.

Falklands Life

A new revised edition of Ian Strange's *Falkland Islands* (David & Charles, £8.50) covers all aspects of Falkland life; fauna and flora get the lion's share of 30 beautiful black and white photographs.