

Project title: Community-based forest landscape restoration and protection for the endangered white-cheeked gibbons' habitat conservation in Van Ho, Son La

Project duration: 2 years

Geographic area of the proposed project:

The proposed site is located in *Van Ho commune, Van Ho district, Son La province, Vietnam*. Van Ho district is a new administrative unit¹, covering the largest forest area in Son La province compared to other districts. Besides Xuan Nha Nature Reserve, another 625 hectares of natural forest is located on the limestone mountains, adjacent to the Hang Kia - Pa Co Nature Reserve (Hoa Binh province) (*Figure 1*). This area is also the watershed for Ma River and Da River. Despite a small size, Van Ho natural forest is rich in biodiversity values, with 784 plant species, 146 animal species, of which 143 plant species are threatened and 23 animal species are listed as endangered². Remarkably, there are evidence of 3 groups of about 13 Northern white-cheeked gibbons³ living in this area, are listed as “critical endangered” in IUCN Red List and named in Group I of most prioritised species for conservation in Decree No. 06/2019/ND-CP by the Vietnamese government. At the end of 2020, PanNature recorded at least 2 new borns joining this small population in Van Ho forest.



Figure 1: Location of Van Ho nature forest, near Xuan Nha and Hang Kia - Pa Co Nature Reserve

PanNature⁴ established a field office in Van Ho in 2015, with regular activities on biodiversity conservation, natural forest ecological restoration, community development to respond to climate change, and internship programs for students in the Northwest region. The experience and mutual trust with local government and communities offer PanNature a precious advantage to continue our conservation interventions in the project area.

Project idea:

These are the critical challenges to be addressed:

¹ It was separated from Moc Chau district in 2013

² According to a field survey conducted by PanNature in March 2020

³ Youtube video: [“Vườn đen má trắng – Linh vật Vân Hồ”](#)

⁴ See more details on the final page

Vietnam Business for Environment – VB4E

+ *Direct and indirect threats to the forest and the northern white-cheeked gibbons:*
H'mong people living in Van Ho district still remain their traditional practice of burning forests for cultivation, or cutting trees for heating and construction, causing increasing degradation of the local forest in recent years, and severe fragmentation of the natural habitat of the endangered northern white-cheeked gibbons. Notably, living in a narrow area separated from Hang Kia - Pa Co and Xuan Nha Nature Reserve (*Figure 1*), the small population of gibbons in Van Ho are hardly either covered by international conservation agenda, or benefit from national reforestation programs, which normally prioritize protected areas and bigger population of endangered species. The reason for these gibbons' survival in Van Ho is the local belief that a death fate may come to those who hunt this species. However, since the area is highly accessible, they are still facing hunting risks from neighboring locals. Although there is no specific survey on the declining population of gibbons due to hunting, in 2020, PanNature has released a report on the threats to wildlife in Van Ho forest in general the hunting habit of the local ethnic communities (H'mong, Tay, Dao, Thai, Muong) using traps and guns, which can easily harm the safety of the gibbons by accident.

+ *Local ethnic community's essential roles but lacking efficient resources and capacity to do conservation and forest protection:*

Van Ho natural forest does not belong to any protected area, currently shared-managed by H'mong people living in Van Ho district. However, local communities still lack sufficient awareness, capacity, and funding to protect the forest and conserve the gibbons efficiently. The only funding available is the payments for forest environmental services (PFES), which are mostly used for family costs instead of forest protection activities. Up to now, PanNature is the only conservation partner working in Van Ho to support local people and local government.

+ *Local authority's limited resources and capacity:*

Since Van Ho is a newly established district, the new ranger team is operating with limited human resources, low capacity, poor biodiversity conservation vision, and vague management mechanisms.

The synergy of these above challenges is threatening the remaining forests in Van Ho with the groups of northern white-cheeked gibbons' and other endangered species' survival unless there are conservation interventions. There are many other small forests with high biodiversity values like Van Ho natural forest scattering outside protected areas throughout Vietnam. While waiting too long for government support, which prioritize other larger areas, without proper management mechanism, these precious forests are at risk of disappearing at the fast pace of human development.

PanNature chooses to address the described problems through promoting the most important human resources for forest protection – local communities. With over ten years of pioneering work in conservation and community development in Van Ho, PanNature sees a high potential of involving local people and local government in conservation efforts. We strongly believe that, with sufficient capacity and management skills, they will contribute significantly to protect their forests and conserve the northern white-cheeked gibbons. The proposed project is also the only conservation effort targeting this area up to date.

Vietnam Business for Environment – VB4E

Project objective: To conserve the endangered white-cheeked gibbon’s habitat through community-based forest landscape restoration and protection in Van Ho, Son La

Proposed activities:

- *Component 1: Biodiversity monitoring and restoration*
 - Restore the fragmented natural forest habitat of the northern white-cheeked gibbons. Up to 120 hectares of forest areas will be restored under the “Rebuilding home for Gibbons”⁵ program;
 - Study and collect information about the northern white-cheeked gibbons and its forest habitat (forest coverage, food source) using biodiversity monitoring tools through the local Gibbons Conservation Group (GCG). At least one GCG is established with five young members from villages surrounding Van Ho natural forest. At least two field surveys are run each month;
 - Monitor ecological succession in Van Ho natural forest. At least four ecological succession plots are established and monitored in Van Ho natural forest every quarter.
- *Component 2: Law enforcement in key conservation areas*
 - Strengthen forest patrol and protection through developing coordination mechanism between forest rangers, local authorities and communities and enhancing forest patrolling and monitoring capacity for local communities. At least two trainings and two local meetings are organized each year;
 - Provide technical support and capacity building for functional ranger unit and communities in reclaiming invaded forest land in key conservation areas. At least two trainings and four field visits are organized in two years.
- *Component 3: Community awareness raising on forest protection and alternative livelihoods*
 - Raise awareness for local community with signboards, local audio broadcasts in H’mong language, traditional festivals. At least six signboards are established, four audio articles are broadcasted, and one festival is organized every year;
 - Develop alternative livelihoods such as fruit tree plantation for at least ten households who are cultivating in key conservation areas.

Beneficiaries: Local people in Van Ho commune, Van Ho district, Son La province and Van Ho Forest rangers

Relevance to VB4E thematic areas:

The project directly contributes to the three focus themes of VB4E: biodiversity conservation, forest landscape restoration, and climate change. It indirectly support the focus theme of water conservation, since the project site is the watershed of Ma and Da river, and reforestation is critical to protect the water resources for the region.

Management structure: PanNature is the lead in facilitating the project implementation. The Hanoi Office will be in charge of management and organizational issues. The field office in Van Ho district will directly implement the project activities with technical support from the Hanoi Office when needed, in collaboration with the Forest Protection Department of Van Ho District.

The project activities will also be monitored and supervised by the VB4E’s National Coordinating Body (NCB), who are experts on forestry, biodiversity, water resources, hence will provide technical advice and support during the project implementation. IUCN play the role as secretariat to the NCB to organize monitoring, evaluation and learning (MLE) trips for NCB.

⁵ [Chương trình “Làm Nhà cho Vượn”](#)



Vietnam Business for Environment – VB4E

Total Budget: USD70,000 * 2 years on rolling basis

Co-financing: IUCN & PanNature would mobilize funding from other sources to co-finance the project

Please contact coordinator at VB4EAlliance@gmail.com for further information if you are interested in the project idea.

About PanNature:

Our vision

PanNature sees Vietnam as a sustainable and nature-friendly society where people live prosperous lives in harmony with their living environment, properly utilizing the country's natural resources to ensure sustainable development in the present and future.

Our mission

PanNature is dedicated to protecting and conserving the diversity of life and improving human well-being in Vietnam by seeking, promoting and implementing feasible, nature-friendly solutions to important environmental problems and sustainable development issues.

What we do:

- Implement sustainable environmental protection and nature conservation solutions;
- Support and assist the Government in positive efforts at environmental protection, nature conservation, and sustainable development for all;
- Cooperate with other organizations and individuals sharing the same vision in protecting nature and the environment;
- Inform the public on a wide range of issues, including biodiversity, sustainable livelihood options and environmental policy and law;
- Protect public interests, especially those of the poor and the disadvantaged, by promoting equal access to natural resources.