SYLLABUS & ITINERARY

Vietnam: Conservation and Tourism in Dong Nai Biosphere Reserve
Instructors, Marilyn Marler and Carla Abrams
For more info contact Marilyn.marler@umontana.edu

Dong Nai Biosphere Reserve in southern Vietnam encompasses the pristine jungles and wetlands of Cat Tien National Park, the secondary forests and war relics of the Dong Nai Culture and Nature Reserve, and busy farming communities. Bike and trek through this fascinating landscape and learn about the war history, current lifestyles, conservation issues, and the unique plants and animals.

We will support three community based eco-tourism adventures, and help staff develop low impact hiking/biking tours for future visitors. Along the way we visit museums and war relics, talk with local residents and scientists, and observe wildlife in the field. We’ll do all of this in the context of post “American War” Vietnam: pressing conservation issues, real lives of people, modern and traditional culture, including a visit to the exotic Con Dao Islands National Park, with its tragic past and optimistic future.

This field based experiential course is not a typical tourist trip. Accommodations are basic, there is physical exertion, adventurous food, and we are spending time with professional staff in the Biosphere Reserve and two national parks. The basic question of our trip: can educational nature tourism be a positive force for conservation? If so, under what circumstances?

The course begins and ends in Ho Chi Minh City,
Price is $3200, excluding international air fare. Includes all lodging, guide fees, in-country travel and most meals.

Participants must be able to:
- Hike and/or bike 10k (6 miles) in a day for a few days. There is one 14km hike (flat terrain) and one 30k bike ride (mostly downhill).
- Sleep in a hammock
- Contend with insects including but not limited to leeches and mosquitos
- Get the recommended immunizations before departure (visit Missoula County Travel Nurse)
- Eat unusual foods and tolerate sleeping in close quarters (accommodations include jungle camping, homestays with farmers and lodging with Forest Rangers)
**Required:**
Inside the Vietnam War (National Geographic documentary video)

A Natural History of Vietnam by Eleanor Jane Sterling, Martha Maud Hurley and Le Duc Minh (Yale University Press, 2006)

**Recommended:**
Birds of South East Asia
Mammals of South East Asia

**Topics:**
- Vietnam-American War History (Dong Nai War significance, war impacts to forests and wildlife)
- Biosphere and UNESCO designation (management zones, implications for people, wildlife, economy)
- Pros and cons of “Eco-Tourism”. Greenwashing versus working for conservation
- Plants: Medicinal plants, forest types, epiphytes, recovery of forests since the war
- Small nature: butterflies, insects, birds
- Rare vertebrates: elephants, primates, pangolins and more
- Ethnic groups in Vietnam: how many, where do they live
- Wildlife threats/challenges: traditional medicine, pet trade, lack of regulation, encroachment, habitat loss
(Day 0) Jan 4- Arrive in HCMC 10 pm, check into Victory Hotel Saigon.

(Day 1) Jan 5- HCMC to Dong Nai Nature and Culture Reserve (DNNCR).

Breakfast at hotel.

Visit the War Museum and Reunification Palace (both are within easy walking distance to our hotel). The War Remnants Museum opened in 1975 and is one of the most popular museums in Vietnam. It presents the government's view of the “American War.” The Reunification Palace was the home and workplace of the President of South Vietnam. It was the site of the end of the Vietnam war, during the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

Lunch at local restaurant. Depart to Dong Nai Nature and Culture Reserve (DNNCR). Check into our comfortable hotel and have dinner at Eco-Tourism Center (ETC) Restaurant. Meet our local guides and DNNCR staff. After dinner, we’ll have a short lecture on the Dong Nai Biosphere Reserve, its specific war history, meaning of an UNESCO site and Biosphere Reserve Designation. We’ll include a geographical and ecological description of the Reserve, recent history, and local residents and current economy.

(Day 2) Jan 6- DNNCR HQ to Jungle Camping

Breakfast at ETC Restaurant. Together with staff and our guides, we will review maps and check gear. Safety/Hygiene talk.

Drive to the Dead Tree Memorial. This small but dramatic memorial represents the impact of Agent Orange defoliant on the forests in South Vietnam.

Visit the nearby War Zone D interpretative site, which is also the beginning of our hike; Here we’ll discuss domestic cultural tourism to the Biosphere, and how it is different (and similar) to nature based tourism.

Just before departing for our hike, we will participate in a short ritual to honor those who died in the war, and to pray for a good journey. Simple lunch at the trailhead or on the trail.

Trek 8k to our campsite along a stream. Observe jungle plants, birds, and insects on the way. This is a secondary forest that was heavily impacted during the war but there is a chance to various animals. At camp we will set up our hammocks, bath in a small stream, and rest. Our guides will cook dinner using traditional and low tech methods that are fun to watch!

Sleep under the stars and witness the bioluminescent jungle soil.
(Day 3) Jan 7- Jungle camp to Rang Creek Ranger Station

Breakfast at camp. Trek 8 k to Kop Creek Ranger Station for lunch and a rest. Get an update on location of the local wild elephant herd, perhaps climb up the observation tower for stunning views of the Reserve and over to Cat Tien National Park.

Transfer by car to Rang Creek Ranger Station. Free time: explore waterfall, bathe, visit with and dinner with Rangers. Learn about the Rangers’ lives and enjoy their truly outstanding cooking and hospitality! This ranger station is frequented by the elephants, although it is unlikely that we will see them here

Night walk for wildlife. We could see mouse deer, loris, sambar deer, civets and more.

Sleep at the Ranger Station. Some will sleep in Rangers’ rooms, some in hammocks.

Discussion topic: Notice that our accommodations are very basic; Dong Nai intends to improve guest accommodations. What could go wrong? Does our visit make things better or worse? Or both?

(Day 4) Jan 8- Rang Creek Ranger Station to Backcountry Ranger Camp

Breakfast at Ranger Station. Bike 8 km uphill to remote ranger station, which is a simple bamboo structure near a small stream in the forest. Look for macaques and langurs on the way.

Lunch on the trail or at camp.

Free time, swimming. Dinner at camp. Discuss poaching, challenges for law enforcement. Impacts of the illegal wildlife trade. Night walk for wildlife (look for lorus, mouse deer, and others).

Sleep in hammocks.
(Day 5) Jan 9- Backcountry Camp to Choro Long House

Breakfast at camp.

Bike 8 km downhill to Rang Creek Ranger Station for lunch with the Rangers. Rest. Continue on bike to Kop Creek, get another update on the elephant herd whereabouts. Refreshments and another look out from the observation tower. Continue (downhill) to the Choro Long House. We'll pass through native tree plantations, fruit orchards and small communities.

The Choro are an ethnic group who live in this part of the Reserve. The Long House is built in the traditional style of the Choro, to accommodate several generations living together. This project is a cooperation between the DNNCR, the national government, and the Choro people. The goal is to promote local customs while providing income from and education to tourists. The Long House is full of information and interpretative displays.

Meet with Choro elders and tour the Long House. Festive dinner and cultural performance. Evening discussion/lecture about the success/challenges of this community based tourism project.

Sleep at Long House.

(Day 6) Jan 10- Choro Long House to the DNNCR HQ

Breakfast at local restaurant. Continue on bike to Bau Hau Lake. This ride is through rolling countryside, mostly through farms and orchards.

Lunch at local restaurant near Bau Hau Lake. View the sculpture garden, discuss future tourism projects for this site, including the proposed lotus shaped building.

Return to Dong Nai HQ. Discussions/evaluations and feedback for DNNCR staff. Traditional Vietnamese dinner party for our going away (with karaoke of course) at ETC Restaurant.
(Day 7) Jan 11 Dong Nai HQ to Cat Tien National Park HQ

Breakfast at ETC Restaurant. Final discussions and share evaluations.
Pack up. Car ride to Cat Tien National Park (2-3 hours)

Arrive at Cat Tien Park. Lunch. Check into bungalows. Free time.

Late afternoon, meet at Cat Tien Visitors center.

Lecture by Dr. Khanh Pham, Park Scientist and Director of International Collaborations: Park history, ecology and conservation issues.
Dinner with Cat Tien friends.
Night Safari: ride in an open air vehicle along the park road with a guide. Look for sambar deer, civets, owls, wild pigs and more nocturnal animals under the night sky.

(Day 8) Jan 12 Cat Tien National Park HQ

Visit the two Wildlife Rescue Centers at CTNP Headquarters. One is funded and managed by Free the Bears, a German based non-governmental organization (NGO). The other, Dao Tien Primate Rescue Center, is funded and managed by Monkey World, a UK based NGO. It is located on a small island upstream of HQ. We'll see sun bears, moon bears, gibbons, langurs, duocs, pygmy lorus, and more, and hear how these animals came to be in these facilities.

Visit the park museum; watch nature documentary at the visitor center.
Organize gear, including checking the bikes.
Evening lectures (To be confirmed):
Birds of Cat Tien National Park and environs, Mr Hoang Quang, friend of Cat Tien Primates of Cat Tien National Park, Dr. Hai Bach, Park Scientist

Evening free time; possible night birdwatching at HQ.

(Day 9) Jan 13 Cat Tien National Park HQ to Dac Lua Village

Breakfast, and then depart by bike. We'll cycle slowly through the jungle via the park road, which is a small, flat, dirt road. There is a good chance to see wildlife if we are quiet.

Check into homestay for lunch.

Afternoon: visit the surprisingly low tech and high production silk factory. Possibly visit the archeological site on the far side of Dac Lua village.

Dinner and stay overnight at homestay.
(Day 10) Jan 14 Dac Lua to Crocodile Lake

Breakfast with homestay family. Return by bike to Crocodile Lake trailhead (8 km). Trek to Crocodile Lake (5km)

Lunch and cultural exchange with Rangers. Afternoon free time.
As the sun gets lower, boating on the lake to look for crocodiles and birds.

Dinner and cultural exchange with Rangers and park staff.
Sleep at the Ranger Station Guest House.

(Day 11) Jan 15 Crocodile Lake to Ta Lai Village and Longhouse

Trek 14k to Ta Lai Village. Look for wildlife along the way.

Lunch on the trail. Arrive at Ta Lai in the early afternoon for swimming, kayaking, and free time at Ta Lai Longhouse.

Discussion with the Longhouse managers and staff. This is a partnership between the local community (Ma people, who are an ethnic minority in Vietnam) and a foreign company (a French-owned coffee business). How does it impact the local people and how does it benefit the conservation goals of the National Park?

Dinner and sleep at Ta Lai Longhouse

(Day 12) Jan 16 Ta Lai to Ho Chi Minh City

After breakfast, say goodbyes and return to HCMC. Stop for lunch on the way.
Check into rooms at the Victory Saigon. Optional sight-seeing. Dinner together and trip re-cap.

Introduction to Con Dao Island National Park ecology and history:

The Con Dao islands have a strong political and cultural history. Many Vietnamese revolutionary heroes were incarcerated there. Starting with the French in the late 1860s, the prison on Con Son Island was used to house opponents of the French colonialism, earning a notorious reputation for the torture of prisoners. Eventually the prison was taken over by the South Vietnam government to house political dissenters, helped by the US during the "American War". Prisoners were held in horrific conditions, including the infamous "tiger cages" that were finally documented by Tom Harkin in a famous Life magazine expose (July 1970). Besides its history, the Con Dao Islands have an immense natural beauty, with forested hills, deserted sandy beaches and extensive coral reefs......and very few tourists. We will hike, swim and explore these lovely islands, meet locals working on conservation issues at Con Dao NP, and visit the
prison with its gruesome past.

(Day 13) Jan 17 Ho Chi Minh City to Con Dao Islands.

After breakfast we take the 45-minute flight from HCMC to the Con Dao Islands. We land on Con Son Island, where we will be picked up by private bus and taken to our hotel which is comfortable but not fancy. After a relaxing morning, we will have lunch at a local restaurant.... fresh seafood is a specialty! We will then tour Con Son prison, and the excellent historical museum. We will learn the tragic history of the prison, who was housed there, and see the notorious tiger cages. The prison was finally closed in 1975. Afterwards we will walk thru a garden of stone statues that was created for beauty and healing.

After a needed rest, we will have dinner with our local friends who work at Con Dao NP. Evening discussion will include the natural history of CD NP.

(Day 14) Jan 18 Boating and snorkeling
After breakfast, we head to the sea and boat to a nearby island for snorkeling and swimming. Picnic lunch. In the afternoon, our local friends will discuss with us the conservation challenges facing Con Dao NP. We will have time to stroll along the beachfront promenade, have a Vietnamese coffee and watch the sunset. Dinner on your own-there are many local restaurants to choose from.

(Day 15) Jan 19 Con Son Island and Con Dao National Park

After breakfast, we will pick up food at the Con Son marketplace for our hike in Con Dao NP. In the forest we will hope to see the endemic Giant Black Squirrel and the Long tailed Macaque monkey. The hike ends at a lovely beach where we will have lunch. After a relaxing afternoon, we will visit a beautiful Buddhist pagoda on the hill, and watch the sunset. Our Vietnamese friends will join us for a special hot pot dinner. After dark, we will pay a visit to Hang Duong cemetery. This unusual cemetery, with its statues and tombs, is the resting place of some of Vietnam’s most celebrated revolutionary heroes. We’ll join people making pilgrimages to the grave of Vo Thi Sau, a young woman executed by the French in 1951. Pilgrims bring combs, makeup and flowers for her tomb. After the cemetery, we return to our hotel.

(Day 16) Jan 20 Con Dao Islands to Ho Chi Minh City
Mid-morning flight back to HCMC. End of course.
Optional sightseeing together or independently; and/or check into rooms at Victory Saigon. Flights back to US usually depart late at night.