Some observations concerning NGOs

To make things clear at the outset, one is sometimes obliged to acknowledge the following facts. The NGOs operating in the countries of the South, which include Viet Nam, are generally of two kinds – those upholding a global conception of human dignity throughout the world and those trying to preserve increasingly threatened natural species and areas as awareness grows of such threats. NGOs in the latter category are more active in Viet Nam than those in the former: this is a fact. Although their tasks are still difficult and their missions often not fully carried out, they are made welcome by the Government and institutions of the country. It is true that in Viet Nam, as in other developing countries, immediate improvements to people’s living conditions take priority, and the need to preserve nature in the long term tends sometimes to be forgotten. Nevertheless, local scientists are becoming aware of the dangers threatening our planet, although very few actions have been initiated by them as yet, and, when they are, they reproduce patterns to be found in various parts of the world, often without taking local particularities into account.

First come the subventions. These are obtained chiefly from the NGOs, often called upon to provide them. Later, local authorities may support a project when they realise, not so much its importance in the long term, but the immediate economic advantages of setting up a protected site, which often attracts tourist activities that in the long run are inimical to its original purpose. The NGO personnel, though devoted and well intentioned, come from another world. At the mercy of changes of posting, they do not have time to learn the language of the country (let alone the locality) and get to know its culture and the way the people’s minds work. To carry out their projects, they rely on local scientists – the natural scientists, it goes without saying. Social scientists are sometimes asked to produce feasibility studies, which provide a livelihood for some of my colleagues (I do not hold this against them: on the contrary).

Even in this relationship, although we are all working with the long term in mind, things cannot be said to go smoothly, and there is definitely room for improvement. The situation will be better understood if I quote a local saying to the effect that, while sleeping in the same bed, people have different dreams. For the same project for the preservation of biodiversity
carried out by the NGOs, procedures, processes and institutions may have been thought up elsewhere, in other contexts, against a background of controversy in some cases, then applied in different parts of the world with little concern for their appropriateness. In short, we “dream” differently of a “Nature” with different meanings for each of us. Other facts are given below.

**Examples of local structures in which biodiversity is preserved**

There is thus a huge gap between the official measures taken to preserve biodiversity in accordance with the usual models promulgated by international bodies and the unofficial institutions that have emerged from the local sociocultural fabric.

For in Viet Nam there used to be, and still are, *forbidden forests* in which, owing to religious beliefs (not only Buddhist), the slightest damage to “nature” is forbidden. “nature” comprising trees, grass, herbs, moss, rocks, pebbles, and of course insects and other animals, large or small. Not only do people refrain from damaging these places, but they enter with a feeling of awe and a fear of disturbing the calm which reigns there. In fact, the site is not just a place for the preservation of nature; the respect it inspires is an excellent preparation for treating the environment in general with respect. Of course, the reasons for that respect have nothing to do with science and often conflict with our conception of secular activity. However, in this institution and in these beliefs may be found the seeds of an environmental education worth encouraging. Of course, the local scientists, not only “Western” trained (in the USSR, China, France, or the United States), but what is more working in the ideological field of a “socialist” and in principle “atheist” state, cannot abide such conceptions, which they regard as “superstition”, or even “obscurantism”, to be eradicated. Further research will help us decide whether these places are natural environments or environments of anthropogenic origin transformed by the absence of predation into wilderness.

The question of areas of anthropogenic origin in which biodiversity can be maintained – alongside a “natural” nature free of all human pollution, to be protected – was raised among other questions at a symposium on natural sites held at UNESCO Headquarters in 1998. I have devoted a number of publications and lectures to *home gardens* in Viet Nam and shall not revert to this subject here. It should be pointed out, however, that biodiversity is maintained in such gardens, particularly when the presence of the plants is due not to their immediate utility but to their symbolic significance (Dinh 2000).

All over the country, other factors again contribute to the maintenance of biodiversity. If a religious sanctuary (Buddhist, Taoist, or animist) is set up in a natural region, that region will be preserved as long as it does not draw huge crowds. Human presence (monks or hermits) does not necessarily disturb the natural equilibrium: over the centuries the pilgrimage site surrounding the Pagoda of Perfumes, and covering a vast region in the north of Viet Nam, has been enhanced with plantations in harmony with a nature that had remained “wild” or, at least, that was so regarded. It was only quite recently (from 1994 on), when Viet Nam opened up to the market economy, and as a result of economic development (shooting of the film *Indochine*, for instance) and the flocking in of visitors, that this equilibrium was seriously upset. It is with the foregoing in mind that care must be taken to protect places of worship and pilgrimage sites like this. Besides the fact that they are often architecturally remarkable, the places of worship (irrespective of the religion practised there, except perhaps Christianity) are surrounded by large gardens and areas with trees. The luxuriant nature (vegetation) might even be said to reflect the religion set up in its midst, the luxuriance of the vegetation often being interpreted as a manifestation of “supernatural forces” (Dinh 1997). So it is that, in northern Viet Nam, most of the religious sanctuaries have in fact become sanctuaries for species of plants of no immediate use, unlike all the areas devoted exclusively to rice-growing. They also provide refuge for species of animals differing from those to be found in the vicinity. These sanctuaries, which also exist in urban areas, or on their periphery, are threatened by town planning and/or squatting due to the population boom. Thought must be given to their safeguarding, not solely for architectural, historical, or religious reasons, but
because they constitute “remaining islands of greenery” playing an undeniable role in the maintenance of biological diversity.

In central Viet Nam, the inner walled city of Hué and the numerous mausoleums in its environs are known worldwide. They figure in UNESCO’s “World Heritage List”, but not on account of the foregoing considerations. At the time of the royal court, from the seventeenth century onwards, and then of the imperial court of the Nguyens, from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, many tributes were paid in the form of plants – the best varieties of fruit trees, rare or remarkable specimens of plants from all over the country, and even from abroad. So the imperial gardens, even in their present state of neglect, in fact conserve valuable species often no longer to be found in their place of origin owing to recent changes in agricultural policies. Has any thought been given to their preservation, in the interests of biodiversity? Who, so far, has taken up this aspect of conservation?

In southern Viet Nam, mention might be made of a remarkable religious institution, the Pagoda of Bats, near the Cambodian border. It is a Buddhist pagoda surrounded by groves of trees harbouring hundreds of thousands of insect-eating and fruit-eating bats. The peasants, who would have liked to massacre them to protect their plantations, have been unable to do so for, under Buddhist rules against the taking of life, the precincts of the Pagoda have become an effective sanctuary for these highly threatened species, which are only vestigial here.

Still other cases neither studied by local scientists nor known as examples to the international bodies might be mentioned, but my purpose here is rather to advocate a number of measures that might be taken in the light of the above.
For an anthropological approach to “biodiversity” research

Need for a new conception of nature

The international bodies that have turned their attention to the problems involved in the conservation of nature seem to have adopted a somewhat idealistic view of it. They are concerned with preserving a “natural nature, completely free of any human intervention”, in which biodiversity reigns *ipso facto*. Hence one need merely safeguard it. This overall conception thus leaves a great deal to chance, and human intervention as a rule plays only a negative role. On this basis, solutions are thought up for application worldwide. This presupposes at least two assumptions – that the situation is exactly the same everywhere, and that people everywhere are prepared to accept these solutions. Such is far from being the case.

Cultural diversity and multiplicity of solutions

In the various human societies throughout the world, behaviour has never been exactly the same, and it is not so now, despite a tendency towards a certain uniformity. Although large wild animals are hunted and exterminated everywhere, and their survival is seriously threatened, one has only to recall the attitude of the Vietnamese to them: the whale, our largest marine animal, is venerated; when it is beached and dies, it is mourned by the local people. The elephant, our largest land animal, is venerated in most of the Vietnamese temples. The same is true of the tiger, our largest carnivorous animal, the eagle, our largest bird of prey, and the boa, our largest snake. This does not prevent some Vietnamese from killing these animals and thus threatening the species with extinction if nothing is done to halt this destruction. The same contradiction exists in regard to plants. On the one hand, the largest trees, especially those with a certain reproductive power, are honoured; on the other hand, it is equally true that the intensive monoculture of rice in Viet Nam often leads to drastic deforestation. However, there are intermediate institutions which tend to restore a certain balance between these extreme attitudes, as we have seen. When decisions are taken, in an overall approach to the problems, there is a need to base them on a local population’s way of thinking or culture so that the people themselves realise the urgency of a situation. Above all, it will be necessary to encourage whatever already exists in the sociocultural context of a particular population that tends towards the preservation of biodiversity.

In Viet Nam, in every village, as in most of the urban districts, there are gardening associations whose members are often patriarchs with a single aim: to pass on to the younger generations the ancestral practices they learned and thus perpetuate plant and animal species that are a part of their familiar or imaginary world and play an important symbolic role. Is not this at the root of a certain sustainability? However, is there a single one of these associations which has been encouraged or assisted by the international NGOs? Nevertheless, these associations exist and are developing. They are a basic thread in the social fabric which can ultimately do without any external intervention but with which it is advisable to cooperate. Acting in concert with them is a means of fitting into the cultural pattern of a population instead of imposing models of questionable relevance.

Know in order to act

Such an attitude assumes that the international organisations are familiar with the sociocultural context of the population concerned. This, in turn, presupposes that basic studies of these aspects have been conducted. But, in Viet Nam, whereas the slightest sayings and doings of this or that political leader are known, there is no basic research on the history of sciences – no history of climatology, natural disasters, epidemics, the introduction of animals and plants, mutations, the relations between human beings and the environment, etc. In short, research is often given a politico-ideological bent and everything in the categories of ethnobotany, ethnozoology, ethnomedicine, or even the history of the sciences, is lacking. This is the observation of a Vietnamese on research in his own country. However, one may well ask how it is that projects for scientific cooperation
between countries of the North and countries of the South have so far evaded these aspects of research, and why? Without undue simplification, one might say that very often researchers from the countries of the North, when they go into their field in countries of the South, are inclined to act as “specialists”, studying botany, zoology, and the environment as hard sciences, frequently calling on local interpreters and guides, whose careers remain those of interpreters and guides and who are very happy to remain so, for they are much better paid than the scientists engaged in basic research. How, in the light of this, can one carry out “research on development”, a field in which a transfer of technology, on the lines of those in engineering, physics, or mathematics, is not enough?

**Conclusion**

Some 15 years ago I was appointed by the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique as one of the rare social scientists – if not the only one – in the United Nations TOKTEN project (Transfer of Knowledge and Technology by Emigrant Natives) concerned with Viet Nam. Finally, the project never came to anything, perhaps owing to the suspicions aroused by the “social sciences”, perhaps because they delve too deeply into subjects that are sensitive for the authorities, but do not concern themselves, on the other hand, with matters related to nature, which, though not always “neutral”, can and should be included in the objectives of basic scientific research. We may explore the time wasted. With the growing awareness of the dangers threatening our planet and the safeguarding of its natural species and spaces, is it too much to expect the research institutions of the developed countries, and those of the developing countries, and even NGOs anxious to preserve biodiversity, to know more about the patterns of thinking and the socio-institutional structures governing people’s relations with their natural environment? Will our action in the field be effective in the long term if such local realities are not taken into account? This is my sole concern.

**References**