

VIETNAM FOUNDATION

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E-letter September 2005

Dear members and friends,

Welcome to another edition of the Vietnam Foundation e-letter.

Once again, we will try to give those of you who are interested but can not actively involve in our work a summary of our current activities.

If you are in Sydney and can afford a few hours every couple of months please come to our regular Board meetings.

We would like to see you, and of course welcome your bright ideas or valuable helping hands.

But more than that, we would also like to share with you inspiring stories from many of our guests at these meetings.

In recent months we have been visited by admirable individuals such as

- Jimmy Pham, who gave up his comfortable life in Australia to set up and devote his time to KOTO, an innovative and successful model for giving the street kids of Vietnam a meaningful and productive future.
- Dr Paul Truong, who left Vietnam in the chaotic days of 1975, became a world leader on Vetiver Grass Technology and now dedicates his knowledge and experience to help solving some of serious environmental problems in that country.
- Michael Brosowski, who went to Vietnam for teaching and traveling, then fell in love with the place and now devotes his time to help the Vietnamese street kids and disadvantaged families breaking out of poverty.

Please drop us a line at mail@vietnamfoundation.org.au if you want to attend and/or keep informed about our Board meetings.

Dinh Quan – a new school for young kids.

Last August, our Prof Tran Tam spent part of his sabbatical leave in Vietnam. Together with Prof NT Tong, our representative in HCMC, and Mr Dac, a staff of the Tuoi Tre newspaper, Tran Tam was taken for a visit to a number of primary schools in rural Dinh Quan, a district in Dong Nai province. The town center was only about 115 km from HCMC, on highway 20 to Da Lat. The villages visited were a few tens of kilometers out of town.

The final part of the journey there was on the back of a local “Honda o^m”. After passing through some tattered old houses along a small, slippery dirt road, the Honda delivered Tam and Tong (clinging in tandem



to the back of the same Honda) to a dark, dilapidated structure with rusted corrugated iron roof, broken walls and bare earth floor. Tran Tam thought it must be some shed that local peasants built to keep their prized poultry or pigs. But no, as it turned out, the shed was the place where many of the local 6 and 7-year old were initiated into the intricacies of a b.c. It was one of the classrooms of primary school of Ap 2, Thanh Son village.

We are sure you will agree with us that the young children of Thanh Son deserve a better place than that run-down shed.



Therefore we have decided to support the re-building of this primary school. The plan under consideration is the construction of a 3 class-room building with concrete floor, brick walls, and tile roof. A water tower and toilet facility are also included in the plan. The cost of construction is estimated to be about AUD 15 000.

As with similar projects in the past, the Tuoi Tre newspaper in HCMC will monitor the

progress of the project on our behalf.

We are looking for your support so that the young innocents of Thanh Son village will soon have a more comfortable and appropriate learning environment.

Tam Nong – a rest house for tired carers.

Last July MV Thuy, Thanh Tam, Tran Tam and a few other VNF members and friends visited Tam Nong, the very navel of the Dong Thap Muoi (Plain of Reeds).

The area is so low that it is flooded every year. Sometime the flood water reaches more than 3 m high in some locations. No wonder, how hard the local population try, they can be productive only for half of the year. No matter how much they work, they remain the poorest of the poor.

The Medical Centre (Tram Y Te) at Tam Nong was built in 1983, originally intended for 20 beds. That was not big enough for the demand of the local population, many of whom were AIDS sufferers. The Centre was thus modified and enlarged to accommodate 50 beds. But still it has not been big enough. Everyday more than 70 patients are crowded into that small Centre. Many of these patients travel from long distances, arriving at the Centre on small rowing boats (xuo[^]ng).

The Centre does not have enough room to cater for all arriving patients. What about the relatives of these patients who accompany and stay to look after their sick family members? They have to hang around under trees or in the open. During the days they are scorched by the tropic sun. During the nights they are savaged by swarms of malarial mosquitoes. No surprise that 20% of these healthy carers end up



being sick themselves and thus put more burden on the Medical Centre. To solve this problem, the Centre is planning to construct an 8-room building with associated bath rooms and toilet facilities to be used as rest house for the carers. The cost of such a brick and tiles structure is estimated at about 400M VND.

We feel that it is the best preventive medical measure that we can contribute to the unfortunate at Tam Nong. After all, the Hoc Mai Foundation (the Australia Vietnam Medical Foundation) has just completed the building of a similar facility, on a much bigger scale (AUD 130 00), but for a similar purpose, for the Viet Duc Hospital in Ha Noi.

Therefore we have pledged to support 50% of the cost of that project in Tam Nong. We are sure you see the merit of this project and thus lend us your support also.

Vetiver Grass - flourishing in the Mekong delta

In early 2001 we were approached by LT Danh, a young graduate from CanTho University who came to Australia to undertake post graduate study. Danh requested us to give some financial support for starting up a project which would study the suitability of Vetiver Grass for soil erosion control in the Mekong delta.

The initial small support from us became the catalyst for a much bigger support from the Donner Foundation in USA. With these financial supports and with dedicated supervision from Dr Paul Truong, a world expert on Vetiver Grass, the study that hardworking Danh enthusiastically started has now bore valuable fruits. Questions such as what is the best time to plant the grass, what type of soil is most suitable, what effect the grass has on the local environment, or on rice crop, what type of pest it may introduce and so on have been thoroughly investigated and the answers passed on to people in the delta.

The few seedlings that Danh brought to CanTho and carefully nurtured in his nursery have multiplied and are now flourishing on the banks of some canals and rivers of the Mekong delta. Without these lovely green patches of long Vetiver grass, many kilometers of valuable cultivable land would have collapsed under the incessant pounding of relentless waves stirred up by thousands motorized boats that buzz up and down the delta waterways.

After initial hesitation due to concern for possible adverse effect on the local environment, researchers and peasants have now had more confidence on the grass. Peasants have started asking for free supply of the grass to carry out their own erosion control.

Our small contribution has really been worthwhile.

Visit by Dr Paul Truong

Last May, many of our members were fortunate to meet with Dr Paul Truong who traveled from Brisbane to our meeting, to show films and to give an interesting talk about his work on the Vetiver Grass.

Dr Truong came to Australia in 1959 as a Colombo plan student to study at Queensland University. He gained his PhD in Agricultural Science and returned to Vietnam in 1968. He set up and headed the Faculty of Agriculture at Can Tho University. He was Vice-Chancellor of that university when he left Vietnam in 1975. After returning to Australia he worked for the Queensland Department of Agriculture until his recent retirement. For the last 15 years Dr Paul Truong had carried out researches on and worked with Vetiver Grass. His work was financially supported by AusAID and many international institutions.

Dr Paul Truong started introducing Vetiver Grass and working with many universities and organizations in Vietnam since 1999. The application of Vetiver Grass for the prevention of soil erosion along river banks in the Mekong delta was but one of the many projects that Dr Paul supervised. He was the supervisor and consultant for many other important projects such as the prevention of soil erosion along the recently completed HCM highway in Central Vietnam, prevention of flash flood and sea water intrusion along the sea shores of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces, etc.

Dr Paul Truong is now working also on projects which use Vetiver Grass for waste water treatment. Many published works by Dr Paul Truong are quoted on the web site of the Vetiver Network www.vetiver.com

Vetiver Grass for waste water treatment

While studying Vetiver Grass, Dr Paul Truong discovered that it had a very interesting property: its ability to absorb huge amount of Nitrate and Phosphate in a very short time. This discovery led to a very exciting idea: the use of Vetiver Grass for waste water treatment.

In fact, such idea was not only tried out in many places such as Thailand and China. It has already been put in practice in the treatment of sewage effluent at Toogoolawah, in Esk Shire, in South-East Queensland.

In many parts of Vietnam waste water and sewage are discharged on open canals into ponds and waterways without any regard for their effects on the environment. The stagnant bodies of water, around which many Vietnamese peasants live, and into which all kind of waste and rubbish are thrown in, are the breeding ground for all kinds of disease.

One possible solution for this problem is to use Vetiver grass placed in pontoons inside the ponds and to discharge the polluted water to wetlands planted with this grass. Such possibilities are being investigated by LT Danh and Can Tho University, also under the supervision of Dr Paul Truong. The sites of such study are a sea-food processing plant and a residential area in Can Tho province.

The Vietnam Foundation is currently co-sponsoring this study.

Visit by Blue Dragon

At our meeting in August, we were visited by Michael Brosowski. This is part of Michael's story:

"I was on a tour of the Mekong delta and had suffered from food poisoning early in the morning. I was forced to stay behind while the rest of the tour group climbed the Sam Mountain. While I was resting I met a young boy and his friends who were studying for an English test. For the next hour I sat in the boy's family home teaching them basic English. As the tour group came back down the mountain, I found myself wanting to stay. This was my paradise. I had never been happier than when I was teaching English to these children who had so little. It suddenly made me understand my true passion; I want to help change the lives of disadvantaged young people who have so much potential, but no opportunity to realize it. Then and there I knew I wanted to live in Vietnam and help make a difference – so I stayed." (from DREAM! [http:// www.project-dream.com/index.php?pageid=83](http://www.project-dream.com/index.php?pageid=83))

and so began a new, exciting phase of Michael's life journey and, soon after, the birth of the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation.

Blue Dragon aims to help the poor and vulnerable in Vietnam to breakout of the poverty cycle. Its two main programs at the moment are "Step Ahead" and "Stay in School". "Step Ahead" works with children living and working on the streets. They are helped to return to schools, supported for attending vocational and skill training, and assisted with finding employment

"Stay in School" is a sponsorship program for children who may have to quit school because of poverty or disability. Through this program children are helped to stay in school with assistance such as paying for boarding costs, school fees, text books, stationery, etc.

You can find out more about the commendable work by the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation at www.bdcf.org

and now ... for our own journey !

All our members! Please note that your membership renewal for the 2005/2006 is now due. If you have not done so, please send in your annual membership fee.

You can do an internet bank transfer to our account:

Vietnam Foundation Ltd, ANZ bank, BSB 012 204, account number 9006 26631.

Please enter your name and the word "membership" as the message attached to the transfer so that we know where the money comes from.

Those friends and supporters who are not yet member can find information about the Vietnam Foundation and application form on our web site

www.vietnamfoundation.org.au

In return for your support and company, we will promise you a rewarding and meaningful journey.

Till we meet again on cyber space....joy and peace!