



Community-owned ecotourism, forest protection & livelihood security Sai Duan village of Phin Ngan commune, Bat Xat district, Lao Cai province, Vietnam

Research context

During the last three decades, there are a lot of changes in the ethnic, mountainous regions of Vietnam. Economic growth and investment promotion brought about poverty reduction, but also imposed social and environmental impacts on local communities. Forest degradation, soil erosion, shortage of land and widen social disparity become an increasing challenge against the poor people's livelihood security. In this situation, the Culture Identity and Resource Use Management (CIRUM) chose to tackle one of the most burning and pivotal issues, namely forest land rights for ethnic indigenous communities in Northern, Central regions and Central Highland of Vietnam. Until 2019, after 15 years working with 9 ethnic minority groups, CIRUM has facilitated and supported confirmation of forest land rights for 52 village communities with total area of 11,808 ha. Sai Duan village of Phin Ngan commune, Bat Xat district, Lao Cai province is one of those target communities.

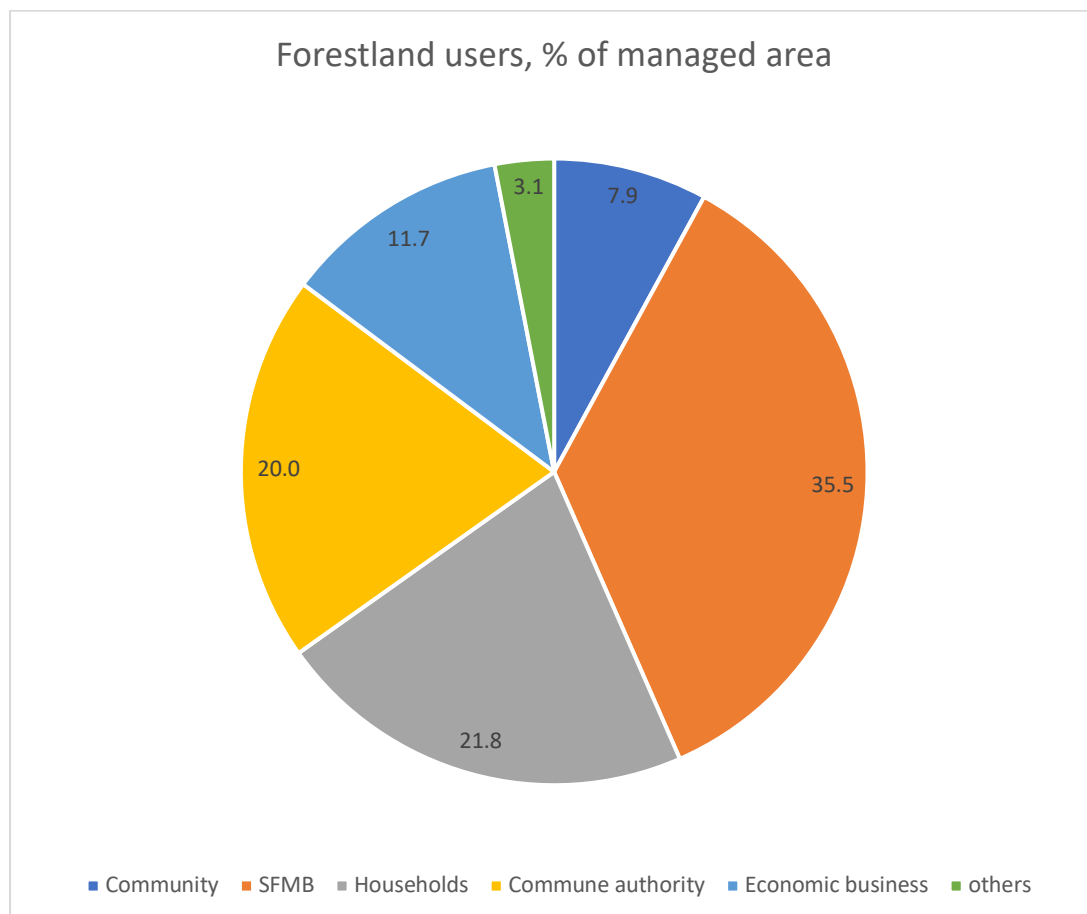


Figure 1 Land users with percentage of areas. Note: SFMB=State Forest Management Boards

The efforts of CIRUM and the target communities have created pilot models for other localities to think of replication, given the percentage of the community land areas obtaining land titles is still very modest nationwide. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), there is only 7.9% forestland area has been allocated to communities (1.16 million ha within the total 14.67 million ha of the nation's forestland area). Notably, a large share of 35.5% of forest land areas are under the legal management of the state forest management boards (including national parks, nature reserves and protected forests). Because the management boards cannot have enough personnel to cover such a large area, they often pay money to hire local people to protect forests. This arrangement costs more state budget, but also hinder local communities from proactive involvement in sound use, co-management and protection of forests.

Though the effects of community forestland is clear, there are a lot of obstacles against the process and outcomes of formal forestland allocation and land titling to community. Firstly, land allocation is a complex process involving many steps and activities of different stakeholders with diverse vested interests and agenda. Therefore, conflicts of interests and land disputes are one of the most common issues, which should be settled before formal confirmation and grant of land right certificates. Secondly, local people's skills and knowledge in fulfilling complicated cadastral forms, the requirement of technical and costly forest inventory and formation of maps are really a big challenge for every ordinary community who want to apply for collective land rights. Thirdly, technical support and funding is limited for forest land allocation while there are only few non-profit organizations being willing to involve in such a difficult field. That is why the percentage of allocated community forest in Vietnam is still very low in comparison to other types of land users.

Even one community who obtain legal land title over their forest land, land title can be revoked because of ill management, forest loss, and even the risk of land transfer to outside investors. That is why post land allocation program, sound use of forest, forest protection and livelihood security is equally important to consolidate long-term community forest land rights. This research will elaborate how CIRUM worked with the local Red Dao ethnic people in Sai Duan village to uphold community traditional knowledge, practice and to build community-owned ecotourism as the way towards improvement of forest protection and livelihoods at the same time.



Figure 2 Red Dzaio women collecting herbs in the community forest

The Red Dao in Sai Duan village

Sai Duan village was established in 1910. There were 3 households at the beginning, increased to 5 households after 5 years. Following the state resettlement policy, villagers moved their houses to the lower altitude during the 1960s-1990s period. Nowadays there are 51 households, 228 people living in the village. 100% of the population is Red Dzaio ethnic group. Sai Duan village belongs to Phin Ngan commune, Bat Xat district, Lao Cai province. It is located 15km far from Lao Cai city center. The poverty rate is 61%. The village is in the list of the 30A State program, which supports difficult localities.

Sitting 400m above sea level, surrounded by forests and hills covered by trees and medicinal plants, Sai Duan has cool weather all year round. This condition is one of the explanation of the villagers' habit and usual use of boiled herbs for a warm bath after a long working day. So, the herbal bath with medicinal purposes becomes one of the unique cultural practices of the locals. Traditionally, the herbal bath plays a very significant role in community healthcare, forest protection and preservation of local knowledge for sustainable income.

Sai Duan spans an area of 700ha, with 127ha out of 400ha of natural forest area being allocated as community forest, granting the local community the long-term land title. The community forest includes sacred forest (known as *Chia* in the Dao language), and protection forest. Beyond the community forest, 250ha of land are used for producing rice, corn, peanuts, vegetables and watermelons, and 15 ha are wet rice fields. The community also plants purple forest ginger (*Amomum longiligulare*) under the canopy of the forest.

There are two main family clans living in Sai Duan village. The Tan clan is located on one side of the stream, and the Chao clan is on the other side of the stream. Many men of the Chao clan get married with wives of the Tan clan, but Tan men rarely marry wives coming from the Chao clan. In the Tan clan, many women are heads of the family. In the Chao clan, men tend to be more controlling. In case the husband of the Chao clan dominates, the wife is expected to be soften to keep peace and maintain the family. For some exceptional cases, the wife is actually the domestic master of the family, while the husband plays the role as a family representative at the community ceremonies and events.

Local income is mainly based on self-sufficient agriculture. Especially, there are non-timber products from the forest such as bamboo shoots, wild vegetables, banana flowers, etc. for daily living. Villagers maintain their traditional craft of embroidery and knitting for daily use.

The Red Dzaio people have their own traditional costumes, and have customary laws to protect their forests and medicinal herbs. They preserve and practice herbal medicine for generations, and use herbal baths as a treatment for illnesses. A field survey carried out by CIRUM staff and Sai Duan healers in 2022 shows that 39 among 40 species of medicinal plants and trees are used for herbal bath. Maintaining and offering herbal bath, local forestry and agricultural products can bring about a good strategy for the villagers to promote their unique community based eco-tourism service.

Though management and protection of community forest has been changed so far, mutual aids and helping the poor in using forest resources are kept practicing by the villagers. In the past, villagers claimed timber trees around the house and they could cut down those trees without asking anyone. After the collective community forest land management is formally confirmed, forest trees have been managed and protected more strictly. Nowadays, villagers have to get permission for cutting timber for domestic use and pay a fee to the community fund. Cutting and selling timber out of the community forest is strictly forbidden. Community forest is very significant for helping poor

According to a local healer, Mrs. Chao Coi May, she knows how to cure diseases with medicinal plants for a long time. Her mother handed down the traditional herbal knowledge, especially herbal bath to her. Everyone in her village takes a bath with medicinal plants every day because herbal bath cures diseases and helps them relaxed after a heavy day of going to the fields and forest.

households to repair their houses. The village head said that she has argued with superior officials that if they don't let poor villagers take trees to repair their houses, will there be funds to help them repair? In fact, community forest plays the role of collective treasury, which is used for mutual help, especially for supporting the poor.

The Red Dao people in Sai Duan village have a tradition of living in association with the forest and together protecting the forest for many generations. They are inherently good at herbal medicine and use bath medicine to prevent and treat diseases and take care of their health. Villagers consider forest and medicinal plants as the most precious things. Here there are forests with many trees that also make the climate cool. According to a village leader, without the forest, it is impossible to build a traditional house for the herbal bath. Forest conservation and protection, improvement of local landscape is very essential for long-term community-based ecotourism.

Mrs. Tan Xu May, head of Sai Duan village told her experience in dealing with forest violator: knowing an outsider encroaching to Sai Duan community forest to harvest bee honey illegally, she could not follow him inside the forest, but took his motorbike to her house. When the man came back, she decided to apply community regulations to fine him.

Seeing the significance of confirming forest land rights for local people, and base on the needs and aspiration of villagers, CIRUM staff did research, gave advice and supported community forest land allocation in 2014. CIRUM started from studying current land use situation, local values, customary law relating to forest land use and management, forest protection and conflict resolution. From detecting real situation and disputes, villagers have many opportunities to meet and discuss to solve land conflicts during their involvement in checking forestland borderline and surveying forest treasures. With CIRUM advice, villagers completed procedures to apply to the communal and district authorities for formal formalities and recognition community forestland. As a result, a total area of 127 hectares of forest land, which is above the residential area was allocated to the Sai Duan village community. On the basis of the granted community land title, villagers obtained full rights in protection and use of forest.



Figure 3 Rice field on terraces in Sai Duan village

The local Red Dzao cultural identity

The Red Dzao have their own traditional script that is passed down from generation to generation. Local people, especially knowledgeable and reputable ones are using and preserving many ancient books, including a book on customary law in their ancient language. According to Mr. Chao Van Chan, there are six major books, including hundreds-year-old books and some rewritten books due to the old books have been gradually ruined. The languages and rationalities in those books are passed on to the descendants and teach them how to live and how to be a “Hien” (moral) person.

The first book is a “law analysis book”, called *Su Song*. The content of the book is to teach children not to quarrel with their parents. According to the customary law of the Dzao people, father is equal to Heaven and mother is equal to Earth. Therefore, if you argue with your parents, you will argue against Heaven and Earth. When you argue with your parents, your parents will turn pale, which means that Heaven and Earth are black because of anger and disaster may appear against you. Older brother is also considered as father, which means you can't argue with brother. If children and grandchildren learn this customary law, they will not only preserve the language, but also understand the way of being human and become a good, ethnical person in the community and society.

The second book called *Po Lay*, which specializes in the universal laws of the world (similar to state law). The book content teaches that if you fight, you have to lose money. If you have money, fight. If you don't have money, don't fight. One should not disrespect the mandarins, the bosses, and should not disregard the law.

According to Mr. Chao Van Chan (a knowledgeable and spiritual leader), whoever has carefully studied the first two books, he or she

should be a good practitioner to avoid bad behavior and therefore, become a good, ethnical person.

The third book is called *Chap Trang*, which means weather forecast. This is the experience learned from the ancestors about weather forecasting. For example, when a cicada sings “*seng seng*” at night, it means that a storm and heavy rain will come. When you go to the forest, you will meet a lot of snakes and millipedes, it will definitely rain. If the sky turns yellow, it's going to rain. If you look the others' faces yellow, there's going to be a storm. It will definitely be sunny on the day of the lunar eclipse, if it is sunny in the previous days, then it will definitely rain on that day, etc.

The Dzao language teaches about how to know the weather based on nature, when to do what based on season of certain blooming flowers. The fourth book is called *San Quang Pao*, which teaches ancient knowledge of weather. For example: in March, when wild flowers bloom, people should do spring crops. When peach and plum blossoms bloom in January, villagers can plant trees and crops. In April, when Chinaberry flowers bloom, people should have a holiday. In September, when flowers bloom on a certain forest vine, it is time to harvest rice.

The Dzao language teaches about planning a great events, such as marriage, funeral or building. It is the fifth Book called *Pun Sau*, which shows which days are good for a couple to get married, predicts



Figure 4 An old Red Dzao book shown by an elder

whether they have a good love affair and marriage. Until now, in the Dzao community strongly believe in this ancient language. Usually before decision on love affair and marriage, a boy comes to visit a spiritual leader to ask if he is in companion with the girl. If no, he knows how to keep a normal friendship because if the couple get into love affair deeply, it will be difficult to leave each other later. According to Mr. Chao Van Chan, the prediction in the book has been proved to be 80% correct in reality, so people believed it.

Book six is called *Thong Sau*, which specializes in seeking the right hours and dates for starting housework, buying and selling valuable items, such as land, buffaloes, cars, motorbikes. People can also look up the best wedding dates from this book.

The Dzao people of Sai Duan village have organized to teach their children in the village on Saturday and Sunday. This traditional education class offers children to learn how to live, how to be a human through reading, explaining and studying the above books. The traditional education class is taught by three knowledgeable people in the village. Usually there are about 20 students attending this class. However, due to some village internal reasons, the class is temporarily suspended.

Village leaders and most of the villagers really want to continue the traditional class and support their children study because this is the Dzao's own language they need to learn. Moreover, through this class, they learn about how to live, how to be a good, moral person. Parents expressed concern for their children because in modern society, their children do not speak Dzao language, do not learn much about how to be good people. On the contrary, if one simply follows the lifestyle of a modern society, they are somehow contrary to traditional beauty.

The Red Dzao people preserve and practice their unique cultural identities, especially traditional rituals such as the *Put Tong* ceremony and the sacred forest worshipping ceremony.

Put Tong is a ceremony to pray to the Ancestors to bless villagers' health, good cultivation and livestock raising, etc. At the beginning of the year, the family clan organizes a ceremony to pray to their ancestors to release their spiritual strengths to bless the family members' business for the whole year. The *Put Tong* worshipping ceremony is only held in families who have paintings of ancestors and be able to invite spiritual leaders who know how to worship for the whole family clan. During the ritual ceremony, people pray for no disease for people and livestock, good crops, and well-protected forests. Currently, there are two family clans in Sai Duan village maintaining *Put Tong* ceremony.

The ceremony of worshipping the Sacred Forest (*Chia Forest*) is to pray to the God of Earth, the God of the Forest to bless the forest to be well protected with no forest violators, no fallen trees, no landslides, and no animals to destroy crops, no human and animal diseases, etc. It is the chance for all community members to express their heartfelt feeling to pray for good lucks. The worshipper is selected from the village. The praying is for the forest to be peaceful, the sea is calm, there are no natural disasters, the forest has no fallen trees, no landslides, etc. One person should be on behalf of each household to attend the community ceremony. Every household likes to join, because villagers believe that a house that doesn't join will not be lucky in their life and production. This is an opportunity to pray to the God of the Forest, the God of the Earth to ask for all the good things for the children and grandchildren. There is a chance for villagers to thank the God of the Forest. After attending the worshipping ceremony, one should to go straight back his or her home (one should not enter another house). For the following day, villagers do not go anywhere far from home. During that day, no one is allowed to touch the forest, do not cut trees, not collect firewood.

Cap Sac is similar to a Graduation Ceremony for the Dzao people to obtain certain ranking and show the spiritual power of a certain person within the Dzao community. The level of *Cap Sac* can be compared to the level of formal education for a person. The ceremony of leveling up 3 spiritual lights is as low as elementary school, 7 spiritual lights is high school, 12 spiritual lights is university. In Sai Duan village, Mr. Tan Duan Chan and Chao Duan Phu obtained 12 spiritual lights, then Mr. Chao Van Chan and Chao A Lu have 7 spiritual lights. The meaning of these ranks is to show a certain Red Dzao person's spiritual authority. For example: If you get 7 spiritual lights, you won't have evil spirits to

disturb you. If the person with 12 spiritual lights dies, his family members must find another person with the 12 spiritual lights for leading the burial ceremony because the person with 7 spiritual lights is not capable to carry out this ceremony. People obtaining 3 spiritual lights can start to worship, but only for low level. People with less spiritual lights cannot lead the ceremony to grant more lights for other people. A person who has not been granted spiritual lights, even if he or she is old, is still spiritually seen as a child. It is believed that only when the *Cap Sac* ceremony is completed for someone, when he or she dies, the soul can return to the ancestral land, and that person can be incarnated well. After a person with 12 spiritual lights dies, the soul goes to heaven to become a mandarin or a boss. Those who have just completed the Level of 3 spiritual lights will not be able to become a boss or mandarin in their next life of the incarnation cycle. A person is subject to consider his family's economic conditions to choose and perform a suitable ceremony. People need to prepare a lot of traditional paintings, rice, chicken, pigs, and even buffaloes to invite worshippers and the villagers to witness. Therefore, once a ceremony is organized, there are at least 3 to 4 couples cooperating and sharing in one event. For level of 12 spiritual lights, sometimes there are up to 40 couples working together to co-organize the ceremony and obtain the spiritual lights together.

Traditional wedding: Older sister prepares a traditional hat for her younger sister. On the day of the procession, the bride wears that hat and goes to the kitchen, then kneels down and bows to the kitchen God to inform God that she is leaving the house to become a bride in another family. A delegate of the groom's family come to the bride's house with offerings. They play traditional trumpet, do some group performance in front of the bride's house. After getting agreement from the bride's parents and relatives, they escort the bride to the groom's house.

Custom of funeral: A spiritual leader sprinkles a bunch of ashes and then cover the lid before burry the death. When comes back the house of the death, he will look at the ashes to see if there are any signs of animal's feet on it. If it is a tiger or a dog, there is a suitable treatment or ritual ceremony being organized to make sure the death soul is in a good incarnation process. The host family welcomes neighbors in the evening, cooks for them for about a month after the funeral ceremony. Many people can come to visit the host in the evening; and the host can play music to dispel the negative energy.

Villagers believe in **unlucky omens** such as: snakes entering the house, or a tree branch suddenly being fallen in front of a walking person. In this case, they often ask a spiritual leader to predict and pray for relief.

The above-mentioned cultural features, especially ritual ceremonies and customs are maintained and practiced regularly according to the customary law of the local Red Dzao. The unique cultural features of the Red Dzao in Sai Duan village can be developed as a potential local strategy to offer visitors to experience cultural eco-tourism in the future.

Community ownership in soft eco-tourism

Community ownership has been confirmed since the initial idea of establishment of the herbal bath service. Community-owned herbal bath service should be associated with local livelihood security and forest protection on the basis of the customary law of the Red Dzao in Sai Duan village. After successfully granting the land certificate to the village, the community members found their strengths in having natural forests and knowledge of herbal medicine. The village has many natural forests, many precious medicinal plants to treat and prevent diseases. Villagers want to have a sound use of precious medicinal plants under the forest canopy. Some enthusiastic members in the village wanted to open a service of herbal bath to serve those who need to relax, cure back pain, degeneration, and insomnia. From villagers' needs and aspirations, especially Mrs. Chao Coi May and other herbal healers, they agreed to meet and discuss with the village leaders. Then the villagers asked CIRUM for support, and then got support for building a traditional house, got advice of method to set up regulations, operation mechanism and establishing the team to manage and operate the herbal bath property.



Figure 5 Discussion at the herbal bath service space

The community held several meetings with the participation of the communal leaders, village elders and CIRUM to discuss on the contribution to building a model that ensures transparency and community participation. The discussed topics were varied and very practical, such as villagers' contribution of labor days, timber for building the house for the herbal bath service, who contributes what, assigns who makes what products. For example: someone makes chairs, others make tables and cups from local bamboo, etc. Materials for building houses and making living products

to serve guests must come from natural forests. Natural food and drink products are guaranteed to be safe and clean.

After getting agreement on the plan, each family contributes 5 wooden planks. For making the path linking to the bathing service house, the whole community pick up stones, which are more than 10km away and brought stone to the site by lorries. The villagers held a village meeting and asked everyone who knew how to do roofing come to do it.

All villagers are eager to come together to participate, comment, discuss with each other about how to establish a model of herbal bath. So, decisions regarding the establishment and operation of the community service are decided by the entire villagers via the community meetings. Villagers agreed on the service model which assures respecting the cultural identity and customary law of the Dzao. When visitors come, they must respect the regulations set by the villagers. The service team as well as villagers do not accept people who come without respect or against community customary law. For example, people do not accept a couple having sex while staying in the service house.

Mrs. Chao Coi May tells her story: "I'm a herbal healer, so I always think about how to make my herbal bath more known, especially for those with back pain, joint pain, insomnia, fatigue. The whole community trusted and voted me. I have been trying to be the leader of the service team. We boil herbal bath with our unique way to create medicine for healing. The entire community are in solidarity to support me and the team to provide herbal bath service".

Villagers vote for youths who are enthusiast and want to engage in the service team. Persons involving in the service team should be modest and honest. The team voted a manager, an accountant and a treasurer as main positions for operation. The mentioned positions are informed to the villagers for an approval via a village meeting. The team is responsible for carrying out service activities based on community decisions. Any change of the team is brought to the community to meet and decide. In addition, the group has communal and village leaders and village elders to advise, guide and orientate. The service team assigns detail work in sub-groups. Mrs. Chao Coi May (an experienced traditional healer) is in charge of preparing and cooking herbal medicines and training new, young members. In addition, there are sub-groups such as: Logistics, Sanitation and waste management, Room and herbal bath preparation, Reception, and Traditional arts sub-group. Five women in the village who know medicinal plants become major collectors for the service team. Mrs. Chao Coi May shares her knowledge and practice with the team to ensure that they only take leaves and branches, do not pull the roots to keep the plants alive. Mrs. Coi May teaches others how

to dry the leaves to ensure the quality of the medicine. The group can go in groups or on their own, then handle the collected herbs to the service team and get paid according to the number of kilograms of collected herbs. The service team members use traditional methods in processing and boiling traditional medicinal plants the way that local people often do. The herbal healers use fireplace to cook fresh herbs collected by Mrs. Chao Coi May and other team members; they do not cook in a modern style.

The villagers discussed and agreed to write the list the service costs on the notice board at the service house. Income and benefit to the service team should be fairly shared. The service team contribute 10% of total profit to the community fund, 10% for management and 10% for the team to reinvest. The rest is shared for all the team members. Investment fund is firstly comes from community members, so as to ensure local ownership. Only a part of the fund comes from outside support, including CIRUM and local officials. One of the important regulation of the service team is to give priority to the poor households to sell their products and foodstuff, such as chicken or pigs.

The service team experience, difficulties and solutions

In the beginning, it was very difficult because everything is very new to the team members, but they were not discouraged. All of them tried learning from doing to improve their knowledge and skills. The team has a notebook to record comments and suggestions from guests so that they can learn from the comments and shared experience. The team members identified one of the difficulties for the local Red Dao people is having and maintaining traditional clothes. Then team want to cooperate with embroiderers and knitters to make products and serve the hands-on needs of villagers as well as visitors.

Members of the Herbal Bath Service Team started with excitement, but they did not know how to start managing the service. Some people had promised to join the service team, but then they said to be busy, reluctant and slow because in fact they had not seen attractive income from the service. However, the communal and village leaders, village elders are very enthusiastic to support, so everyone feel secure to engage in the herbal bath service.

In supporting the herbal bath service team, artisans and village elders exchange experiences of the Dzao traditional knitting and embroidery. Herbal healers tell their experiences about medicinal plants and stories about herbal forest. Prestigious people, village elders share the culture and identity of the Red Dzao.

In the beginning time, the service team members did not know how to calculate and keep records, so they asked CIRUM staff to instruct them little by little. They kept working and learning patiently and gradually got better, though they found that currently they have not been very proficient yet. To keep the operation on the right track, thematic discussion, such as the significance of non-timber products, local building materials, forest friendliness, and traditional culture are mentioned everywhere at all times.

We were very happy but also very worried because we had never done a service before. We did not know how to manage and operate the service. We didn't know how to keep the books or to calculate. We were worried about whether there were customers or not. We need to have a service that guests would be happy when they stay and remember when they leave. Then we started working, learning while drawing experiences (*Mrs. Chao Coi May's story*)

The members of the service team and village leaders had an opportunity to visit Huong Sen service in Hanoi and Sa Pa medicinal bathing services to improve understanding of the natural values and traditional ethnic culture. Through two visits and the sharing of comments many times from domestic and foreign guests, the team members are aware of the importance of natural forests and the cultural identity in association with in sustainable income generation, forest-based eco-cultural tourism and community development. As a result, members can distinguish the value of natural products from industrial products, so they are very confident and proud of their traditional products.

At the beginning, the members of the Service Team lacked confidence in their management and really wanted to get help with management practice so that to motivate them to continue working with the team. Primarily, the Service Team members did not have experience in how to receive delegations, to identify the needs of guests, and have limited awareness of environmental sanitation. Gradually, CIRUM offered practical training and some visitors gave suggestions, so the team members got more awareness and improved their practical skills.

Currently, we just started practicing, and have initial small income. Therefore, some members of the team, seeing that their income was low, they took time off to find jobs at a company in Quang Ninh, Hai Phong or Ha Noi. I saw that many young people had gone to work for companies and then did not come back home anymore. They leave their wives and children, gamble, even get in debt... So I think about this issue a lot. I think our service is very promising, many visitors also tell me the same (*Mrs. Chao Coi May's story*).



Figure 6 A landscape view in Lao Vang village, that will be able to supplement to the Sai Duan herbal bath service

The operation of the team is not always smooth. Sometimes they face problems, even crisis, and they have to find ways to solve. For instance, once the manager of the team had just simply followed the customs of community mutual supporting, granted a sum of credit to a poor households without informing other members in time. Knowing the issue of miscommunication and incompatibility to the team's regulations, some members reacted strongly, some even wanted to quit the team membership. Then the team manager had to apologize to the members. The team also added a regulation requiring regular financial expenditure disclosure and timely response to members' inquiries.

At first, the members of the Service Team merely thought of providing herbal bathing. Then they found that after taking a bath, customers wanted to eat the village's food, and drinks such as stir-fried native chicken with ginger, village pork, smoked meat, and wild vegetables. So the service of cooking local dishes was then added. Thus, offering local food helps the villagers to have more income. If people have income, medicinal plants are protected by them, and herbal remedies are passed on to their descendants. The village forest is protected, outsiders are not allowed to cut down trees and herbs as it used to happen in the past. When young people and husbands have more jobs in the village. They do not have to go far; then their family members are happy.

Initial results of the herbal bath service and outlook

From the beginning of operation (in 2017) up to the end of 2022, the service team has received 20 delegations each year on average, with a total of about 1,000 visitors. Total revenue and expenditure are summarized by the Service Team after each arrival to ensure transparency. Dividend income and benefits are complied with community regulations. The group deducts some income to reinvest such as building toilets, repairing equipment, buying some utensils to meet the essential needs of guests.

Since the herbal bath service has been established, villagers realize clearly the importance of medicinal plants not only to treat diseases but also to bring in income, so they are more willing to manage and use medicinal plants in natural forests in a better and safe way. In the past villagers did not care when outsiders came in community forest. Nowadays they do not let outsiders in to pick herbal plants. When they see strangers entering the village, they will notify the forest self-management group to remind them not to pick medicinal plants in the community forest. Another rationality is that because the medicinal plants are sacred, people are supposed not take them in an unreasonable manner.

The Sai Duan model of community-owned herbal bath service is a typical example of a soft ecotourism model that secures local livelihoods in combination with conservation and development of ecological culture of the community. From building the house and other properties for the herbal bath and the practice of replacing cemented concrete with local materials (e.g. rocks, bamboo, wood), local people, including officers change the way of thinking of what is true value of modernization and sustainable development. Hence the concept of community soft-ecotourism in combination with sustainable livelihood and forest protection is created for further exchange and possible replication in other ethnic communities which share similar conditions with Sai Duan village.

Observing development process of the Sai Duan Herbal Bath service, Mr. Tan Lao Ta, a communal leader states his positive comment: "Through discussion, villagers' opinions and initiatives are very supported by the village elders, village leaders, and communal leaders. In the process of building the herbal bath property, communal leaders have supported, especially created legal conditions for house building and offered a part of the funding for building a path linking to the service house as well as other surrounding infrastructure. Finding the benefits and values of the herbal bath service, the communal leaders reported and proposed to the district level. They got attention and positive feedback from the district leaders in terms of guidelines and development policies. The herbal bath is highly appreciated by the district leaders and visitors. Then they offers small support in cash and in kind to consolidate and promote the model of herbal bath".

Ms. Hong, an active, enthusiastic visitor from Hanoi tells about her experience: "Through a friend I know that there is a herbal bath of the Red Dzao people. I heard about herbal bath of the Red Dzao for a long time, but don't know where is real, where is fake. I come here for the second time. This time I am staying here for 7 days, today is the sixth day. I used to suffer from sick with vestibular disorders, knee pain, shoulder pain. I came here and saw favorite things. The first is soaking in the herbal bath, I felt better. I found that my bones and neck were better, and I was able to sleep better. The air here is very fresh, the food, vegetables and chicken here are very fresh and clean because they are produced by local people. Another thing I likes is observing natural landscape here. Some

people say the price is a bit expensive; but after being here for 6 days, I saw people going to the forest to pick leaves and then return to cook manually. That is very hard work. They spend lots of time to scrub this and that, clean, wash and dry towels. I think that's a good price. I will come back here in the future”.

The Sai Duan herbal bath service will be further improved and upgrade their operation in the coming time with the following characteristics and orientations:

- The Red Dzao herbal bath service is not only meaningful to the team members, but also has a special meaning of solidarity and mutual support when priority is given to the poor to sell their products.
- The model will become an on-site vocational school to provide practical training for the youth, such as training in identification of medicinal plants, cooking, tour guide, communication, embroidery, knitting, etc. Currently, the Commune People's Committee has plan to open a vocational training class in Sai Duan, and it is a chance for the service team and Sai Duan villagers to cooperate.
- Combine herbal bath with local dishes, landscape tour guide, traditional music performance, medicinal plant processing, knitting, embroidery, etc. to maximize local strengths and develop eco-cultural tourism in the near future to meet livelihood security, environmental and social security.

The Sai Duan herbal bath service can suggest implications to policy makers and NGO practitioners who are interested in or support community-owned ecotourism. In this arrangement, outsiders are supporters, not controllers. And the role of outside actors (tourist agencies) should be minimized. The question of who should be owners of forest and conservation should be raised, while the Sai Duan model confirms that locals are the best. Counter discourse over the formal conservation units which consume much state budget should be reviewed to answer the queries of effectiveness and efficiency, especially there remains a requirement of sustainable forest conservation and local livelihoods security.

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