

Vietnam Sets Bold Milestones for Elephant Conservation with New National Action Plan

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The “Vietnam Elephant Conservation Action Plan to 2035, Vision 2050” (known as VECAP 2022), was launched on 20th November 2024, by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) (Fig. 1). This groundbreaking initiative aims at conserving Vietnam’s dwindling elephant population. The strategic plan seeks to safeguard both wild and captive elephants while promoting coexistence with human communities. It will guide the recovery of the Vietnam elephant population from now until 2035, with the vision: “To conserve and develop sustainable populations of wild elephants, promote harmonious coexistence between elephants and humans, and ensure the welfare and foster the development of a sustainable captive elephant population in Vietnam by 2050”. Hon. Nguyen Quoc Tri, Vice Minister of MARD, emphasised the plan’s significance at the launch, stating: “This action plan reflects Vietnam’s strong commitment to protecting Asian elephants, a vital part of our natural heritage, while fostering harmonious coexistence with human communities.”

Vietnam’s elephant population plummeted from an estimated 1,500–2,000 in the 1970s to just 100–130 individuals by the early 2000s, due to habitat loss, fragmentation and human-elephant conflict. To arrest the decline, a series of conservation policies and regulations have been regulated and implemented since 1996, including ministerial-level and national government level plans, underscoring the importance given to conserving elephants in the country. National government-level decisions are binding on all relevant ministries, while ministerial-level decisions apply only to the issuing ministry and are not obligatory for others. They include Ministerial Decision No. 1204/NN-LN-QĐ dated 16/07/1996, issued by MARD and implementation of the Action Program for Elephant Conservation in Vietnam for the 1996–1998 period, focussing on Dak Lak Province, which is considered to hold the largest elephant population in Vietnam. National Government Decision 733/QĐ-TTg, dated 16/05/2006 Emergency Action Plan for Elephant Conservation until 2010. National Government Decision 940/QĐ-



Figure 1. Official launch of the VECAP 2022.

TTg, dated 29/07/2012 regarding approval of the Emergency Action Plan for Elephant Conservation in Vietnam until 2020, the National Government Decision No. 763/2013/QĐ-TTg dated 21/05/2013, approving the Master Plan for Elephant Conservation in Vietnam for the 2013–2020 period and the National Government Decision No. 413/QĐ-TTg, dated 31/03/2022, granting an extension for the implementation of the Master Plan for Elephant Conservation until 2025. The latest policy initiative in this process is the VECAP 2022, which is a national-government level plan. It takes a scientific, data driven approach and is based on scientific findings and methodologies, international conservation standards such as the ‘Guidelines for Species Conservation Planning’ and ‘Species Conservation Planning Principles and Steps: Process Design and Facilitation’ of the IUCN, and it conforms to all national guidelines and regulations.

The background for the VECAP 2022 was prepared through a pilot program initiated in the Dong Nai province in 2019, for identifying methodologies to obtain reliable data on which to base management decisions and adapting them to the Vietnamese context (Fig. 2). Under the project, three main initiatives consisting of assessing elephant populations and monitoring by camera traps (Fig. 3), assessing and monitoring human-elephant conflict through community data collection and the mapping of elephant distribution through a grid-based questionnaire survey were developed and tested. Dong Nai Forest Protection Department (FPD) officers conducted all the field activities. Financial and technical support for the initiative was



Figure 2. The first workshop in Dong Nai in 2019 to identify feasible methods for obtaining reliable data.



Figure 3. Elephants captured via camera traps, used to identify different individuals.

provided by the Humane Society International (HSI). Project design, training of FPD officials and data analysis was conducted by Ms. Nguyen Thi Mai and international consultants Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando and Dr. Jennifer Pastorini, through HSI. The results of the pilot program were presented and discussed at an international workshop held in August 2023 in the Dong Nai Province. The identified methodologies were highly commended by national and international experts who attended the workshop and were deemed particularly relevant to Vietnam’s small, fragmented, and high-risk elephant populations.

MARD/Department of Forestry has been assigned by the Vietnamese Government as the authority on elephant conservation. VECAP 2022 preparation was formally initiated in 2022 by the MARD/Department of Forestry and formulated through a multi-step process. The first steps involved assessing the conservation status of elephants via a literature review and a questionnaire survey of stakeholders. The literature review included scientific publications, as well as grey literature such as unpublished reports and news items. The questionnaire survey was conducted by the VECAP 2022 composing board of the Department of Forestry. The questionnaire targeted stakeholders in elephant conservation, including government agencies at national and provincial levels, enforcement units, national and international NGOs, research universities/institutions, international and national experts, captive elephant owners, and local communities. While most stakeholders provided input via official correspondence or



Figure 4. The first national technical workshop in Hanoi in July 2022.

online, in-depth group interviews were conducted with communities living in proximity to wild elephant habitats and captive elephant mahouts/owners. Through the literature review and questionnaire survey, the existing knowledge on elephant distribution, abundance, threats and management were assessed, and gaps identified. Overall, it was found that the available information was inconsistent and unreliable, due to outdated data, unscientific methodology and lack of long-term data collection based on consistent methodology. Based on the findings, an overall approach was defined, with identification of appropriate, effective scientific interventions and their possible timings, locations and costs.

Next, a four-day national workshop was held in July 2022 to define conservation goals and objectives, formulate strategies and actions, setting indicators of success and identifying constraints and resource requirements (Fig. 4). Based on the results of the workshops, log frame drafts of the action plan for both wild and captive elephants were prepared (Fig. 5).

Afterward, five provincial workshops were conducted in in Dak Lak, Dong Nai, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, and Quang Nam from August to December 2022, where the suggested approach for the VECAP 2022 was explained, the availability of resources and current capacity to implement the interventions reviewed and resource requirements and training needs identified (Fig. 6). Based on the results, a draft plan for each province was prepared. The provincial meetings were coupled with 10 community consultations in key elephant habitats of Dak Lak, Nghe An, and Ha Tinh (Fig. 7). The community consultations provided opportunities to local communities to voice their concerns and requirements,

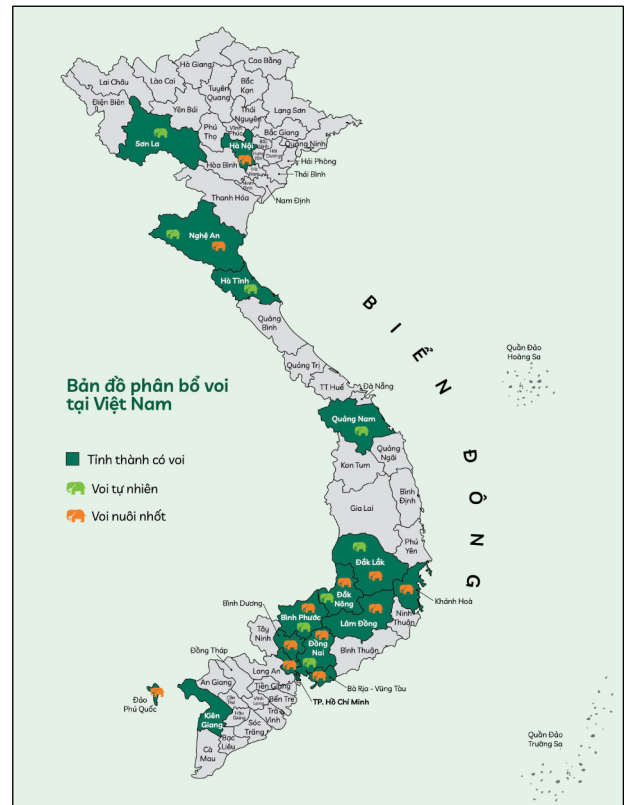


Figure 5. Map of Vietnam showing elephant range provinces (dark green areas). Green elephants stand for wild elephants and orange elephants for captive elephants.

which were assessed and integrated in the plan as appropriate. Subsequently, at the national level, technical meetings and thematic workshops were held and the log frames were reviewed and revised.

Another two national workshops were conducted in February 2023 and December 2023 and many technical meetings of key experts were held to further refine the action plan (Fig. 8). The outline of the proposed plan was also presented at five international meetings. Through this process, inputs from local, regional, national and international stakeholders



Figure 6. Provincial consultation workshop held in the Quang Nam province in 2022.



Figure 7. Village meeting in Thanh Son Commune, Dinh Quan District, Dong Nai Province.

were incorporated and the draft finalised. The final draft was endorsed by the Asian Elephant Specialist Group working committee on ‘Assisting elephant conservation in Vietnam’.

The VECAP 2022 balances conservation science with community perspectives, addressing Vietnam’s unique challenges of fragmented elephant populations and high-risk habitats. It also aligns with Vietnam’s obligations under the ‘Kathmandu Declaration on Asian Elephant Conservation’. This strategic, practical and scientific plan marks a pivotal step in Vietnam’s efforts to protect its elephants and preserve the country’s biodiversity for future generations.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Dong Nai Forest Protection Department and officers for their efforts in making the Dong Nai a success, all the local, regional, national and international stakeholders who contributed to the development of VECAP 2022, the Humane Society International for providing technical and financial support, and particularly Ms. Nguyen Thi Mai (HSI), Dr.



Figure 8. The second national technical workshop in Hanoi in February 2023.

Prithiviraj Fernando, Dr. Jennifer Pastorini and Mr. Nguyen Tri Man, for their enthusiasm and guidance in developing the VECAP 2022 throughout the process.

Citation

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Viet Nam Government

Kế hoạch Hành động Quốc gia về Bảo tồn Voi tại Việt Nam đến năm 2035, tầm nhìn 2050

Vietnam Elephant Conservation Action Plan to 2035, Vision 2050 (VECAP2022)

Published in 2024

Printed according to the publishing license # 2705/QĐ-NXBTN, dated 13/11/2024

ISBN: 978-604-41-5345-2

Verified #: 4378-2024/CXBIPH/25-141/TN

The VECAP 2022 (Fig. 8) is available for download on the website of the Department of Forestry, MARD:

<https://cuclamnghiep.gov.vn/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/VECAP-2022-Report-16.pdf>

An English version is in preparation.



Figure 8. Cover of the VECAP 2022.