



AYAD | Robert Gray

Country | Vietnam

Assignment | Permaculture Support Officer

Host Organisation | Social Policy Ecology Research Institute, Farmers Field School,  
Branching Human Ecology Preservation Area

Australian Partner Organisation | Australian National University

## **A Solution to Growing Rocks**

I live next to a river and under mountains. These are excellent ingredients for making a rich tapestry involving uncommon cultures and values, diverse biological life and even good wholesome permaculture (ecological agriculture). The river and mountains speak to me. The more I get to know them, always sitting there close to my work and life, the more they start to permeate my thoughts. The river is always singing, at times softly and sweetly like raindrops on a thatched roof, and in the monsoon season, like thunder, boulders literally roll and shake with the incredible forces of nature.

I wanted to put the sound of the water into my words, so I thought I would go down to the river to write. Sitting on a rock in a sharp bend of the river, the water is deep below my dangling feet. It's a good place to swim. To my side, stones create a large open space at the waters edge, almost like a rocky lawn of some forgotten palace, only there are no buildings in sight. All dwellings and classrooms are hidden in the forest beyond.

I am living in a remote mountainous corner of northern Central Vietnam near the Lao boarder. The Human Ecology Preservation Area (HEPA) 400ha project site, where I am based, is the regional Farmer Field School (FFS) headquarters for the Mekong. From the HEPA it's half an hour to the nearest town, which is quite something for population-dense Vietnam. It's lucky that I enjoy the quiet life, sometimes, like now when by the river, I even feel empathy for my volunteering compatriots who might be competing with the traffic in Hanoi this very minute.

My Host Organisation is the Social Policy and Ecology Research Institute (SPERI), an independent scientific organisation focusing on ecological agriculture education and facilitating networks of Mekong ethnic minority youth, farmers and elders who face the

complex challenges of globalisation, loss of culture and environmental degradation. SPERI works mainly in Lao and Vietnam in sensitive highland areas that are now being exposed to rapid changes.

Vietnam in a nutshell: I think if you were to crack this nut open you would hear the sound of a million honking motorbikes, misty humid air would then pour out to fill the surrounding room and from that mist would come a long line of economics and accounting university students (it seems that nearly every student I meet outside of HEPA is studying economics or accounting!). This is a Vietnam entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy - no holds barred. With the country's current economic growth; the issue is that there are often hidden costs to the environment and vulnerable groups, especially the ethnic minority people that live in mountainous and resource rich areas.

Industrial agriculture in particular is putting pressure on local resources, chiefly, the soil. One of my work colleagues, Su, from an ethnic Hmong minority group in the north of Vietnam, tells me a story about growing rocks in the village and why he chose to study and later work in HEPA.

*“Once in my village I was talking to an elder and he was asking why every year the rocks seem to grow up out of the ground as this had not happened in the past. Later I was selected to study eco-farming and learnt about how the use of chemicals and other practices such as deforestation can lead to soil erosion. When I went back to the village I could see that; yes this is why the rocks are growing; we are changing our practices and are no longer protecting and preserving the life in the soil, so it washes away, rocks grow and then crops cannot.”*

Su wants to learn as much as he can, and help ethnic minority youth understand how to protect the soil and create good permaculture design.

At FFS; students, farmers and official visitors learn to work with nature rather than against it. Students study the design science of permaculture with aims to integrate traditional knowledge with clear ecologically based design principles and whole systems thinking. In addition to this, SPERI places an emphasis on nurturing traditional culture, beliefs and practices and the role they have in resource management. Minority youth are a special target group and by studying in FFS they can understand key issues in the community, such as soil erosion, and can effectively design local ecological solutions based on a respect of traditional culture and the environment.

My assignment objectives focus on building up curriculum resources of the Farmer Field Schools. I'm assisting the students and staff to develop small action research trials in

which to integrate local knowledge with permaculture principles and design, assisting with training courses in the process.

Students get a chance to take different topics such as soil and water management and design of cropping and animal systems in real situations on a number of small model farms in HEPA. I often practice with the students and staff during community work on model farms and help them to share lessons learned. I also develop new workshops based on practical topics such as alley cropping, composting, worm farms or growing mushrooms. We also have had participatory strategic planning sessions to develop new mid and long-term objectives for the FFS, which has been quite a process. It's a great experience to be involved in a really hands-on way while also giving input on a strategic level.

AYAD assignments have a focus on capacity building. I think this is a bit like building up the soil with mulch and compost in model farms, it is a slow and small solution but one which produces the deepest change and healthiest systems. It is the minority youth who are ultimately in the best position to teach their peers, it takes some time and support to build up facilitation and design skills but once they are confident they can literally speak the language of Mekong youth.

During these last months of my assignment I will be assisting the staff and students to update and adapt the design foundation aspect of the course of SPERI with a focus on 'teaching-by-learning' & 'learning-by-doing'. It continues to be a moving journey working with our community in HEPA - one in which we share celebrations, mutual learning adventures and the small moments of everyday life, like the puffy floating seeds that drift around this time of year. "Nature is very clever," Su mentions to me as we observe a flying seed. When I reflect on the exceptional opportunity of being an AYAD, I realise it has been such an honour to be one part in the small and slow solution to combat growing rocks.