

THE VETIVER NETWORK – VIET NAM

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1997 and Early 1998

The Vetiver Network Viet Nam can be said to have been born on 27 December 1997, the day after the conclusion of the national five-year congress of our *Hoi Lam Vuon* (Gardeners' Association) in Hanoi. On that day, as one of a handful of representatives who had not yet left to return to our respective provinces, I had the opportunity to listen to an informal presentation about vetiver by Ken Crismier to a small group of people at the central office. The logic of what he said, along with his enthusiasm, made a strong impression on me, and I did not forget about vetiver grass when I returned to Nghe An.

To back up a step, I should add that vetiver, the grass itself and basic knowledge of it, has been in Viet Nam for some time – I do not know how long, probably many decades. As Mr. Crismier had learned, there were some vetiver activities at the time of his “discovery” of vetiver in mid 1997; however, he was able to discover only one current, ongoing activity, and that only later. In any case, the extent of activity was minimal, with scattered individuals reinventing the wheel, as it were, basically repeating research trials that had already been done, not only around the world but even in Viet Nam. Among other things, significant projects in the North, including a consultancy trip by PK Yoon in mid 1993, seemed to have left in Viet Nam little institutional memory of their earlier existence – it was difficult (though ultimately not impossible) to discover any concrete information about them. And closer to home for us, no one in our region, the Nghe An province in particular, had ever heard of vetiver, as far as we have been able to determine.

1998

Some months later, in 1998, the first planted seed germinated: I had occasion to show to Heleen Koenraads, of the social forestry and nature conservation project in Nghe An province (north-central Viet Nam), materials Mr. Crismier had sent on his return to the United States, and she contacted him. Nothing immediate came of that.

Shortly thereafter, I contacted Mr. Crismier, and he visited us in Nghe An on his second trip to promote vetiver. While he was visiting, several of us including him went on a short field trip to see something of “VAC” (“garden-pond-enclosure”, a traditional implementation of permaculture). As it happened, on that same day, 13 November, a group of adult students of agriculture had come to the same location on a field trip for another purpose. I quickly realized the opportunity, and seized it: The two groups joined together for an impromptu half-hour presentation and discussion of “vetiver grass, the hedge against erosion”!

It was on that same second trip to Viet Nam on behalf of vetiver that Mr. Crismier achieved initial success on several fronts:

- He worked with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) to organize a more general meeting of perhaps 20 people, representing various interested organizations and institutes in the Hanoi area, on 7 November. Among those attending were Tran Thi Tam, one of the two people who had initiated that lone vetiver activity (in Pho Tho province) that Mr. Crismier had been able to find by then, and representing the National Institute of Soils and Fertilizers, along with a colleague. Their technical support for Mr. Crismier's presentation – as well as their moral support – carried the day and resulted in a very successful meeting.
- On 18 November the first copies of the “green book” in Vietnamese came off the press. Translated by Mr Crismier and published in 5 000 copies by the Agriculture Publishing House

in Hanoi, this would be a great boon to the vetiver effort. I immediately requested 1 000 copies for distribution in our province.

- It was during this time that Mr. Crismier was busy casting seed in a different direction, sending (in some cases hand-carrying) letters to a number of our highest government leaders. Only a few days later, this was to result in an invitation to him to go to the offices of the National Assembly for an interview, at the suggestion of the president of the National Assembly, a forestry engineer himself. Mr. Crismier's premise for these approaches was that since erosion is such a huge problem in Viet Nam, even the top leadership would presumably already be very aware of and concerned about it – and thus receptive to the promise of a solution.
- That successful earlier meeting led to agreement with MARD that they would be the organizational sponsor for greatly expanded vetiver seminars shortly thereafter in Viet Nam.

1999

The year started out very well indeed. The MARD seminars were held in January in Hanoi (19 January) and Ho Chi Minh City (29 January), along with a smaller non-MARD meeting with our hometown people in Vinh (25 January). Invited international vetiver experts were Paul Truong from Australia and Diti Hengchaovanich from Thailand. This was Mr. Diti's (and his wife Mrs. Arunee's) first visit to Viet Nam – and Paul Truong's first since 1975 and he was nervous about returning. Paul Truong had been the first head of the School of Agriculture of the University of Can Tho south of Ho Chi Minh City, and on this, his first trip back, he was greeted roundly and feted grandly by his former colleagues and students.

The seminars were enthusiastically received by the participants, and there was good newspaper and television coverage as well – Mr. Crismier told me how upon returning to his guesthouse in Hanoi one day soon after the seminar, the guesthouse manager greeted him with cheers, reporting he had seen him on television four times in one day.

Shortly thereafter Paul Truong received a pledge of support – training assistance and planting material for Nghe An and Viet Nam – from his friend Mr. Sima Morakul, Director-General of the Land Development Department in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives of Thailand. We ran into some difficulties in making that activity happen – Mr. Crismier was kept very busy with his self-appointed task as coordinator of the network – but at long last, in late May, a team from Nghe An consisting of myself and two others travelled overland from Vinh across Laos to Thailand, to learn more about vetiver there, at Nong Khai and elsewhere. When we returned home we were not alone – a truck heavily loaded with 12 varieties of vetiver went back to Vinh with us. We have planted that in a 4 000 m² nursery, and are multiplying it and gaining experience thereby. Initial results are of course encouraging – after all, this is vetiver grass.

We would like to take this opportunity to express once again our great appreciation to Mr. Sima Morakul and all the people of the Land Development Department, both in Bangkok and upcountry, for their unstinting help with the trip itself (including bearing with us in our missteps in preparation and the resulting delays), in teaching us about vetiver, and in providing a large quantity of planting material.

2000

Now here in January 2000 we are attending the Second International Conference on Vetiver in Phetchaburi, Thailand. We have ahead of us a long row to hoe – or more to the point, a long hedge to plant – but we fully expect the results in Viet Nam to be worth the effort that we and others are making.