



**Welcome to HEPA**  
Eco-Farming School of SPERI in  
Ha Tinh Province - Central Vietnam

## **HEPA - Human Ecology Practice Area**

### **HEPA**

HEPA is where students from ethnic minority groups throughout the Mekong catchment come to learn about eco-farming practices with their own time-proven traditional practices.

We invite you to come and join us in this very special place where pristine rainforest and ecological farming practices coexist.

We believe this Human Ecology Practice Area (HEPA) to be unique.



To ensure you have an informative and enjoyable stay with us, we have put together the following Information Package to ensure you come prepared. HEPA may not suit everybody, but if you decide to come, we want to ensure you have a rewarding experience. So please read the following so you know what to expect.

## **HEPA History and Philosophy**

HEPA is located on approximately 500 ha of mountainous primary rainforest containing the beautiful Huyen Vi Waterfall and Rao An River. Its highest elevations are designated “sacred forest” preserved for worshipping nature. The middle elevation is an area for study and research, while the lowland is an ecological farming area.

HEPA was established in 2002 under the Decision No.1230/QĐUB with a 50-year land use rights Certificate to protect the natural forest, undertake reforestation of disturbed areas, and provide a facility for indigenous ethnic minority students in the Mekong Region to practice, learn and research sustainable ecological farming harmonizing between humans and nature. Today, much of reforestation work has been done and student practice farms are being converted into self-sustaining fully productive ecological farms.

HEPA’s philosophy is Nurturing Nature, which reflects the great gratitude to nature through agricultural system design and land use planning based on fundamental characteristics of Nature. HEPA persistently worships the watershed Eco-Home, where humans and other living things co-exist in harmony with nature, and where indigenous knowledge and native species are shared and exchanged towards the strategy of biodiversity preservation and development.

## **Location**

HEPA is in a remote rainforest location, bordering Laos and on the edge of thick forest. We will collect you from the bus or train on your arrival. We can also help you arrange transport from Hanoi if you come from that direction (see Getting Here). The nearest shopping center is 7 km away. We can arrange for you to get to these shops if you wish. If you can spend some time to visit other places in Vietnam before or after HEPA, you will find that your experience in HEPA is much different from elsewhere – an uniqueness of HEPA in its landscape and cultural behaviours to nature.

## **Climate**

In winter (Nov-Feb) the night temperature gets down to about 7°C.

In summer (May-July) it is warm with dry winds.

For this reason we have scheduled our Intern Programme from December to May.

Rain 2225 - 2400 mm/year with perfect 23°C average temperature per year.

## **Accommodation**

HEPA owns a range of beautiful houses with old and diverse styles representing different cultures across the country. They are predominantly wooden with palm or tile rooves, which are decorated with ecologically handicraft textile products beautifully and skilfully made by the elderly women of ethnic minorities. If you prefer a softer sleeping surface, we suggest you bring suitable bedding sheet, sleeping bag or foam sleeping mat for your personal use.

Most of the houses are completely open, with a communal sleeping space. However, if you prefers privacy, there are farms for you to stay.

Washing is done by hand and you may wish to bring your own eco-friendly washing products as they are not available at the local market. HEPA also offers you the very unique hand-made washing products which are made of ecological materials, a gift from HEPA Nature.

Toilets are in a building away from the house. Toilet paper is not allowed at HEPA, but water and natural soap is provided for toilets.

In the winter season, bathing in a hot spring is only 200 meters away, and swimming is available at any time in the Rao An River inside HEPA.

## Food



Photo: New Year Celebration Cooking

Traditional Vietnamese food is served three times a day. Meals usually include rice, fresh fish, forest vegetables and ecologically home grown vegetables as well as broth and soup. Everyone says the food is excellent and there is ample quantities.

Our fruit tree gardens are still in development so as yet there is not a lot of fruit grown on site. So please bring fruit with you if you wish. We will try to provide you with some fruit during your stay, as well as take you on one or two trips to the local

## Health

We are a healthy, hardworking crew here at HEPA and we ask the same of you. We prefer non-smokers and have a no-tolerance policy for other drugs and alcohol.

markets. You may wish to bring snack and other food if needed.

However, please take any food wrapping materials with you when you leave.

There is good pure water at HEPA although we boil it to be sure.

We have ample green tea and lemongrass tea. If you like coffee or other drinks (including long life milk) we suggest you bring them with you

Vegetarians: You are very welcome at HEPA. Please let us know if you are vegetarian. We suggest you bring any specific supplies you require with you, and partially self-cater.

## Waste management

HEPA is in a sensitive forest water catchment of high ecological value. We want to protect and preserve these values. Our wish is that when you leave HEPA, you leave us only good memories of you. We ask that when you leave, you take any plastic and other packaging materials, and other waste with you. We want to keep HEPA as you found it, clean and pristine! Thank you.

We encourage you to make Sunday a rest day when you stay at HEPA. There is so much going on here that you may not want to miss out on anything! Please take care of yourself and have a day off 😊.

There is a pristine spring fed river at HEPA and swimming is possible for most of the year.

We recommend you get travel health insurance for your stay with us.

We have several dogs at HEPA. They are very well behaved and play an important role in keeping stray buffalos out of the farms. However if you are afraid of dogs, please let us know and we will do our best to restrain them and accompany you until you feel at ease.

## **Cultural Sensitivities**

HEPA people are impeccably clean and tidy in their dress, appearance and behaviour. Please be culturally sensitive to this. For example, we ask that you tidy up after yourself, and fold your bed away each day. Please wear discreet clothing (shorts below the knee and no cleavage showing).

We can advise you further on cultural sensitivities when you arrive.

Regular washing keeps everyone healthy in a group living situation. Only shampoo/bath gel made of natural ingredients are used in HEPA.

Toilet paper and plastic bags are not allowed at HEPA as it is located in a pristine watershed area.

Smoking, drinking beer and alcohol are prohibited.

Children under the age of 18 are forbidden to use cell phone and/or any game player.

Any violation of the HEPA's rules will be strictly punished.

HEPA culture is also characterized by self-services. Accordingly, every visitor should be proactively engaged in cooking meals, washing dishes, cleaning up houses, garden, kitchen, etc.

Coming to HEPA, you will feel a family warm, sincere and peace of mind during your stay, and more importantly, the taste of HEPA Eco-Home.

## **Security**

Because HEPA is located close to the border with Laos, local police will be informed of your stay with us. At HEPA we judge people by their hearts and character, and not their appearance. However, the police make it a lot easier for us to accommodate guests here if you and your passport photo are tidy in appearance, with limited piercings, tidy hair and no visible tattoos.

Thank you so much for your help with this.

## Children

HEPA is an especially creative space for children.

However, please be aware that there are no children who live here on site, and only a few preschool children at the neighbouring settlement. Because of the remote location the children go to stay with other family to attend school during the week. As such, if you are planning to bring children with you, who need contact with other children, perhaps you could plan to come in a group with another family. Whatever you decide, just let us know how we can help facilitate a more comfortable stay for your children.



### What to bring:

- Suitable light weight quick dry clothing suitable for the season. It can take a long time for clothes to dry during Sept-Feb and is warm from April-August, with cold periods during Nov-Jan.
- Working gloves and sunhat
- Swimming costume and towel (February-October)
- Sunscreen, insect repellent, first aid kit
- Water bottle
- Torch (or buy a rechargeable one in Vietnam for around \$3)
- Watch or alarm clock - you will want to be on time for meals and meetings, community workdays and scheduled teaching/ discussion sessions.
- Jandals, sandals, thongs and boots
- Sleeping bag
- Passport for local police to view.
- Extra snacks and speciality foods/drinks you like for your private use
- Enthusiasm and good manners
- Willingness to exchange culture. We especially welcome people to share games and musical talents with HEPA staff and students.

## **Optional extras**

- Laptop ( YES...we have wireless internet & WIFI)
- Camera
- Memory stick
- A Vietnamese sim card for your cell phone
- Something to protect your electronic equipment from prolonged high humidity
- Notebook/exercise book and pens
- Any Eco-farming texts/ DVDs/ resources to show us
- Vietnamese language phrasebook
- Formal traditional clothes, music, stories, traditional products for learning and sharing
- Local plant species for HEPA to trial growing
- Traditional herbal medicine for integration and exchange
- Stories of your own community lifestyle, cultural identity and performance style, information concerning your community
- Information about traditional customary laws towards land, forest, water, animals, mountains, ceremony

## **Getting Here**

Arrive in Hanoi Capital or in Ho Chi Minh City then fly to Hanoi, Vietnam:

### ***Depart from Hanoi:***

**Option 1:** You can catch a direct, overnight bus from Hanoi capital at Nuoc Ngam bus station (with soft bed, need to be booked by yourself or with the assistance of our staff in Ha Noi). You will be dropped in Tay Son town, 15 km away from HEPA. From Tay Son town bus stop, you can take a taxi or “xe om” (moto taxi) to HEPA, contacts are as below:

+ Taxi: +84 964 502 678 (Mr. Kien) or +84 913 605 985 (Mr. Tuan Anh). The taxi fare is about 150,000 VND one way

+ Moto taxi “xe om”: +84 941 621 243 (Mr. Xuan) or +84 167 677 8968 (Mr. Nhuan). The cost is about 60,000 VND one way.

(Notes: Most of the drivers cannot speak English. For English speaking assistance, please contact: Ms. Phuong +84 985 713 430 (preferred) or Ms. Yen +84 904 288 299)

**Option 2:** For sight-seeing along the road: you can catch the public bus or train from Hanoi to Vinh City (100km from HEPA), then you catch a local bus No.22 (Tho Lam bus) from Vinh to Tay Son town, 15 km away from HEPA. See the guidance to get to HEPA from the Tay Son town bus stop stated in the Option 1.

Should you have any further assistance regarding ticket and hotel bookings in Vinh City, please contact our staff in Hanoi.

**Option 3:** Take a local flight from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh city to Vinh City. There are two local flights from Hanoi and four flights from Ho Chi Minh city every day. Please visit website at <http://vietnamairfares.org/> for your self-ticket booking. After you arrive Vinh city, you catch a local bus No.22 (Tho Lam bus) from Vinh to Tay Son town, 15 km away from HEPA. See the guidance to get to HEPA from the Tay Son town bus stop stated in the Option 1.

NB: The bus is much cheaper than the train, however the bus stops many times and sometimes visitors might feel like it is taking a long time and can be crowded.

***From Laos:***

HEPA is 13 km away from Cau Treo International border between Ha Tinh province (Vietnam) and Borikhamxay province (Laos) on the national highway No.8.

You can catch the bus from Vientiane capital of Laos, cross the border and get off at Son Kim 1 commune, Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province, Vietnam. HEPA is located 16km from the border gate.

Please contact us and we will advise you of the best route and means to reach HEPA.

**Additional requirement for foreign visitors coming to HEPA for researches, internship, voluntary work, etc. up to 3 months**

As HEPA is located in a border area, a border permission must be obtained. In order to assist you with that paper, you are requested to provide us with the following documents at least 30 days prior to your arrival for the local authorities' approval according to the prevailing regulation.

1. Copy of passport
2. Copy of business visa (tourist visa is not allowable). We strongly recommend you apply for the visa to be issued at the Embassy of Vietnam in your country in order to obtain the border permission on time.
3. Letter of Recommendation to be signed by your organisation representative under the letter head.
4. Work plan in HEPA on a daily/weekly basis).
5. A Co-operation Agreement between the two organizations must be made in case of up to 6-month work for visa processing.

**We look forward to hosting you!  
Have an enjoyable and memorable trip to HEPA!**