

# Spiritual Forests—A Nature Conservation Model of Ethnic Minority Communities in Central Viet Nam

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## Abstract

This paper aims to analyze and evaluate a model of forest conservation and management of ethnic minority (or indigenous) people in central Vietnam, often referred to as the spiritual forest. These forests, called sacred forest or ghost forests by the ethnic minority people in Thua Thien Hue province, have existed for a long time among forest residents. However, they have recently declined, both in quality and quantity, due to various factors, including changes in society, economy, environment, and perception, among other reasons. Based on research conducted in A Luoi district, Thua Thien Hue province with household interviews, group discussions, and field surveys, we find that spiritual forest retains religious and human significance. They are also often among the last remaining natural forests left due to deforestation by human activities. The research results indicate challenges that conservation of spiritual forest may face, while giving recommendations derived from communities for sustainable forest development and conservation in the region.

## Keywords

Forest Conservation, Ethnic Minority, Spiritual Forest

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## 1. Introduction

Viet Nam is a multi-ethnic country with 54 various different ethnic groups. Apart from ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh), Khmer, and Chinese ethnic groups who mainly live in the plains, most of the other ethnic minority people live in mountainous areas, and have lives closely attached to natural resources, especially forests, leading to histories of “forest-based cultures” (Ngọc, 2008). Examples of these forest based cultures include the traditional customs and current indigen-

ous laws of local communities.

However, over the past several decades, Viet Nam's forest area has been constantly changing. Statistics show that in 1943 Viet Nam's forest cover occupied 43.7%, but was reduced to only 28% in 1990 (Cúc, 2007). But by 2000, thanks to great efforts in reforestation and afforestation, the national forest cover increased to 33.2%, and by 2014, the national forest cover was 41.1% (MARD, 2014). Yet the impact of these forest changes on forest-based cultures and livelihoods of ethnic minority people have been insufficiently investigated for Viet Nam.

Public land resources are a type of resource that is always attached to the collective ownership of a community/village and is an integral part of the survival space, also known as the "social space" (Ngọc, 2008) in Asian mountainous areas, including Viet Nam. However, scientists have not yet paid enough attention to this type of resource, and there have been several inconsistent ways of interpretation of these forests (Đào, 2003), especially for forests protected for spiritual reasons (i.e., sacred forest, ghost forest).

The Ta Oi and Co Tu people in Viet Nam in general and in Thua Thien Hue in particular have lived in forest for generations, and thus they are knowledgeable about forests, having developed a lifestyle of "forest ethics". For the ethnic minority people, though forests and mountains are immense, they are assigned to specific owners, such as village communities. The village's forest land is sacred and must not be trespassed, and no one is allowed to defile (Ngọc, 2008), especially with regard to the spiritual forests. However, at present, due to many influencing factors (i.e., social awareness and history), there have been changes in beliefs and living activities regarding spiritual forests. For the above reasons, this study on spiritual forests was conducted, and aimed to answer the following questions: 1) is the customary laws are still existed and used in the local communities? 2) How the local communities use the laws for forest management? How the customary laws are inherited to next generations recently? How the customary law is channelized into the current government laws?

## 2. Global Understanding of Spiritual Forests

The spiritual forest is a common type of forest among several ethnic groups in South and Southeast Asia (Conklin, 1980) and even at the global level (Das, 1997). This type of forest is not only economically significant in terms of exploitation and use of resources, but also culturally and socially significant in terms of maintaining and creating festive performances, religious rituals associating with customs and tradition, as well as taboos and abstinence in daily life, production and behaviour. Spiritual forests also have environmental significance, as they can contribute to conservation forestry (Naragan et al., 1998). Sacred forests or phenomena are often associated with old forests/watershed forests; therefore, they are similar to botanical gardens to some extent. However, while botanical gardens are home to several "herbaceous flowers" planted by people, sacred forests

are the result of consciousness based on which people may take actions to protect primary forests and preserve animals and plants. This serves as an effective way to avoid resource depletion (Gadgil & Vartok, 1976).

### **3. Background and Methods**

#### **3.1. Background**

According to the 2009 population and housing census results, the population of Ta Oi in Viet Nam are 43,886 people, mainly living in the provinces of Thua Thien Hue (29,558 people, accounting for 67.35%) and Quang Tri (13,961 people, accounting for 31.81%). Co Tu is mainly living in Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces 74,173 people, 88.2%). The location of research area are illustrated in **Figure 1** below.

Regarding the ethnic history, development level, language, and cultural characteristics, etc., the Ta Oi and Co Tu ethnic groups at the study site have certain differences. However, due to the fact that they lived together for a long time, having a common goal of conquering the nature and fighting against foreign invaders, these two ethnic groups have several similarities, especially regarding economic and social development in the same historical-ethnographic area (Lộc, 1984). For example: Village headman decided where to do slash and burn cultivation and when to move to the other place (shifting cultivation) in the past.

#### **3.2. Methods**

The research was conducted with household interviews, group discussions, and the field surveys in A Luoi district, Thua Thien Hue province. The stratified random sampling was applied to select the households to be interviewed from the list of households provided by official village headman. There were hundred households interviewed by the enumerators and the group discussions accordingly.

The above maps illustrate the Viet Nam country (map 1), Thua Thien Hue province (map 2) and three communes in A Luoi district where survey was conducted (map 3).

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1. Land Ownership and Community Roles**

In a traditional village of Ta Oi and Co Tu people there are two types of forest and forest land owners: individual ownership and community ownership. These two ownership types co-exist, but each type has its own significant role in terms of traditional ownership among communities. These ownership types significantly contributed to the balance between the natural system and the human system.

Community/village ownership used to be the most inclusive and common type among the Ta Oi and Co Tu people. This means that the village community

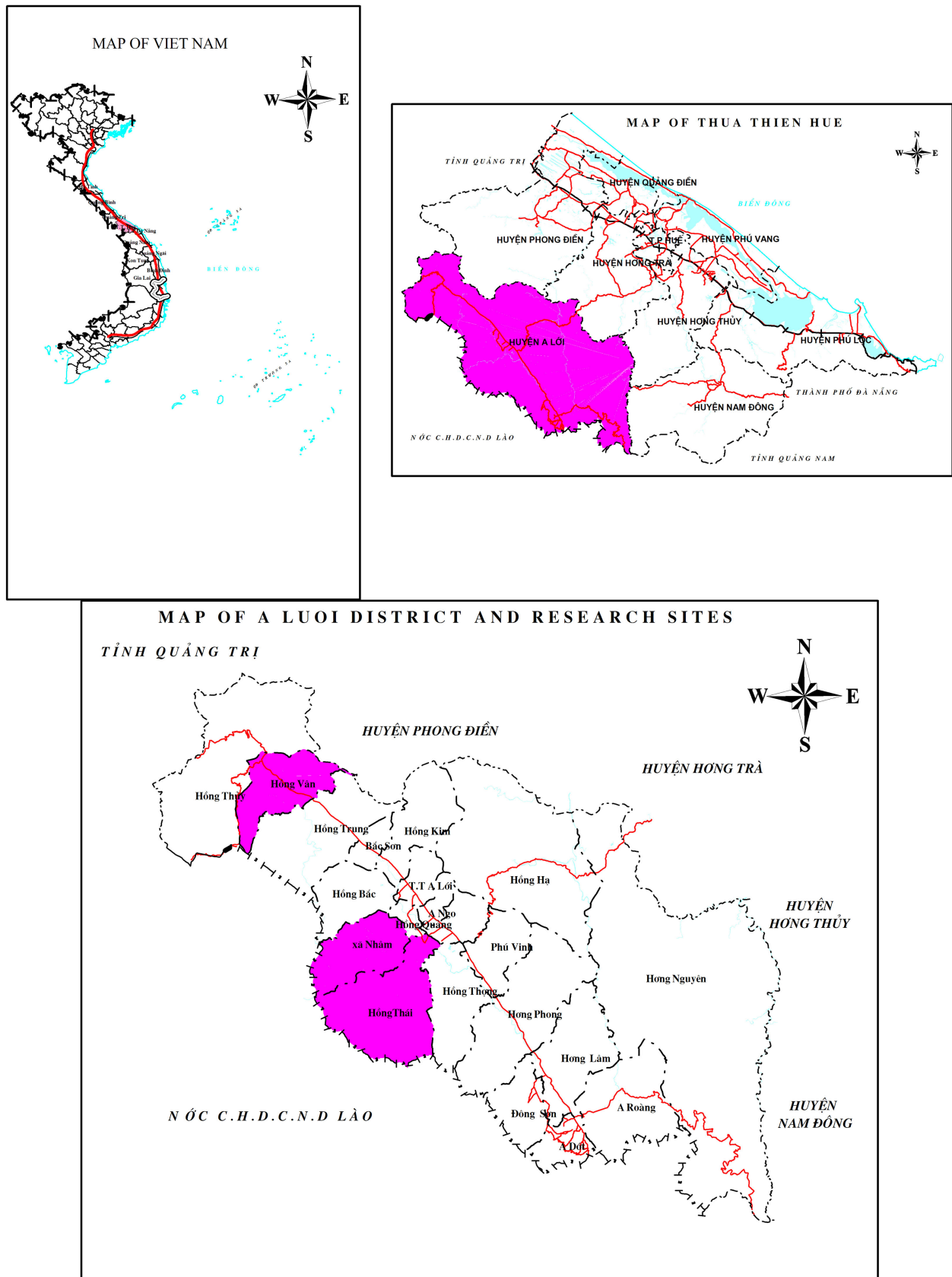


Figure 1. Maps of Viet Nam, Thua Thien Hue province, and research sites communes in A Luoi district.

is the true owner of the entire village territory, with boundaries usually defined by mountains, streams, old trees, big rocks, etc. These boundaries are often established by people who first explore the new land to establish the village or maybe by an agreement between villages and village headman. Although this is an implicit rule, boundaries are well respected by the village members and outsiders. The customary law of forest management in the Ta Oi and Co Tu people stipulates that forest and forest land are managed and owned by the entire community, and no one has the right to sell or transfer to outsiders. When a village member dies or leaves the village, his/her land must be left to the village community. Outsiders who encroach on the village community's land, in any forms, will be punished.

In the past, for the Ta Oi and Co Tu people, all land, forests, mountains, rivers, streams, produce, etc. within the scope of the village were managed and owned by the village, and thus they are the common property of all village community members. All members have equal rights regarding community land tenure. However, when a village member want to create a new field, or plant new crops, he/she should ask the village head for his permission, while having the gods' consent (Hồng, 2002). Further, while the land and forest products are the village's common property, it has been agreed upon by village members that who first discover/explore forest products and land, he/she might have the rights to use them. For example, interviewee Dang Van Quyet from Arom village noted: *“When I find a new patch of land suitable for farming, find a big tree with many beehives, or find precious timber trees, etc. within the forest area of the village, I just need to mark my possession (i kam) in many different ways such as tying up two small trees, or using a knife to cut a few times into the trunk, ...then the soil, that tree is mine. Other village members, when they see those signs, will not trespass and take it for granted.”*

Community land management, while guided by village custom, also relates to the cosmologies of local ethnic communities: *“it has been handed down by ancestors, then allocated by the yang (gods) to each village to manage. This has always happened like this”* (Nguyen Ngoc, 2008). Accordingly, apart from village communities as the real forest/forestland owners, in the opinion of the Ta Oi and Co Tu people, the invisible owners, known as the ultimate powerful force, are the gods. It is the gods who control the entire forest land of the residents who heavily rely on shifting cultivation (also known as swidden agriculture) and nature for their livelihoods. It helps to prove that the local communities are still using customary law in forest management in their lives daily.

## **4.2. Cosmologies and Relation to Nature**

The Ta Oi and Co Tu people are highly dependent on nature, and much of their livelihood depends on understanding and monitoring nature. For natural phenomena such as clouds, rain, thunder, lightning, deep streams, high mountains, big trees, etc., they fail to explain them, so they have created spiritual under-

standing of these phenomena. The Ta Oi and Co Tu people believe that the universe has four “realms”:

- Heaven (*Bábbang*): Heaven is endless, of absolute power, and thus determining the life of all creatures on earth. This is also the residence of the gods, and they may get angry when people treat them disrespectfully. The results of in-depth interviews with the village elders in Parinh village revealed that the Co Tu people have the following “*yangs*” (or gods): “Yang” of land (*Ca regret*), water (*Dak*), trees (*Alloong*), rivers (*Caruung*), mountains (*Ca koong*), forests (*Arih*), heaven (*Babang*), clouds (*Til Luc*), thunder (*Gram*), lightning (*Cammmla*), and othres. Among those yang/gods, Yang of Heaven and Yang of Land are the ones that are most afraid of.

- “Life” (*parmong*): The living space of humans and all living things (including animals and plants) that people can intuitively perceive. In the world of life, human beings play the most important role. However, human beings are only a very small part of nature, and as a result they should obey or live in harmony with nature.

- “Water realm” (*Xà dak*): The water realm is the living space of fish and shrimp species. This is also the residence of the water ghost (known as *Tu Do*). The Ta Oi and Co Tu people are afraid of water ghosts, and they believe that people who drown are caught by these water ghosts, and thus constitute bad luck. As a result, they base on the customary laws to practice certain taboos, for instance not to bury all dead people in the ghost forest.

- “Death” (*Dehârd*): is the subterranean space, where the souls of the dead (*ar va*) reside. They often cause sufferings for human beings. Therefore, in order to have a peaceful and healthy life, people must make offerings to, serve, and share with the deceased (Hông, 2002).

These concept of the universe, and practices of animism, have created the entry point for the spiritual forest to come into existence. Though several generations have passed, the spiritual forest is still in mind and daily life of Ta Oi and Co Tu people. The research team conducted interviews to find out if the spiritual forests continued to exist in Parinh village. The research results indicated that 100% of the interviewees indicated “yes” that spiritual forests existed previously, while 95% said “yes” for currently. This further reinforced our affirmation of the existence of spiritual forests in people’s lives.

The survey results showed that, according to local people, there are two types of spiritual forests in the Parinh village area (see **Table 1**). The *sacred forest* is the residence of powerful gods that people admire and respect. It is also a place with many big trees (usually in a watershed), is home to aggressive animals (white snakes, big pythons, squirrels, or tigers). In Parinh village the sacred forest was located in the area of Ka Te dam (also known as Cu thi Cu tham). Though this forest area is small (about 0.5 ha), it is associated with the story of sacred water. It means that the water has been protected for communities lives from the watershed down ward to the low lands where community do agricultural production.

**Table 1.** Basic features of the spiritual forests in Parinh village, Hong Ha commune.

N°	Indicators	Values/features
1	Name	Sacred forest and ghost forest
2	Area	Either small (i.e., water source of Ka te dam), or large area
3	How to recognize physically	With several big trees (Đa, Kim giao, ...), many layers of canopy, thick tree density, many creepers, many animals (snakes, pythons, tigers...).
4	How to recognize humanely	With interesting stories relating to sacred forests, abysses, and phenomena.
5	<b>Impacts on communities/local people</b>	<b>Reverence, fear</b>

Source: Field survey, Parinh village

The second type of spiritual forest is the *ghost forest*, which is the place to bury the dead, and for the devil to reside. These forces cause accidents and suffering for people, if they are offended. The ghost forest is also known as the “battlefield”, with an area of about 1 ha. This is the burial ground of Parinh village. Local people called it the “battlefield” because this area used to be the location to set up anti-aircraft artillery during the American war. When the war ended, the area became the village cemetery.

### 4.3. Management of Spiritual Forests

The space of spiritual forest is owned and managed by the village community through customary law handed down for a long time in the traditional society of the Ta Oi and Co Tu people. However, this is a special type of space, sanctified in the consciousness, spirit and daily activities of the people, therefore its management scheme is different from that of other types of public land in the village. According to the ethnic minority people, the sacred forest and the ghost forest belong to nature, and thus they belong to and are governed by gods. Any actions doing harm to forest such as logging trees, or encroaching into the spiritual forest, mean offending the yang who hold the authority to govern those forests, which will make the yang angry, causing drought and disease, storms, floods, and crop failures, etc. We conducted a survey on what is allowed and not allowed to do in the spiritual forest area in Parinh village (Table 2).

### 4.4. Challenges in Spiritual Forest Management

Despite the significant role of the old spiritual forest, the current management and ownership have been experiencing many changes, creating numerous challenges for the spiritual forest that was once strictly protected by customary law and traditional religion. According to the research results, 57.1% of interviewees indicated that there is a decrease in trust in the spiritual forest. But when asked if it is necessary to maintain the spiritual forest, 67.9% said that it should be maintained. Moreover, respondents added that: “Why can’t you believe it, because the spiritual forest is so mysterious, who dares to destroy it. Destroying it will cause sickness, accident, famine, etc.” stated Kon Son, of Parinh village.

**Table 2.** Regulations for the sacred forest and ghost forest in Parinh village, Hong Ha commune.

N°	Activity	Allowed	Not allowed
1	Collecting fire wood	X	-
2	Grazing cattle	-	x
3	Logging, farming	-	X
4	Worshipping, serving as a meeting place	X	-
5	Hunting animals	-	x
6	Building graves, burying dead people	-	x
7	Passing by	X	-
8	Catching fish, throwing pebbles into sacred abyss (dangerous for villagers)	-	x
9	Swearing, shouting, littering and urinating	-	x
<b>10</b>	<b>Building houses</b>	-	<b>x</b>

Source: Field survey in Parinh village, Hong Ha commune.

People do not believe in spiritual forests as they used to in the past, because people's perception is now changed in comparison to the past (42% of respondents); they have better health (25%), with guaranteed health care system (7.1%). However, people are still afraid of, reverent, and believe in spiritual forests. "Every time I hear about the sacred forest, I'm so scared that I get goosebumps" stated Kon Dong of Parinh village. Or like the case of "Mr. Kon Dien, who fell sick due to destruction of sacred forests and thus had to make offerings" (Ho Thi Nang, Parinh village). Up to 67.9% of the interviewees indicated that there is a need to maintain the spiritual forest because of its cultural, economic and environmental significance. Conflicts and challenges regarding the trust in spiritual forest do not only occur with Ta Oi and Co Tu people in A Luoi district but also in many other ethnic minorities in Viet Nam.

The spiritual forest of the Ta Oi and Co Tu people was formerly a special form of public land belonging to the community, under the management of the village, and governed by the *Yangs* based on the customary law. However, currently village community ownership is no longer existing, but replaced by the state/collective ownership (through forest owners) and individual ownership. However, the current state/collective ownership of public lands (including spiritual forests) are not strong enough, while individual ownership is so strong, resulting in the fact that public lands are not well managed, and thus heavily encroached.

This is a big difference compared to the previous context. In the past, the land belonged to the village, and every village member had the right to exploit, but if they violated the customary law, they would be fined (78.6% of the interviewees). "When being fined by the village elder, the person violated the rules must strictly comply with the regulations. Moreover, the villagers are very aware of their crimes against the spiritual forest, so there have been many cases that villagers themselves voluntarily confessed their crimes without trial by the village elder"



said village elders in Parinh village. This shows that previously public land was once thought to be derelict but in fact had an owner. Now, under the provisions of the national 2003 Land Law, all land must have an owner, but in fact a lot of forest areas are ownerless.

The summary in **Table 3** shows that so many changes happened regarding public land ownership in general, and the spiritual forest in particular. These are also the challenges that the management of public land in mountainous are now facing.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Solutions to Maintain Spiritual Forests for Effective Management**

Despite many difficulties and challenges faced such as young people do not believe in spiritual forests (12/25), outsiders intrude on lands (11/25), current law not yet recognized (2/25) and other reasons, only 14.3% of the interviewees indicated that there is no need to maintain spiritual forests. Thus, the key issue is that there should be solutions to preserve and maintain spiritual forests as “an important form of forest protection, contributing to effective conservation” (Pandey, Deep Narayan, 1998). Based on the feedbacks from local people, together with other related documents, we propose solutions as follows:

### **5.2. Management of Spiritual Forest Based on “Forest Ethics” —A Valuable Way of Public Forest Land Management in Mountainous Areas**

Currently, in forest management, there are three aspects that are mentioned: 1) Organizational aspect, which is the domain of managers; 2) Scientific and technical aspect, which is familiar to officials with forestry expertise; 3) the Indigenous knowledge aspect, which is the domain of local people (Viên et al., 2005). Associated with those three aspects are three management forms/methods that are flexibly applied, together or independently a) Administrative management by state agencies; b) Management of technical agencies; c) Traditional management (non-administrative). In particular, indigenous knowledge is closely attached to the traditional management method, based on spiritual belief and traditional practices. That is also known as a management approach based on “forest ethics”, which is well recognized and promoted in the society of ethnic minorities - people who are attached to and dependent on the forest.

“Forest ethics” is a concept used to refer to a typical way of “treatment”—management by mountainous residents towards their living environment. It includes a system of thoughts, concepts of ownership, ways of behaviour, management, regulations on spiritual beliefs, etc., which reflect their worldview and human outlook. “Forest ethics” is a “cultured” behaviour towards the forest—a humane, highly understanding, value-driven approach to “forest love/forest ethics” (Ngoc 2008). According to this behaviour, humans are a part and a very

**Table 3.** Comparison of past and present forest management practices in A Luoi district.

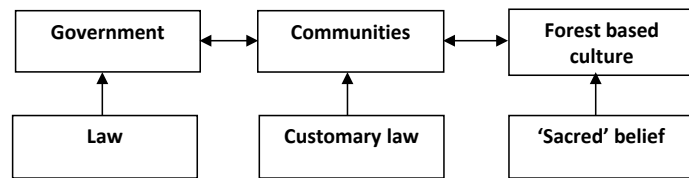
Content	Customary law	Current law
Types of land ownership	Community ownership, individual possession and use	State/collective ownership and individual tenure rights, of which state ownership has the vital role.
Access right	All community members have access right. For outsiders, this may vary, depending who they are.	All can go into forest, except special cases.
Benefit sharing	Based on the actual demands of community members.	Based on the national and provincial legal framework on benefit-sharing of forest products.
Use right	Community members apply the use right based on the principle that first come, first served.	The right of collecting forest products and other benefits is allocated to forest owners.
Control right	Given to community leader and protectors, or community members have joint responsibility.	The government have the utmost right. Forest owners are partially given the right as indicated by law.
Transfer right	Only within the community, not with outsiders.	Depending on specific forest types, and ownership, forest owners can use their allocated forest and forestland use right as collateral, to lease, inherit, and transfer.
Patrol and Take action	The leader as stipulated by customary law.	Forest protection system  Law

small part of the forest, so people should obey the natural laws of the forest, respect the forest, do not over-exploit the forest, and should treat the forest as you treat yourself—should be imbued with a profound philosophy: For people who depend on the forest, if the forest disappear, so will the people. These helps to answer the first question (is the customary laws are still existed and used in the local communities?) in the introduction part.

### 5.3. A Combination of Two Existing Management Approaches: Informal and Formal Management

The research by Sunderlin (2003) shows whether forest and forest land develop or not greatly related to management methods and social institutions. Currently, in areas with ethnic minority people, there exists both formal and informal management methods for natural resources:

- Unofficial management: This management method based on community ownership and control, which has existed for a long time, with positive effects. Currently, the village no longer exists independently, each member is not only a citizen of the village but also a citizen of the country. However, in some villages, the informal management approach shows its effectiveness that the formal one fails to do so, especially for spiritual forests.
- Formal management: This management method has been carried out by the state administrative and professional agencies to ensure the overall state management of all country resources. However, there are many policies that are not feasible because they have not been combined and integrated with the will and beliefs of local people.



**Figure 2.** The government (law) + communities (customary law) + “sacred” belief.

To deal with that problem, it’s necessary to know how to promote strengths, combine the two forms of management, while not underestimating one form or overemphasizing the other. The state management needs to coordinate and integrate with informal management in dealing with the issue of public land, especially for spiritual forests. Otherwise local communities are not interested in whatever state doing and leading to the deforestation and local people are out of the game in sustainable forest management. Local communities are well adapted with current policies and laws from the government, but they still keep their own customary laws and believe in natural resources, especially forest because they are directly related to their livelihood.

#### 5.4. Wisely Use Religious Belief for Management of Spiritual Forests

The spiritual forest of Ta Oi and Co Tu people in particular and ethnic minorities in Viet Nam in general, in our opinion, is a product of religious belief. In other words, it is thanks to religious belief in spiritual forests that primeval forests still exist in Viet Nam as well as many other countries in the world. Though the religious belief in the spiritual forest is basic and simple, it helps make people closer to, and know how to get along with nature, while regarding the nature as an inevitable part of their life. As such, we need to make the belief “sacred”, and wisely use the religious belief for forest management. We propose a potential forest management as in the **Figure 2** above.

### 6. Conclusion

The results of my research show that the local communities in A Luoi district, Thua Thien Hue province still practice their own customary laws in the ways of natural resources management, especially forest resources. Although, forest resources own by the government by current laws, forestland is allocated to local communities to manage and used with the long period with land tittle with fifty years renewable. This helps local communities manage, use and inherit forest land to the next generation. In this context Ta Oi, and Co Tu people still practice manage their allocated forest by their own customary laws without conflict.

The research results on spiritual forests of Ta Oi and Co Tu people in A Luoi district, Thua Thien Hue province show that there exist spiritual forests that closely relate to the lives of the local communities. Although there is no official protection under the current law, people still have faith and belief in the spiritual

forest, therefore they preserve and organise relevant traditional festivals and customary laws. In order to contribute to the conservation of spiritual forests and promote the ethnic cultural traditions in resource management and use, customary laws and regulations of the village should be incorporated into the current law system. Presently, the government's program on forest land allocation has been partially implemented, which is to allocate some forestry land (with and without forest) to local communities and household groups. This enables local communities still keep their own customary law and combine well with current laws/policies of government. At the same time they help the young generation inherit well their own customary law in forest management and conservation. However, regarding the current local needs and situation, especially in the Central Vietnam area, the allocation programme is still far to meet demand. We propose that government at all levels should promote the allocation of forests to local communities so that they may fully participate in sustainable forest and forest land management.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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