

## FOR OUR STUDENTS

## SIT Study Abroad Program in Vietnam

### MEKONG DELTA: NATURAL AND CULTURAL ECOLOGY

**Editors' note:** In anticipation of the upcoming ASIANetwork Conference panel on Ecology and Development and to encourage the expansion of Asian Studies in the natural sciences, we want to highlight this SIT Study Abroad Program in Vietnam.

The Mekong River, the longest river in Southeast Asia, flows for 3,000 miles from the Plateau of Tibet to the South China Sea. The river basin is shared by six countries and populated by 60 million people. Before it reaches the sea, the river flows through the Mekong Delta, an intensely cultivated and densely settled landscape. Many of the plans for upstream river development—such as dams, irrigation schemes, and dredging—will dramatically alter the river's flow and impact the delta in unpredictable ways. Protecting the ecological and cultural resources of the Mekong Delta will require unprecedented basin-wide cooperation.

This interdisciplinary program explores the natural and cultural ecology of the delta, examining mangroves, shrimp farms, migratory bird habitats, freshwater swamps, and grasslands, as well as sustainable development, pressures on natural resource exploitation, and ecotourism. Activities and excursions include a two-week trip to Cambodia. This program is organized in conjunction with Can Tho University, internationally recognized for its research in a wide range of topics associated with management of the Mekong Delta region, including marine aquaculture water conservation and management, and irrigation systems.

#### COURSEWORK/COMPONENTS

**Intensive Language Study: Vietnamese–**  
(VIET 1000 / 4 credits / 60 class hours)  
Emphasis on speaking and comprehension skills through classroom and field instruction. Instruction is integrated with the Natural and Cultural Ecology Seminar. Particular attention is paid to vocabulary that will support students' Independent Study Projects. Instructors are faculty of the Can Tho University.

**Natural and Cultural Ecology Seminar–**  
(ENVI 3000 / 6 credits / 90 class hours) An interdisciplinary course, conducted in English, with required readings, focusing on aquatic ecology in the delta. Lectures are provided in conjunction with Can Tho University. Lectures generally include:

##### *Mekong Delta Life and Culture*

Precolonial and colonial history; the Viet Nam War and the delta ecosystem; postreunification development; Doi Moi (renovation) and agricultural intensification; issues in human and natural ecology; theoretical perspectives on the environment.

##### *Introduction to Wetland Ecology*

Basics of aquatic ecology in large floodplain rivers in the humid tropics; wetland hydrology; functions and major types/classifications of wetlands; socioeconomic factors and wetlands.

##### *Floodplain Wetlands*

Melaleuca forests; freshwater swamps and depression areas; acid sulphate soils; water pollution; changing flow regimes and unusual flood events; irrigation and altered flow; conservation issues and endangered species; sediment budgets and delta geomorphology; invasive species.

##### *Mangrove Ecology*

Biodiversity; mangroves and coastal protection; rehabilitation efforts and mangroves; shrimp

farming and mangroves; saltwater intrusion in farming areas; coastal fisheries.

##### *Challenges of Sustainable Development*

Problems of compacted soils caused by bombing; population pressure; mangrove restoration; flooding and farming; water pollution; food security; ecological impacts of collectivization and decollectivization; protected areas and conservation; sustainable aquaculture; integrated pest management; rice-fish systems; wild-capture fisheries; landless laborers and sustainable livelihoods; mangrove and Melaleuca restoration and protection; sustainable shrimp farming; ecotourism; health and pesticides; economic diversification strategies; traditional uses of mangroves and Melaleucas.

##### *Comparative Delta Ecology. Cambodia*

Students will visit Tonle Sap, Cambodia, for two weeks for a comparative analysis of environmental issues. Topics include fisheries and food security; flooded forests; siltation of the lake; migratory bird habitat; conflicts over fishing lots; water pollution.

##### *Educational Excursions*

Educational excursions provide direct knowledge of case studies in natural and cultural ecology. Excursions might include Angkor Wat, Tram Chim National Park, Plain of Reeds, Cau Mau Peninsula, Red River Delta, Vo Doi Forest, Can Gio Biosphere Reserve, Ca t Tien National Park, and villages associated with Can Tho researchers.

**Field Study Seminar–**(ANTH 3500 / 2 credits / 30 class hours) A course in the concepts of learning across cultures and from field experience. Introduction to the Independent Study Project. Material includes cross-cultural adaptation and skills building; project selection and refinement; appropriate methodologies;

field study ethics; developing contacts and finding field resources; developing skills in observation and interviewing; gathering, organizing, and communicating data; maintaining a work journal.

**Independent Study Project–**(ISPR 3000 / 4 credits / 120 class hours) Conducted in Can Tho and surrounding areas. Sample project topics: ecological change and food security in the delta; the Eastern Sarus Crane and transboundary habitat protection; shrimp farming and mangroves; pesticides and health; ecological consequences of landlessness in the delta; invasive species; ecological consequences of Doi Moi; urban development and delta ecosystems, orchards, pests, and monoculture—investigating biological controls; traditional uses of mangroves—the role of local knowledge.

**Program Orientation–**Academic, cross-cultural, health, safety; and program orientation are conducted by the academic director and other contributors during the first week of the program. Material includes program rationale, organization, and logistics; attitudes and tools for immersion in another culture; academic and personal expectations; evaluation methods and criteria.

**Homestay–**Three weeks in the area of Can Tho, Viet Nam. Other accommodations during the program include guest houses, hostels, or small hotels.

**Program Evaluation–**Oral and written presentation of the Independent Study Project. Overall program synthesis and assessment.

**Prerequisites–**None

**Deadline for Student Applications Fall 2006–**  
May 15