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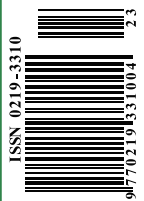
# THE JOURNAL OF OUR ENVIRONMENT ASIAN GEOGRAPHIC

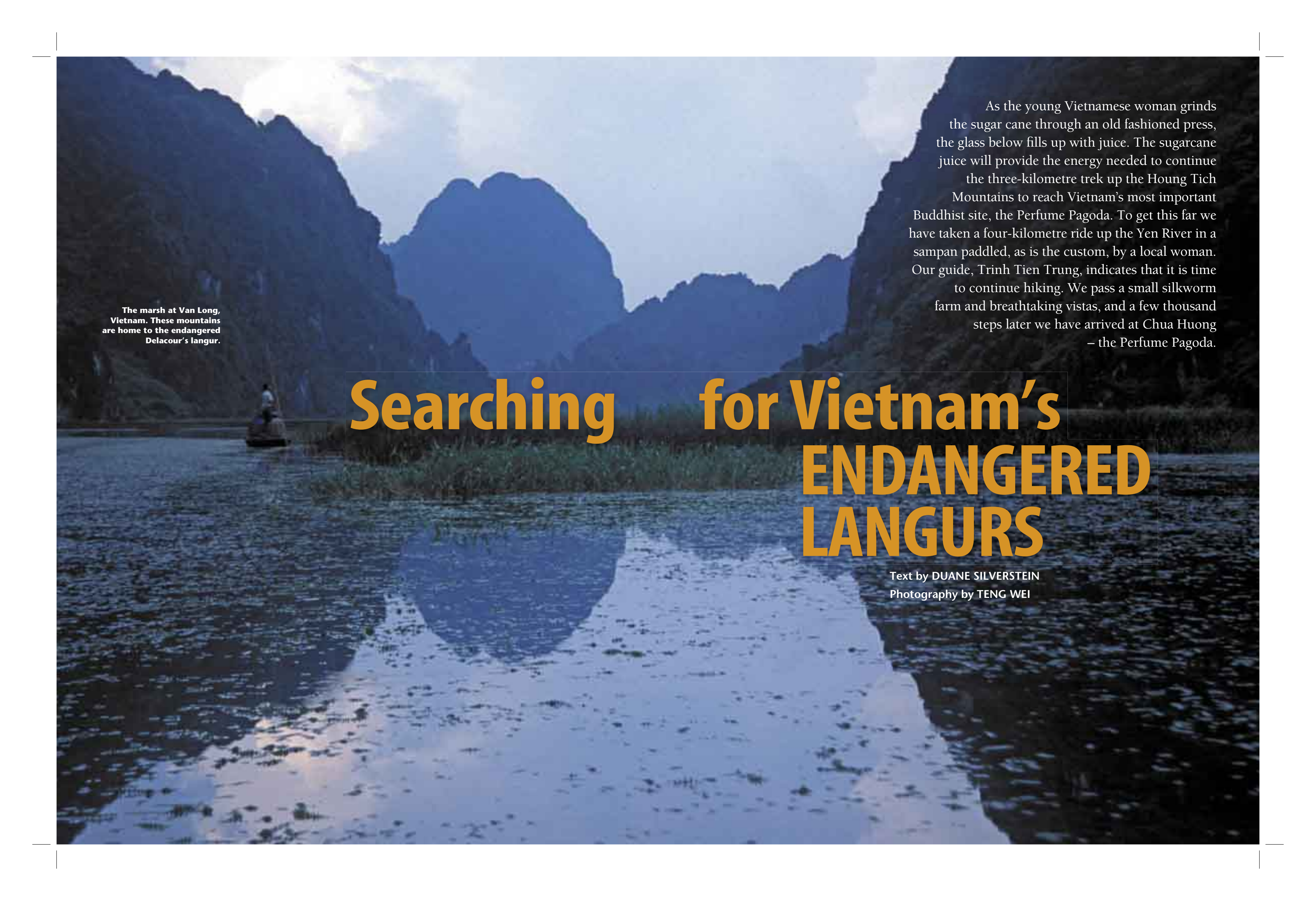
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## THE UGLIEST FISH IN THE SEA





The marsh at Van Long, Vietnam. These mountains are home to the endangered Delacour's langur.

As the young Vietnamese woman grinds the sugarcane through an old fashioned press, the glass below fills up with juice. The sugarcane juice will provide the energy needed to continue the three-kilometre trek up the Houg Tich Mountains to reach Vietnam's most important Buddhist site, the Perfume Pagoda. To get this far we have taken a four-kilometre ride up the Yen River in a sampan paddled, as is the custom, by a local woman. Our guide, Trinh Tien Trung, indicates that it is time to continue hiking. We pass a small silkworm farm and breathtaking vistas, and a few thousand steps later we have arrived at Chua Huong – the Perfume Pagoda.

# Searching for Vietnam's ENDANGERED LANGURS

Text by DUANE SILVERSTEIN

Photography by TENG WEI



**Juvenile Cat Ba langur at the Endangered Primate Rescue Center**

I had begun my search for two extremely endangered monkeys at the Perfume Pagoda to pay respect to local customs, but also to ask for help in spotting these near-extinct species, which, due to their very small numbers, are extremely hard to find. The Perfume Pagoda is located in a spectacular cave with many stalactites and stalagmites. It is said that by touching one such formation, the Golden Column, we will be blessed by good fortune. And so I touch it, but my wish is not for material goods but for the continued existence of these beautiful monkeys. I am, after all, in search of two of the most endangered primates in the entire world – the Cat Ba and Delacour’s langurs. Langurs are a type of leaf-eating monkey found in South-east Asia, perhaps best known for their long tails. The world has not experienced an extinction of any primate species in over 100 years. Sadly, the Cat Ba langur is a leading candidate to end that streak.

There are only 59 Cat Ba langurs left in the world. All but two of them are found on Cat Ba Island, in Halong Bay, Vietnam. To make matters worse, there are only six sexually mature males left. In the 1960s there were over 3,000 Cat Ba langurs. By the late 1980s there were only 200 left. At one time these langurs were shot for sport. In recent years they have been killed to make monkey bone paste for alleged medicinal purposes, and to be served as meals in exotic food restaurants.

I have come to Vietnam as director of Seacology, the world’s premier non-governmental organisation with the sole purpose of preserving marine and terrestrial island environments throughout the globe. Seacology specialises in “win-win” projects where islanders receive a critically needed benefit they request in return for making an important sacrifice on behalf of the environment. Seacology’s methods are unusual in many ways. It has a staff of only four people and operates

with little overhead and no red tape. It respects the cultures of islanders, and deals with them as equals. It does not get involved in endless studies or international conferences, but instead focuses all its efforts on projects where a little bit of money can have a very significant and immediate benefit for both the village and the environment.

Seacology has supported the work of Dr. Rosi Stenke of the German organisation the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (ZSCSP). Dr. Stenke has started a program in which local residents are in charge of guarding particular Cat Ba langur sub-populations against illegal poaching. In return, the local guardians’ families receive fishing and harvesting rights in their patrol areas along with a US\$50 monthly stipend. This simple solution has so far been remarkably effective. In the year since the program started, there have been nine new Cat Ba langurs born, a population increase of 20 per cent. In fact, this is the first time in over 20 years that the Cat Ba langur population did not decrease.

I am now beginning to suspect that the trip to the Perfume Pagoda has indeed paid off. Our voyage to Cat Ba Island was about to be called off, as Typhoon Dujan was scheduled to pass through but, at the last minute, the typhoon changed direction and it was all systems go.

Cat Ba is one of 3,000 limestone islands located off the north-east coast of Vietnam. These steep islands are of such striking beauty that they were named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. I made my way to Cat Ba in a modern version of a Chinese junk. The picture postcard beauty of these islands leaves no doubt that the World Heritage Site status is well deserved. After a several-hour voyage I finally meet up with Rosi Stenke. Originally from Germany, Rosi spent several years in the remote Australian Outback before coming to Vietnam to help save the Cat Ba langurs. Though she is too modest to mention it, it is clear that her dedication has come at a great price. Certainly she has given up the comfortable lifestyle and much higher salary she would have had if she remained in

**In the year since the program started, there have been nine new Cat Ba langurs born, a population increase of 20 per cent. In fact, this is the first time in over 20 years that the Cat Ba langur population did not decrease.**

**Ducks on the marsh at Van Long, Vietnam.**



Germany. It is also obvious that living on a remote island can be a very lonely existence. Yet Rosi would never complain, and is so dedicated to her critical mission that it would not occur to her to do anything else.

Cat Ba langurs are also called Golden Headed langurs due to their beautiful mane of golden fur surrounding their otherwise black faces. Babies are born with a very bright orange colour. I can hardly wait to begin our search for these striking monkeys, but first Rosi introduces me to two important people. Vu Van Châu is one of the local guardians helping to protect the langurs. Though in past years people he knew used to hunt the langurs, Châu tells me, “I was very happy to join the guardian program along with my family.” Indeed, Châu is actively recruiting other guardians.

Chu Xuân Canh is Rosi’s incredibly capable project assistant. If anyone can spot the hard-to-find langurs it will be Canh, whose dedication and enthusiasm is contagious. Canh believes that “The guardian program is a good idea, because we enlist the local people who live with the hunters. Guardians are friends of hunters. The hunters dare not shoot the langurs knowing that a neighbour is a guardian.”

At last it is time to search for the Cat Ba langurs. Rosi and Canh take us to a small inlet. A family of six langurs lives on one side. The two sides of the inlet used to be connected by a mangrove forest, which has now been cut down. As a consequence, one single female langur lives by herself on a small islet 100 metres from the Cat Ba mainland. Stenke explains, “She can see the family of six but, as langurs cannot swim, she can no longer join them. She calls out to them on occasion.” In a reflection of the sacrifice she has had to make to protect this species, Dr. Stenke says, “I call the lone langur Rosi.”

After several hours of searching, we find no langurs. We move the boat to another side of Cat Ba Island, but again to no avail. We only have one more day to spend at Cat Ba and I am beginning to brace myself for the disappointment of not seeing these beautiful but rare creatures.

The next morning we are up at dawn, binoculars in hand, combing the steep cliffs. Again, no luck, so we move to another site near Cat Ba town where the langurs can sometimes be spotted. On our way we pass floating fishing villages, a series of many floating homes. “The children will often row a boat before they can walk,” Canh tells us. Once again, our



**A highly endangered Cat Ba langur at the Endangered Primate Rescue Center, Cuc Phuong, Vietnam**

**The guardian program is a good idea, because we enlist the local people who live with the hunters. Guardians are friends of hunters. The hunters dare not shoot the langurs knowing that a neighbour is a guardian.**

**Dr. Rosi Stenke and Chu Xuan Canh brief author Duane Silverstein and other members of the Seacology expedition on the Cat Ba langur guardian program.**



**Seacology board member Masayuki Kishimoto, Seacology executive director (author) Duane Silverstein and Seacology fellow Pete Boyce at a silk worm farm en route to the Perfume Pagoda.**

search bears no fruit. We then head to Cat Dua or “Monkey Island”. There, long-tailed macaques have been introduced as a tourist attraction. The species is not endangered, but can pose a threat to the Cat Ba langurs by passing communicable diseases. Recently, one male escaped by swimming to the next island and his whereabouts is not known. These macaques are cute and enjoyed by the tourists, but could spell doom for the Cat Ba langurs.

At least we have now seen some monkeys, but still no sign of the Cat Ba langur. We search again in the afternoon. As the sun is setting, we spot movement in the trees high up a cliff. I am very excited thinking that a Cat Ba langur is spotted, but

the excitement wanes when two red-bellied squirrels jump from the moving trees.

I have to leave the next morning, so it looks like I will never get to see the elusive Cat Ba langur. We decide to try one more time. We board a dingy at 4 am to head to a lake only accessible through a small arch at low tide. It is pitch black out and the darkness is punctured by spectacular lightning strikes that silhouette the many islands we are passing. Going through the arch we enter a hidden world. We are on a lake surrounded entirely by steep cliffs. We have only two hours to look before the tide rises and we are trapped for the rest of the day. Just as the sun begins to rise we notice movement



**A Delacour's langur at the Endangered Primate Rescue Center.**

in the trees high up on a cliff. And there it is. I am filled with all sorts of emotions as I see a beautiful Cat Ba langur male. I am excited to see such a beautiful animal. Sad to know my newfound friend may be the last of his kind. Proud that Seacology is helping Rosi, Canh and ZSCSP try to save this species from extinction. After 30 minutes of following the langur from tree to tree, we must leave the lake immediately, as the tide is rising. It is now time to begin the journey to find the Delacour's langur.

There are now only 250-300 Delacour's langurs remaining in the world. Several of these beautiful monkeys, also known as the White Shorts langur because of the striking white colouring of its rump, can be found at the Endangered Primate Rescue Center (EPRC) established by Tilo Nadlur near Cuc Phuong National Park in Vietnam. Like Rosi Stenke, Tilo is also from Germany and also sacrificing a lot to save some of the world's most endangered primates. EPRC is the last hope for several of Vietnam's endangered monkey species. Tilo

tells us that EPRC receives no government funding, and that some days are harder than others. "I have just driven 1,500 kilometres to rescue a langur, and returned to learn that one of our primates died." Nadler instructs me to go to the village of Van Long, where a local guide will take me to a nearby valley, home to a group of 25 Delacour's langurs.

In the remote village of Van Long a local guide, who will take me by sampan to try to find the langurs, meets me. Just as we set out, it starts to pour. Within five minutes, every centimetre of my clothes is drenched.

The rain eventually lets up as the guide poles the sampan along a river thick with many fragrant reeds. The mountains on either side and in front of us in the distance appear to come from some Hollywood version of Shangri La. After 15 minutes, the guide begins to gesticulate wildly and point toward the cliff. He is pointing to a family of Delacour's langurs which, as advertised, appear to be wearing white shorts. As we are about to leave, we spot a male langur on the very top of the mountain, his silhouette outlined in the setting sun. He is standing up

surveying the valley, like a king inspecting his kingdom. With the help of Tilo Nadler and the EPRC, there will be heirs to this Delacour's langur's throne for many years to come.

I am pleased to be one of a small number of people to have seen two of the world's most endangered primates in one trip. But I am also puzzled. How is it that the world has ignored the plight of the Cat Ba and Delacour's langurs, two of the earth's most endangered primates? Are we to stand idly by and watch some of our closest related members of the animal kingdom become extinct? What will future generations think of us for depriving them of the opportunity to share the planet with such fascinating animals?

My guide Trung and I end our expedition as we began it – in a temple. We visit the Le Dai Hanh temple in the ancient Vietnamese capital of Hon Lu. I give thanks to the incredible work of Rosi Stenke and Tilo Nadler. I give thanks for enabling Seacology to provide some assistance for these efforts. But most of all, I pray that the Cat Ba and Delacour's langurs will still be here for my grandchildren's grandchildren to visit.

### How is it that the world has ignored the plight of the Cat Ba and Delacour's langurs, two of the earth's most endangered primates?

**Members of the Seacology expedition on a sampan at Van Long, Vietnam**

