

## A HEALTHIER FUTURE IS PERCOLATING FOR VIETNAM

# More Than a Thousand Coffee Farms Have Earned the Rainforest Alliance Certified™ Seal

Despite a tumultuous history marked by war and colonialism, Vietnam has experienced remarkable growth in its coffee industry during a relatively short period of time. The country is now second only to Brazil on the list of the world's top coffee exporters. Though the rapid rise in production has been a great boon to the economy, it has also put a huge strain on Vietnam's environment. The proliferation of poorly managed coffee farms, where beans are cultivated with disregard for the environment, has given rise to pollution, habitat destruction and soil and water degradation as well as a significant loss of biodiversity. To counter these problems, the Rainforest Alliance has been working with some of Vietnam's leading coffee exporters, helping them transform the crop's production and ensure that it is being managed sustainably, benefiting both workers and the environment.

### An Industry Begins to Go Green

Coffee was first introduced to Vietnam by French colonists in 1857. Although the central highlands region — known as Buon Ma Thuot — proved to be a very fertile area for growing Robusta beans, coffee production was severely disrupted by decades of war and political turmoil. But since the early 1980s, when the country quietly reentered the global coffee market, it has seen a dramatic rise in production, with coffee now one of Vietnam's key export commodities, generating an income of over \$1.5 billion (US). Most of Vietnam's coffee is produced on small family-run farms of two to five acres (.8 to two hectares) in area.

This rapid expansion of coffee farming has put intense pressure on the environment and highlighted the need to make the industry's agricultural practices more sustainable. Though there are farms in the Buon Ma Thuot region that have been verified as meeting the code of conduct set forth by the Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C) Association — which since 2004 has established basic criteria for good management practices on farms — some of Vietnam's leading coffee exporters decided to pursue Rainforest Alliance certification, because of its strict standards, greater emphasis on environmental protection and the potential to earn a price premium.

Rainforest Alliance certification is based on a comprehensive set of environmental, social and economic criteria developed by the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN), a coalition of locally based



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NGOs that is coordinated by the Rainforest Alliance. Farms that meet the criteria are awarded the Rainforest Alliance Certified™ seal of approval, which they can use to market their crops.

In 2008, the Rainforest Alliance led a technical assistance and training course in Buon Ma Thuot that was open to all interested parties. Among the many companies who attended, the two that responded most proactively were Dakman Vietnam, a coffee processing and export company belonging to the Volcafe Group, and



### OUR MISSION

*The Rainforest Alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior.*

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the ECOM Coffee Group, another leading coffee trader. After they received additional assistance — to familiarize themselves with SAN criteria and learn what their producers needed to do to become Rainforest Alliance Certified — Dakman and ECOM held training workshops for the coffee farmers from whom they buy their beans and taught them how to make the necessary changes on their farms. In December 2008, 616 farms, covering a total area of 2,627 acres (1,063 hectares), were awarded Rainforest Alliance certification.

## Conserving Natural Resources and Money

Among the changes required for Rainforest Alliance certification is a reduction in agrochemical use. Before Rainforest Alliance certification, many of the farmers applied pesticides with little guidance,

*In accordance with SAN standards, farmers are now limiting their use of agrochemicals — to the benefit of the environment and their bottom line.*



but now their use of these chemicals is limited — to the benefit of the environment and the farmers' bottom line. Nguyen Thanh Tuy, who owns a 2.5-acre (one-hectare) coffee farm, has saved 40 percent on his overall expenses simply by reducing his reliance on agrochemicals. "The main benefit since joining the Rainforest Alliance certification program has been the economic factor," he said. "I spend less money on the maintenance of the farm — mainly through less chemical use — and I earn a higher price for the coffee."

Certified farms have also implemented efficient waste management systems. Many of the farmers used to burn waste or discard plastics, agrochemical containers and rubbish along the edges of their properties. Now, these farmers segregate their waste properly, creating a cleaner environment for their farms as well as for the community that surrounds them. In addition, they are monitoring their water consumption and keeping detailed records of their water and agrochemical use as well as data on their total harvest.

All of these changes are expected to have a positive long-term impact on farmers and the environment. According to Peter Sprang, the Rainforest Alliance's sustainable agriculture manager for the Asia-Pacific region, "These farmers are learning that they

can reduce the amount of chemicals on their farms yet still equal or improve their overall yield," he explained. "It's a win for their profitability and a win for the environment, as chemical runoff into rivers decreases and wildlife is better protected."

Before applying for certification, the farmers and their families already benefited from good living conditions, and their children were attending local schools, so the farms were in compliance with the social aspects of Rainforest Alliance certification. In accordance with Vietnamese law and the SAN standard, workers and farmers must be well paid, but certified coffee commands an even higher price than what these farmers had been receiving previously. Now these communities are able to invest further in the education of their children as well as provide them with up-to-date books and better quality school supplies.



*Communities are earning more for their certified coffee and are now able to invest further in the education of their children.*

## Certified Coffee Produces A Ripple Effect

In 2009, Vietnam's acreage of Rainforest Alliance Certified coffee farms increased, reaching a total of 3,956 acres (1,601 hectares), with 513 new farmers achieving certification on their farms. Not only are certified farmers more aware of environmental issues but their involvement in the program is also having a ripple effect, as their neighbors are becoming interested in learning more about — and joining — the program.

In addition to boosting the livelihoods of farmers in rural Vietnam and protecting the soil and water, the expansion of certified coffee will also help to conserve the country's wildlife. Previously, wildlife conservation efforts in the area were very poor; any birds or reptiles spotted on coffee farms would have been eaten or ended up in cages. Now, as a result of becoming certified and learning about sustainability, farmers understand the importance of looking after the wildlife that surrounds them; birds help control harmful pests, and snakes consume rats that might otherwise eat the coffee berries before they can be picked. According to Jonathan Clark, Dakman's general director, "The Rainforest Alliance shows farmers that they can produce good quality coffee while limiting damage to the environment."

*Photos: C. Watson, C. Trewick*

*For more information about the Rainforest Alliance's sustainable agriculture program, please visit [www.rainforest-alliance.org/agriculture](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/agriculture)*

