

## Local engagement in the conservation and restoration of the Holy Hill in Xishuangbanna

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Rapid expansion of cash crops, particularly rubber, in recent decades has reduced the forest cover in many areas to scattered fragments in an agricultural matrix in Xishuangbanna. Although these fragments have often been severely disturbed by the harvesting of timber and other forest products, the continuous presence of forest on a site allows the retention of a diverse forest flora and the more tolerant components of the fauna. The protection and restoration of forest fragments in a human-dominated landscape is impossible without the active support of the local communities. Between 2014 and 2017, with the support of BGCI, Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, CAS (XTBG) implemented the protection and restoration of the 'Holy Hill' near Manyanguan village by demonstrating the value of forest fragments, the potential to reverse the on-going decline in biological diversity, and encouraging community engagement. To raise the awareness of local students and facilitate the engagement of local communities, one school garden of about 700m<sup>2</sup> was established in Xiaojie Central Primary School (XCPS) growing over 100 species of native, economic, and educational plants. A Nature Observation Club (NOC) with members from 4<sup>th</sup> grade was set up to learn more about the tropical rainforest and local biodiversity and the skills to monitor planted plants with the guidance from teachers of XCPS and XTBG. A total 372 seedlings of 15 species were reintroduced to the 'Holy Hill' with the active involvement of local villagers and NOC members. Those introduced seedlings were managed by local villagers and monitored by NOC members once a year. Now 60% of those seedlings are growing well. The school garden also serves as an important environmental education base, which has attracted many other schools' visiting and learning. XCPS was awarded the title of Eco-school in 2019 as a result. A research article about this project was published in *People and Nature* in early 2024. This presentation will show how the school garden plays the role of raising plant conservation awareness and their role in the conservation and restoration of the 'Holy Hill'.