

**EXPLOITATION OF THE CULTURAL VALUES OF THE MA ETHNIC COMMUNITY IN THE BUFFER ZONE OF CAT TIEN NATIONAL PARK TO DEVELOP TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF TA LAI**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Established in 1998, Cat Tien National Park – the 41th Biosphere reserves of the world is not only highlighted with abundant fauna and flora but also a living locality of many native tribes with featured cultural tradition, in which most of population is the Ma people, mainly rounding up at Ta Lai village of the buffer zone of Cat Tien National Park. The variation about cultural tradition, customs and festival has made cultural humanity resources of this area more plentiful. However, the effectiveness of the exploitation of original culture of Ma people to develop tourism is still not true with its inherent advantages. This paper aims to show the potential, current state of development, impacts and solutions to exploit the cultural values of the Ma community in Ta Lai in order to develop tourism on the perspective of sustainable development standpoint.*

**Keywords:** cultural value, Ma people, Cat Tien National park, develop tourism

**TÓM TẮT**

**Khai thác các giá trị văn hóa cộng đồng dân tộc Mạ ở vùng đệm vườn quốc gia Cát Tiên để phát triển du lịch: Nghiên cứu trường hợp tại Tà Lài**

*Được thành lập vào năm 1998, Vườn quốc gia Cát Tiên - Khu dự trữ sinh quyển thứ 41 của thế giới không chỉ nổi bật với hệ động thực vật phong phú mà còn là địa bàn sinh sống của nhiều tộc người bản địa với truyền thống văn hóa đặc trưng, trong đó đông nhất là người Mạ, hiện tập trung chủ yếu tại xã Tà Lài ở Vườn quốc gia Cát Tiên. Sự đa dạng về truyền thống văn hóa, phong tục tập quán, lễ hội đã làm phong phú hơn tài nguyên văn hóa nhân văn của vùng. Tuy nhiên, hiện nay hiệu quả khai thác bản sắc văn hóa của đồng bào người Mạ để phát triển du lịch vẫn chưa được đúng với ưu thế vốn có. Nội dung bài viết trình bày về tiềm năng, hiện trạng phát triển, những tác động và giải pháp khai thác các giá trị văn hóa của cộng đồng người Mạ ở Tà Lài, để phát triển du lịch trên quan điểm phát triển bền vững*

**Từ khóa:** giá trị văn hóa, dân tộc Mạ, vườn quốc gia Cát Tiên, phát triển du lịch

**1. Introduction**

In the context of globalization, tourism had a rapid and strong development step, proving the important contribution to the social-economic development in each country, each territory. Traveling to the ethnic minority areas is getting more and more attention from people around the world because there would be a great place for observing, finding of the customs, living styles as well as special cultural values.

The community of Ma people in Ta Lai belonging to the buffer zone of Cat Tien National Park is considered as one of the characteristic resources of the potential sector to develop tourism, with plenty of ideological position of the local people. The primitive beauty in the living style, customs, economic activities or clothing,

and arts are considered as outstanding comparative advantages, attracting tourists and encouraging tourism activities. Since many years ago, Cat Tien National Park has been investigated and developed for tourism, with its results contributing greatly to the economy, social, and environment. However, the exploitation of resources and tourism development at this area still has many issues to solve; which is especially the exploitation about cultural values of the ethnic minority community (particularly Ma people). Therefore, it is necessary to enhance the exploitation of cultural values of ethnic communities in the buffer zone of Cat Tien National Park on the basis of cultural preservation and sustainable development to create a driving force for tourism in this region developing in line with

their inherent value, contributing to the improvement of community life.

## 2. Research Methods

The traditional cultural characteristics of Ma people in Ta Lai, the relationship between indigenous people and the natural environment of National Park as well as the ability to develop tourism associated with the indigenous peoples are important elements to evaluate the tourism development at Ta Lai. Besides, the statistics about the number of tourists and tourism revenue also contribute to the forecast, solutions and strategies for tourism development. To analyze the development of Ma community tourism in Ta Lai, the author used secondary data provided by the Ecotourism and Environmental Education Center, the Science and International Co-operation Department (2010 - 2016). However, there are no specific statistics on tourism in this area so the data is not really specific.

In order to objectively evaluate the tourism development of the Ma community in Ta Lai belonging to the buffer zone of Cat Tien National Park, the authors used some methods such as: collecting and processing information; analyzing; synthesising; field method (at research site); consulting with experts (in the field of tourism

and conservation) to evaluate based on clear, accuracy evidence of the research site. Finally, solutions to exploit, preserve cultural values of Ma's community in Ta Lai, and develop sustainable tourism were proposed.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Ma Community at Ta Lai Village

Ta Lai is one of three villages which are bounded with the Cat Tien National Park including: Dak Lua, Ta Lai (Dong Nai) and Dang Ha (Binh Phuoc). This is also the area in which its villages put the greatest pressure on the natural resources of Cat Tien National Park (Victoria Bateman, 2010). The majority of the people living in the area are poor households whose income is mainly from agricultural production while agricultural land is very limited. When the demand for agricultural land grows, land trading between migrants and ethnic minorities is driving the indigenous population into the forest (Becker and Tran Van Mui, 2003). Lack of labors, large numbers of children, degraded land, poor health, lack of investment, lack of knowledge and information and lack of planning capacity make life more difficult in Ta Lai. (Table 1)

**Table 1.** Data about the population of the communes adjacent to Cat Tien National Park in Dong Nai Province

Date	Dak Lua	Ta Lai
Number of households (households)	1.591	2.308
Demographics (people)	7.120	8.470
Labor (people)	5.871	4.691
Number of villages putting a lot of pressure on forest resources.	2	3

*Source: People's Committee of Tan Phu District, Dong Nai Province, 2015*

Ma ethnic minority area (Ta Lai Village, Tan Phu District, Dong Nai Province) has 163 households with 973 people. This area has the most Ma people living in Dong Nai (People's Committee of Tan Phu District, 2015). Ma people can be called Chau Ma with different local groups: Ma Xop, Ma To, Ma Krung, Ma Ngan. Ma's language belongs to Mon-Khomer. Ma people live in villages, each of which has from 5 to 10 long stilt house (the place of people who has the

same bloodline). Head of the village (bon) is the "quãng bon" (old man village leader). With long development history, Ma ethnic community has established and developed a huge storage of distinctive cultural traditions in many aspects of life. (Mai Ngoc Khuong and Pham Dac Luan, 2015)

#### *Economic activities*

The main economic activity is agriculture, in which upland rice cultivation is common, and

some low areas cultivate rice based on available water source. In Ta Lai, the technique of farmers to cultivate rice is to push the buffaloes down into the field in order for them to trample the soil until mud forms and then sow the seeds. Buffaloes and cows are raised by letting free, sliding into the forest and living in the herd; when people need to get meat or trample fields, they catch them home. In addition, the handicraft such as iron forging, weaving fabric, canoeing also brings high efficiency. In particular, weaving and knitting are two popular and very important occupations in the life of the Ma people. (Cat Tien National Park Project, 1999)

#### *Beliefs*

Ma people believe that there are many gods such as Yang God (The Supreme God), River God, Mountain God, Fire God ... Like other ethnic groups using the Mon-Khmer language, Ma people usually celebrate the traditional Buffalo fighting festival at Lunar New Year. Festivals are primarily celebratory and sacrificial. Festival must have buffaloes and in addition, other animals such as cows, pigs and chickens are also killed for blood sacrifice. Community rituals are considered as the cultural traits of the Ma people in Ta Lai.

#### *Clothing*

Ma women wear skirt- pants, longer than their calf; men wear loincloths. In the farming season, many people leave their back bare and stay half-naked. In the cold season they use blanket to cover themselves. They also have “tooth shorter, ears stretch” custom, and wear many jewelry rings.

#### *Food*

Ma's food is polished round-grained rice, sticky rice, maize, squash, sweet potato, cassava, vegetables and wild animal meat. The main way to prepare food is to grill, boil and make soup. They like to drink “rượu cần” (wine drunk out of a jar through pipes), eat meat-grilled and smoke cigarettes. Especially, “rượu cần” is one of the obligatory objects in festivals. (Cat Tien National Park, 1999)

#### *Cultural and artistic values*

The folk literature treasures include many ancient tales, and many unique legends. Musical instruments include gongs, drums, gourds, jars and bamboo pipes, three-hole flute attached to the dry gourd pods and “Tăm pot” singing artis-

tic. (Becker and Tran Van Mui, 2003)

Throughout the development process, Ma's life has changed, but they still maintain their unique ideological position. This is a valuable humanity tourism resource contributing directly to the promotion of the ideological position, promoting the development of tourism associated with indigenous communities.

### **3.2. Exploitation of cultural values of the Ma ethnic community in Ta Lai to develop sustainable tourism.**

#### **3.2.1. Development of tourism products**

Tourism products currently exploited in the Ma ethnic village in Ta Lai include:

##### *Festival*

*Buffalo- killing festival (Lễ đâm trâu):* Like many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, buffalo-stabbing festival is a cultural feature of the Ma. This festival is celebratory and sacrificial. Meant to celebrate a successful crop.

*New-crop festival (Lễ mừng lúa mới):* Held regularly after each crop to thank the gods who have helped for a full harvest. The festival needs only one kind of any animal.

*Gong Festival (Lễ hội cồng chiêng):* It is a festival of many ethnic minorities in this area, especially the Ma community, held at any time of the year. Each instrumentalist carries a different gong measuring between 25 and 80 cm in diameter. Different arrangements and rhythms are adapted to the context of the ceremony, for example, the ritual sacrifice of the bullocks, the blessing of the rice or mourning rites.

##### *Textile products*

Ma women are famous for traditional weaving with colorful and skillful patterns. Pattern motifs are usually represented in a realistic manner; knitted or added colored yarns during the weaving process. The pattern on the textile products is sophisticated and complex with the main colors being dark, red on a black fabric or blue on the white foundation. The motifs are mainly composed of three types: animal shapes, vegetation shapes and other shapes such as sun, stars; long house, mortar ... Currently, there are about 20-30 women who can weave proficiency in Ta Lai.

##### *Woven products*

Because of the self-sufficiency and self-provided characteristics, most of the men here know how to knit household items in daily life. The

products are usually: rattan weaving baskets, bamboo; “nia”, basket, sieve; basket to keep seeds, basket to keep fishes... The woven products of the Ma are very sophisticated - a combination of physical and mental factors is interwoven, inextricably intertwined. However, the number of skillful knitting is still very low, about 3-4 people. (Dang Thanh Tan, Pham Quang Thu, Bernard Dell, 2012)

#### *Local food, specialties*

Most of them are simple dishes with natural ingredients. These dishes gradually become an indispensable part of daily meals, receptions or occasions, Tet anniversary. Polished round-grained rice with salt mixed with chili, lemon grass, bamboo shoots, soup, some vegetables... are common foods with special taste, become strange and unique specialties of the Ma.

#### *Folk arts*

There are 16 members in the art group and two classes of gongs. Men play gongs, and women dance and sing. They usually perform at the festivals or serve tourism.

### **3.2.2. Development of different types of tourism**

The highlighted point of Ta Lai is the abundant, diverse culture of the indigenous people. In addition, to go to Ta Lai, visitors have to cross the long road, through the jungle with many wild animals. This helps Ta Lai be more attractive and adventurous. With the existing advantages of diverse cultural tourism resources as well as adjacent to Cat Tien National Park, Ta Lai is currently developing some types of tourism such as: Cultural and historical tourism; Research-study tourism; Tourism vacation Volunteer travel; Adventurous tourism – exploring nature.

#### **3.2.3. Develop integrated tourism routes**

Ma ethnic community in Ta Lai has been becoming one of the attractive places to visit and is considered one of the typical tourist routes of Cat Tien National Park, especially for foreign tourists. At present, the tourist routes to Ta Lai are linked to the Cat Tien National Park including:

*Bau Sau - Ta Lai (walking) Tour.* Travel time: 6 hours. Distance: 14 km. You will cross the mixed forest, cross many streams and end the journey in the grassy near Ta Lai.

*Tour to visit the Ma village, S'Tieng in Ta Lai.* The length of the tour is 12 km. 30 minutes by

canoe or 20 minutes by car.

Coming to Ta Lai, tourists will visit the natural House of Ta Lai ethnic people, where visitors can see the whole scene of labor, activities, festivals of ethnic minority here through the pictures, artifacts which are conserved here. In addition, visitors also have a chance to participate in production activities with farmers (rice cultivation), participate in planting silkworm mulberry - traditional long work of people, learn about brocade weaving, and stay at long house of ethnic minority people. From Ta Lai, going along the suspension bridge spanning the Dong Nai River, visitors can visit Vam Ho Dam or visit the memorial Ta Lai Prison (The Eco-tourism and Environmental Education Center, 2016)

### **3.3. Situation of tourism development in the Ma ethnic village in Ta Lai**

Started to be cultivated in tourism since 2005, to date, the Ma community in Ta Lai has contributed significantly into increasing the number of tourists and tourism revenue for Cat Tien National Park and tourism industry for Tan Phu District (Dong Nai Province). Ta Lai is really an attractive destination for tourists, especially with the international tourists' tastes because the current development trend of world tourism is ecotourism, explore, learn and research, enjoy the culture, natural scenery, humanities.

#### **3.3.1. The number of tourists and tourism revenue**

According to preliminary statistics, the number of visitors to Ta Lai has increased continuously. In the period of 2010 - 2016, tours to Ta Lai always occupy more than 20% of total visitors and 35% of tourism revenue of Cat Tien National Park. This is also the second attractive destination after Bau Sau Ramsar Site in Cat Tien National Park. Visitors coming to the village of Ta Lai ethnic current mainly consist of the following main subjects: single international tourists, international tourist package, domestic tourists on vacation and weekend and backpacking tourists, more than 50% of whom are foreigners. Most of them are interested in the characteristics of indigenous cultures through homestay (The Eco-tourism and Environmental Education Center, 2010-2016).

#### **3.3.2. Tourism development programs**

With the support of WWF-Vietnam, the community-based ecotourism model, Ta Lai Long



House was built in Ta Lai with a capacity of 180 guests per day. The project was developed in the form of cooperation with investors for technical and infrastructure support and has been transferred to the local tourism co-operative that was operated from 2012 (The Science and International Co-operation Department, 2013).

More than 200 local people have been actively involved in the design and development process with project's staff. In addition, Cat Tien National Park supports with environmentally friendly materials such as bamboo, rattan, wood, palm leaves. Community service teams are trained by the project with skills needed to engage in tourism activities. After the project was over, this tourism model is continued to grow under the management of the community group in cooperation with the business unit. It can be said that this is a model of private-community coordination in the management and development of tourism, creating jobs for about 100 local people trained by the project of WWF-Vietnam, among of that, 91% people are ethnic minorities. The project also creates a benefit-sharing mechanism for the community to be benefit from tourism, in particular, a fixed amount from the expenses will be paid to Long House to contribute to the community Development Fund, Poor households in the community or loans to develop production, improve livelihoods. In addition, the project will also support Cat Tien National Park to promote and encourage ecotourism activities.

Since 2007, the project to preserve and develop brocade weaving in Ta Lai has been implemented by Cat Tien Ecotourism and Environmental Education Center in Cat Tien National Park. The skilled trainees will weave brocade aesthetic items to sell to tourists visiting Cat Tien National Park or exploring the cultural life of ethnic minorities in Ta Lai. At the same time, the project also invested in the design of brocade clothes with high applicability for ethnic people here. The project of preserving and developing brocade weaving for Ma ethnic people in Ta Lai is invested by Tan Phu District with over 2 billion VND for the construction of workshops, looms, sewing machines, supporting material purchase initially so that people have the opportunities to maintain and preserve this traditional profession. (People's Committee of Tan Phu District)

### **3.4. Evaluating the impacts of tourism in**

## **the Ma ethnic community in Ta Lai based on the perspective of sustainable development**

### **3.4.1. Positive effects**

Ta Lai is known as a buffer zone commune closest to Cat Tien National Park which has many advantages for tourism development, especially, when Cat Tien National Park is becoming a favorite destination for domestic and foreign visitors. It is also one of the two poorest communes in Tan Phu District. Therefore, tourism development activities have greatly contributed to improving the economic life of the local people.

The development of tourism contributes to create jobs, improve the life of the Ma people in Ta Lai. Tourism companies create more employment opportunities for the people of the commune, change the employment structure, improve the quality of labor in the tourism sector and enhance income for local households. With the principles of profit sharing, it is estimated that in 2015, the average income of the households participating in tourism business is about 7.3 million per month per household. In addition, a part of the profits are extracted to support cultural festivals, poor and studious children, support elderly people, tree planting ... to ensure that all members of the commune benefit from tourism.

Rural infrastructures are improved and the investment capital provides the entire community with the benefits of providing tourism services and infrastructure (transportation, electricity, clean water, telecommunications ...). In addition, local people also learn management experience, designing tours and other necessary skills; establishing solid foundation for business tourism later.

Tourism development contributes to reduce pressure on the national park and the local ecological environment. In the past, upland farming played a key role in livelihoods when most of people were poor, lacking of capital, having low literacy, lacking of technology and opportunities to access to the markets. People did not have the opportunity to borrow or get access to capital supporting the development of production and livestock in order to generate income and improve their livelihoods. As tourism develops, the life of the Ma people gradually improves. Additionally, as the exploitation of resources to de-

velop production is planned and organized more closely, the negative phenomenon is decreased sharply. This has contributed to reduce pressure on Cat Tien National Park buffer zone.

Creating a variety of tourist products for local and increasing the ability to attract tourists. Since there are stops before visiting Ta Lai, visitors have more options to extend the tour, which helps improve tourism revenue, and improve living conditions for local communities.

Tourism promotion activities (propaganda and publicity) have become a tool for introducing national cultural identity on a global scale; creating opportunities for cultural and economic exchanges with other countries. Moreover, tourism activities contribute to enhance environmental awareness of local people through exchanging and learning with tourists; raising awareness, making social relationships more and more advanced and tight.

### **3.4.2. The challenges in the development process**

Tourism activities in Ta Lai depend heavily on the number of visitors to Cat Tien National Park; the weather and climate (tourism is mainly exploited in the dry season) also seasonality (holidays, long vacations). This makes the income from the tourist business of indigenous people is not unstable. In fact, the income from tourism is only enough to pay for the development of tourism projects, so there might be risks that this problem can lose the support from the community.

The capacity of regulating tourism activities of indigenous people has many limitations, which has greatly affected the development of tourism products, the ability to attract customers, increasing tourism revenue and raising incomes for the community. This is reflected through: (i) The tourist activities of the Ma ethnic minority in Ta Lai are small and disperse, not promoting all the cultural values of the nation. Tourism products are poor and monotonous; Transportation infrastructure and tourist facilities have not invested satisfactorily. (ii) The limited awareness of local communities and the capacity to organize tourism business activities are low; the human resources involved in tourism activities have not been properly trained, lack of vocational skills, communicative behavior...

Most of the tourism development programs

in Ta Lai are now funded by non-governmental organizations. Therefore, that leads to passivity in travel management, especially when donors are no longer involved.

The typical cultural traditions are at risk of falling apart, and daily life is affected by many influences, such as: the traditional arts of singing, dancing, music, traditional crafts and festivals are less organized; the preservation of musical instruments is limited, due to: the elderly are less and less; the young people are not aware of actively preserving the cultural capital or if they are aware, it is also very difficult to teach.

The process of building infrastructure and technical materials for tourism takes a lot of time and strongly influence to the daily production activities of the people; tourism businesses do not have time to gain stability and profit. Therefore, profit for people is limited and interrupted, while they still need to ensure the basic needs of daily life.

The procedures for applying for a tourist business license are complicated and time consuming, which limits the development and sharing of benefits from tourism.

- The settlement of legal procedures at different levels to approve tourism development projects takes a long time, which makes many travel businesses hesitate to invest in developing tourism products and decreases the interest of the community in tourism development.

- While constructing accommodation facilities, although the construction project has been agreed between the project partners, the locality, when the project started, it needs series of complex approval documents from the Provincial People's Committee, relevant departments such as Department of Construction, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Department of Natural Resources and Environment and Provincial and district police ... that has affected the local tourism activities.

### **4. Solutions to sustainable development of the Ma ethnic villages in Ta Lai**

With the potential of tourism available, tourism development of the Ma ethnic community in Ta Lai should be focused more to help the indigenous people increase their income, improve their lives, both conserve and preserve natural resources, environment, traditional culture, preserve craft villages and diversify tourism activi-

ties through specific solutions:

#### **4.1. Developing appropriate planning and management mechanism**

Tourism based on the preservation of national culture, which is in particular the Ma community in Ta Lai, is a sensitive tourism because it is linked to the daily life and culture of each ethnic minority. Therefore, careful research, careful consideration should be made when developing community tourism.

When tourists eat together – stay together – live together with people, experience the culture, art, cuisine of the community and preserve the identity and customs of ethnic minority people, they can cause impacts on native life and culture. Therefore, the development of tourism must be organized and managed with caution, based on appropriate management policy, so the cooperation and agreement of all stakeholders are required, in which the role of local communities is extremely important; unnecessary bad effects on the lives of local communities must be avoided. In the planning of tourism development, it is necessary to have the participation of local people and their opinions must be respected. At the same time, local authorities need to help them understand the benefits and responsibilities, so that each indigenous resident can become a subject and be benefited from tourism activities. This is considered as an important key to attract the engagement of the community in tourism activities.

#### **4.2. Improve the community's capability in tourism activities**

Key issue is that it is necessary to raise people's awareness and responsibility so that they can actively create unique and featured tourism products of high quality, make impressions and increase tourists spending in local to maximize revenue for the community.

Mobilizing people to participate in activities (reception, accommodation ...), ready to meet the customer's need on visiting, discovering customs, habits, labors activities. The support policy should be created to encourage citizens to restore and develop a number of traditional crafts (such as wicker, handicrafts, souvenirs...), and mobilize them to actively participate in protecting environment activities.

Taking great investment on building facilities and infrastructure for tourism. Cooperating and

closely combining households to produce and supply tourism products into a series of values satisfying to tourists.

Developing and raising the quality and qualifications of human resources, based on the actual source of the on-the-spot human resources, meeting the demands of tourism business activities with specific training plans. The content of the curriculum should include: study to improve professional level, specialized deeply in professional knowledge (guidance, customer reception, cooking ...); Improved ability to use foreign languages and basic skills (communication, behavior, solving situations ...).

#### **4.3. Promoting communication and promotion activities**

The local authorities, Cat Tien National Park Management Board and tourism businesses should combine to promote the cultural characteristics of the Ma community in Ta Lai by building the exhibition hall about their cultural life; Organizing traditional festivals, promoting through the media devices, such as: television, newspapers, magazines, Internet ... to update the information to visitors should also be done.

#### **4.4. Exploitation combined with conservation of tourism resources.**

Strengthening the awareness of conservation consciousness, responsibility for conservation and environmental protection when exploiting natural resources, especially with indigenous culture, with tourists, communities, business tourism.

Propagating to the community to raise the awareness and responsibility for the preservation and restoration of their cultural, artistic, customary, festive, house and traditional architectural and craft values. At the same time, educating, raising awareness of forest protection and biodiversity; minimizing the pressure on the natural environment, especially the National Park, to ensure sustainability in the development process are also important.

#### **4.5. Simplifying primary procedures, boosting call and support**

Managers (People's Committees, departments, agencies, and government agencies) need to observe, facilitate the unit business, community, simplifying method for short-term accompanying the standard, and support for tourism programs and projects in the rapidly growing

and highly effective address.

The business source of the State should increase calling for investment from organizations and individuals in the nation and abroad, creating favorable conditions for the implementation of the ecological value system, bringing high efficiency and long term to ensure the sustainable development.

### 5. Conclusion

The Ma community at Ta Lai belonging to the buffer zone of Cat Tien National Park is one of the ethnically diverse cultures and located in a unique geographic location in Cat Tien National Park, so it can attract visitors. The exploitation of community cultural values of the Ma ethics to develop tourism, especially traditional cultural tourism, has become a prominent feature of this region. The exploitation of cultural values of the Ma community in Ta Lai confirmed the predominant values of this particular resource. However, the exploitation of the above-mentioned values in service of tourism development still faces many difficulties and challenges. Suggested solutions of the authors hope to contribute significantly to the process of exploiting cultural values of the Ma ethnic community in Ta Lai to achieve the desired effect to meet the needs of tourism development; improve community life; supplement the accumulated capital for the locality; preserve cultural values and ensure sustainable development.

### Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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