

# USING THE KNOWLEDGE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT NATURE

The Tanintharyi region of Myanmar is home to a variety of indigenous and local communities. The largest ethnic minority is the Karen. With their knowledge and experience of the sustainable use and management of natural resources built up over generations, they can make a huge contribution to nature conservation and sustainable development.

## SECURING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Tanintharyi, the most southerly administrative region of Myanmar, still retains numerous undisturbed ecosystems with high biodiversity. Thanks to the wealth of natural resources and fertile land, the region is threatened by the development of large industrial projects including palm oil and rubber plantations, mining and infrastructure. These are leading to deforestation, water pollution and land seizure, which in turn have disastrous consequences for biodiversity, ecological functions and natural resources. For the Karen and other indigenous communities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to continue their sustainable life in and with the forest.

## NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS

A new generation of NGOs with young leaders is currently making inroads across the region. With their refreshing views and hands-on approach, they are in an excellent position to work together with local communities and to establish ties with local government. They support the people in mapping out indigenous land use. They offer knowledge of national laws and initiate transparent and inclusive dialogue about the threats of climate change and biodiversity loss for the country, and for indigenous and local communities.

One vital area of focus is working with young people to provide them with the knowledge they need to be able to use drones and satellite images, ecosystem monitoring and media campaigns. There is also growing attention for positive actions to promote participation by women, for example employing and paying for childcare staff so that women can attend meetings.

## REINFORCING CIVIL SOCIETY

IUCN NL encourages cooperation between local organisations and with regional networks, to enlarge the impact of their activities. Between 2016 and 2020, five local partner organisations of IUCN NL have

“Our partners in Myanmar are exceptionally successful in strengthening communities and empowering young leaders. These partners are convinced that true change can only come from within local communities. They are not the target group for projects, but should be in the driver’s seat.”

Evelien van den Broek, expert Myanmar at IUCN NL

been working on the problem of land degradation, via a shared Theory of Change, within the strategic partnership Shared Resources Joint Solutions. All these organisations are deploying their own expertise and can learn from each other and from IUCN NL, to develop new skills and operate more effectively. Together they have empowered civil society and local communities. They have established consultation with local governments and have raised calls for changes to government policy in favour of nature conservation and community governance.

## PROFESSIONALISATION

IUCN NL has enabled its partner organisations to increase their professional skills. We offer advice and training to improve project management, based on a method of planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning, backed up by careful accounting. We have also introduced a new method to recognise and identify changes in behaviour known as 'outcome harvesting'. This method offers opportunities to reflect on and learn lessons from projects and approaches that may be more or less effective.

## Example of our work

### Bottom-up nature protection

Because indigenous communities are part of the ecosystem, they must be given an important role in nature conservation. The Tenasserim River & Indigenous Peoples' Network (TN) trains young people to become community leaders for sustainable development. With support from IUCN NL, TN has organised a series of nine-month training programmes, and over a period of three years, 36 leaders have received training. These young people now have more knowledge and skills to work alongside their own and other indigenous communities to strengthen sustainable systems to improve livelihoods and for nature conservation.

## Political unrest

### Military coup

After a civil war between the army of Myanmar and the ethnic minorities that has lasted 70 years, there has been a formal cease fire, since 2015. Since that time, major investors have shown an interest in the country's natural capital. Refugees and internally displaced persons wishing to return to their ancestral territories are confronted with the fact that their land has been taken over by businesses that are using it to start large-scale agriculture and mining projects. In the new political space that has been created by the civilian government since 2015, growing numbers of complaints have been received by government about unlawful land use. The military coup in February 2021 brought an end to the process of democratisation, and once again the population, communities and nature are at the mercy of the whims and interests of the army.

## COOPERATING WITH IUCN NL

In Myanmar, IUCN NL can support local NGOs in empowering indigenous and local communities so they can represent themselves in decision making processes about the development of the landscape, stand up for their traditional rights and use their knowledge to contribute to sustainable landscape management.

Despite the disruption to the democratisation process, it remains essential that local organisations in Myanmar continue their work.

Do you want to help us make this possible? Visit our [website](#) for detailed information and more example projects or contact our expert [Evelien van den Broek](#).