

Policy recommendations for environmental conservation in the Chindwin River Basin



SEI policy brief

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1. Introduction

Myanmar is one of Southeast Asia's most biologically diverse countries, hosting 132 key biodiversity areas (KBAs), sites that significantly contribute to the persistence of global biodiversity.¹ Within the country, the Chindwin River Basin is one of the most biodiverse. Located in the northwest region of Myanmar, the basin hosts a range of habitats from forests and swamps to coasts and mountains with diverse flora and fauna. The Chindwin River alone hosts fourteen of the country's KBAs, covering 51.1% of the basin area.²

The Chindwin Basin is facing habitat loss and species population decline driven by economic development activities combined with the impacts of climate change. Poor environmental conservation – including weak law enforcement, institutional fragmentation, limited government capacity, and low conservation priorities – further threatens the basin's ecology and biodiversity.³

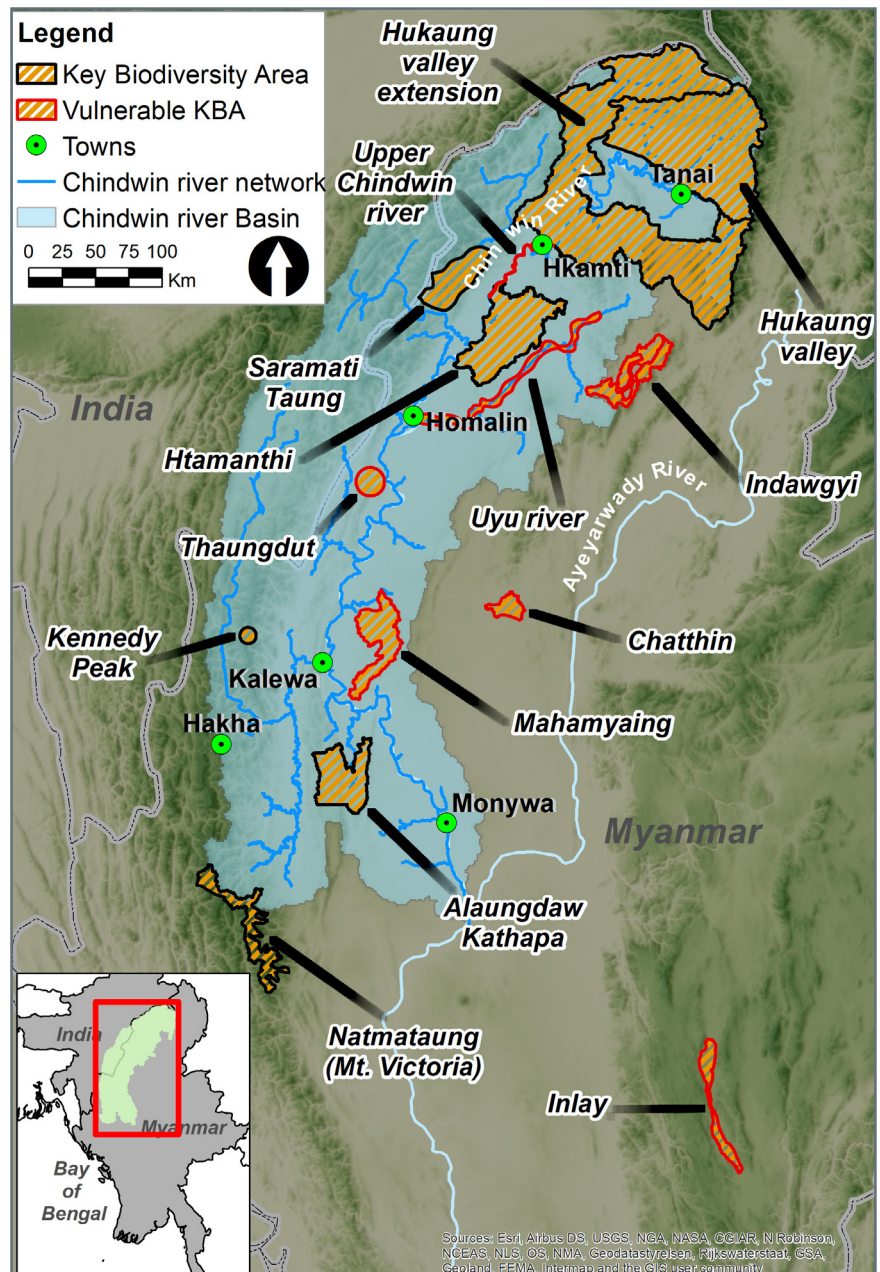
A major consequence of rapid biodiversity loss is the impact on communities who are reliant on biodiversity for their lives and livelihoods.⁴ As such, conservation approaches must benefit both local communities and nature. One approach with this consideration is the community-based natural resource management approach that has been formally recognized since the 1970s.⁵

Given the interdependency of livelihoods and biodiversity in this part of Myanmar, this brief explores ideas for enhancing community-based conservation in the Chindwin River Basin. We draw upon insights from biodiversity conservation experts and SEI's past work on biodiversity in the basin area. We conducted nine key informant interviews with conservationists from government, civil society and international non-profit organizations in northern Myanmar as well as reviewed the literature on community-based conservation practices in Myanmar.

2. Community involvement in different models of conservation

Community-based natural resource management promotes biodiversity conservation while providing economic and financial incentives for local communities. These two objectives converge under the premise that communities are more likely to support and sustain conservation practices if they exercise control over biodiversity management decisions and obtain benefits from the conservation efforts.⁶

Myanmar's 135 diverse ethnic groups largely depend on ecosystem services provided by their immediate natural environment.⁷ Improved access to natural resource management



is vital for the enhancement of community livelihoods in the country. Securing access to watersheds, forests, and other biodiversity sources is essential for rural livelihood practices such as agriculture, swidden cultivation, animal husbandry and fisheries.⁸

Nature conservation efforts in the Chindwin River Basin could set standards by enabling various ethnic groups to manage resources following their own customs and practices. Indeed, biodiversity practitioners throughout Myanmar strongly believe that the success of conservation projects is contingent on community buy-in and involvement.⁹ Further, the government already supports community implementation of agroforestry, community forestry, and ecotourism as conservation initiatives for livelihood enhancement.¹⁰

Several organizations are working on biodiversity conservation in the Chindwin Basin. These include the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation's Forest Department, particularly the Nature and Wildlife Division, and university researchers. The Wildlife Conservation Society, Flora and Fauna International, Myanmar

Birds and Nature Society, the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association and Friends of Wildlife, among others, represent non-governmental organizations.¹¹

Myanmar currently practices three primary conservation models involving community participation: National Parks, Ramsar Wetlands and Biosphere Reserves. In 2018, Myanmar had 42 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, with plans for 19 more.¹² The country also maintains six Ramsar sites¹³ and two biosphere reserves, Inlay Lake and Indawgyi Lake.¹⁴ The Chindwin River Basin contains Alungdaw Kathapa National Park, Chatthin Wildlife Sanctuary, Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary, Hukaung Valley Wildlife Sanctuary and Indawgyi Lake Biosphere Reserve.¹⁵ Each of the three conservation models demonstrates varying degrees of community participation or exclusion and performs differently along conservation and sustainable natural resource management goals.

National Parks

National Parks are areas designated by the central government for ecosystem protection and recreation. Community rights of access and use differ significantly within individual national parks depending on national legislation. Prohibitive rights of access to national parks that prevent local people from extracting resources within the areas can interfere with communities' customary and subsistence uses of the land.¹⁶

Ramsar Wetlands

Ramsar's 2016-2024 Strategic Plan explicitly "...encourages Parties to promote, recognize and strengthen active participation of indigenous peoples and local communities, as key stakeholders for conservation and integrated wetland management."¹⁷ While there is no requirement to establish community conservation, there is a strong recommendation for Ramsar Parties to acknowledge and strengthen communities roles in wetland management.

Biosphere Reserves

The biosphere reserve is the most explicit in its criteria for community conservation. The notion of community participation is central to the concept of biosphere reserves.¹⁸ The biosphere reserve concept is unique in that it promotes both conservation and sustainable resource use by communities in the designated area.¹⁹ Biosphere reserves are characterized by inclusive engagement and benefit-sharing with local communities and interested stakeholders in the decision-making processes.²⁰

3. Legal opportunities for community participation in biodiversity conservation

Myanmar's current legal framework provides opportunities for communities to participate in biodiversity conservation. Myanmar ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1994 and since then has become a party to several multilateral environmental agreements on climate change, biodiversity, and environmental pollution.²¹

The Conservation of Biodiversity and Protected Areas Law of 2018 includes provisions favouring community participation in conservation that promote socio-economic development and biodiversity conservation.²² In 2020, two community conservation areas were established, Yay-Win Kyauk Khaung (11 May 2020, announcement letter 57/2020) and Ashya-myin and Anuak- Myin (15 May 2020, announcement letter 77/2020).²³ Further, by-laws that emerge under this law could define rights and engagement measures involving local communities.²⁴

Additionally, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2015-2020 on conservation priorities identified the Chindwin River Basin as a critical area in need of

conservation measures due to its high level of deforestation and has targeted an increase of Protected Areas in the region to 10% of land cover.²⁵ Once the plan period ended in 2020, however, there has been no further national-level biodiversity strategy.

The NBSAP also highlights that biodiversity conservation needs to consider the needs of women, indigenous groups, local communities, the poor and marginalized groups.²⁶ Further, the plan encourages community management practices such as community forestry, community-based ecotourism and locally managed marine areas that leverage community bargaining power and organizational capacity.²⁷

Recognition of customary land use and rights is critical to the success of community conservation. Though existing laws lack a firm commitment to recognizing traditional land rights, limiting ethnic groups' access to and management of natural resources, the National Land Use Policy hints at change.²⁸ The current national Land Use Policy establishes that: "Customary land use tenure systems shall be recognized in the National Land Law in order to ensure awareness, compliance and application of traditional land use practices of ethnic nationalities." This paves the way for conservation practices to recognize customary land rights.

The strategic involvement of minorities' and Indigenous Peoples' roles in traditional natural resource management is specified in laws related to biodiversity and environmental conservation, as well as in international human rights norms and regulations. Myanmar has adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which emphasizes that government policies and programmes should promote and protect minorities and Indigenous Peoples.²⁹ Any development project related to their resources requires stakeholder consultations and free, prior and informed consent from Indigenous Peoples.³⁰ But this rarely happens in practice.

4. Lessons learned from community involvement in Myanmar conservation

The demand and need to strengthen community involvement in conservation practiced throughout Myanmar has been widely campaign. It is important to highlight the different roles that communities can take in conservation, from locating endangered species for protection to collecting data for research. They also caution against the potential impacts that could occur when communities face exclusion from conservation.

Conservation practices examples from Inlay Lake and Sagaing Region serve as possible options for involving communities in the conservation of existing protected areas in the Chindwin River Basin. These practices could benefit Chindwin because its livelihoods, particularly those of ethnic people, are deeply reliant on biodiversity. For this reason, community involvement and awareness are essential for conservation success. With limited government capacity to manage conservation areas, community-based natural resource management presents an opportunity to co-manage and protect Chindwin's rich biodiversity.

Recognizing local expertise

Local communities have extensive knowledge of the ecosystems upon which they rely. Some conservation projects in Myanmar involve local communities in the monitoring of national parks. In conservation efforts to protect the habitat of the Burmese Roof turtle in Khamti district of Sagaing Region, conservation officers from the nongovernmental organization, Upper Chindwin Turtle Conservation WCS-Myanmar, recruited women, youths, and older people of Shan Ni ethnic background to locate turtle eggs needing protection.³¹

Targeted awareness-raising and engagement

As some of the primary users of biodiversity, ethnic people and local communities should be the first to receive knowledge on conservation plans and practices. In the Indawgyi Lake biosphere reserve located in Mohnyin Township, the Kachin and Shan Ni ethnic groups are involved in awareness-raising and implementing nature-based tourism.³² In Karen State, the Forestry Department and Karen civil society groups get training on data collection and anti-poaching techniques to preserve critical tiger habitats jointly.³³

Seek a balance between livelihood and conservation priorities

Given the dependency of livelihoods on biodiversity and natural resources, conservation practices need to provide livelihood benefits for sustained community support. In the Indawgyi Lake biosphere, international funding provided job opportunities for youths to patrol and monitor the area, support organic farming, promote nature-based tourism and sustain the lake's fisheries.³⁴

Inclusive planning and decision-making

Community buy-in in the establishment of conservation areas is vital for the success of a conservation project. The exclusion of communities from conservation may lead to conflicts between park management and local communities. An example is a recent outcry by members of the Rawang ethnic group over the designation of the Hakaborazi National Park as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The community expelled the Forest Department and Wildlife Conservation Society from the National Park area, identifying environmental destruction, loss of livelihood and breakdown of customary practices since the site's designation as a national park in 1998.³⁵

At Inlay Lake – the second largest freshwater lake of Myanmar and the country's first Biosphere Reserve – diverse stakeholders participated in efforts at balancing the conservation and use goals of the biosphere. To date, one central focus of the efforts has been agreement on the Biosphere Reserve's boundary areas for use and conservation. These boundary discussions led to the establishment of core, buffer and transition zones in the Biosphere Reserve.³⁶

5. Challenges of community-based conservation in practice

Though international and domestic laws provide a framework for community-based participation, Myanmar still faces several challenges in implementing community conservation.

Broader issues include the lack of capacity, funding, poor governance, and lack of law enforcement.^{37 38}

Another challenge is an occasional lack of interest and low prioritization for biodiversity. Some communities may not show interest in biodiversity conservation, particularly within ethnic communities.³⁹ This wariness may derive from previous unfortunate experiences or current extreme poverty, as well as from limited appreciation of the value of biodiversity and ecosystem services.⁴⁰ Another factor could be that government representatives at regional and state levels fail to prioritize biodiversity in their policy agendas due to their own limited financial, human and technical capacities.⁴¹

6. Recommendations

The principles of community-based natural resource management based on the involvement of local people in planning, decision making, implementing and monitoring of conservation efforts can help conserve the Chindwin River basin's biodiversity while bringing sustained benefits to communities.⁴²

We recommend the following measures for promoting community-based natural resource management in the Chindwin River Basin:

- **Enhancing Coordination and Governance**

Greater collaboration between federal and subnational governments and line agencies can improve knowledge and resource sharing between different levels of government to overcome technical and financial constraints. To enhance collaboration, subnational line agencies should look to existing platforms that support participatory governance and interdepartmental coordination, such as the Chindwin River Basin Committee, to promote community-based natural resource management.

- **Prioritizing Biodiversity for Enhanced Livelihoods**

The government's international and domestic laws and policies provide a solid substantive and procedural foundation for protecting nature and involving communities in conservation. The central and subnational governments can leverage these laws to prioritize biodiversity conservation measures that sustain the livelihoods of communities in the Chindwin River Basin.

- **Collaborative Conservation**

Local communities in the Chindwin River Basin need incentives to collaborate on biodiversity conservation. Subnational governments can provide them with opportunities and compensation for participation in decision-making, capacity building and implementation of biodiversity projects. Their greater involvement would lead to longer-lasting effectiveness in preserving the environment.

- **Recognition of Customary Rights**

Central and subnational governments should recognize customary uses of natural resources as many of Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups rely on traditional uses of natural resources to support their livelihoods. The recognition of customary land uses, and rights is critical to ensure the participation of these groups in community conservation and the preservation of cultural heritage.

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