



Mutraw District, KNU

SALWEEN PEACE PARK



A vision for an indigenous Karen
landscape of human-nature harmony
in southeast Myanmar



“All living things sharing peace”

The Salween Peace Park reflects the core aspirations of the Karen people

1. Peace and self-determination
2. Environmental integrity
3. Cultural survival

The Salween River and forests are under threat

In a remote region of southeast Myanmar, overshadowed for decades by civil war and military dictatorship, the forested mountains of the indigenous Karen people may seem to be an unlikely sanctuary for wildlife.

The Salween River basin contains one of the last great wild landscapes and natural teak forests of Southeast Asia. The 2,800-km-long Salween River has survived to date without a single dam. Rare and diverse wildlife like Asian elephants, gaur, and gibbons still call the place home. In recent years, an indigenous conservation initiative has documented the presence of dozens of endangered species like the tiger and clouded leopard.

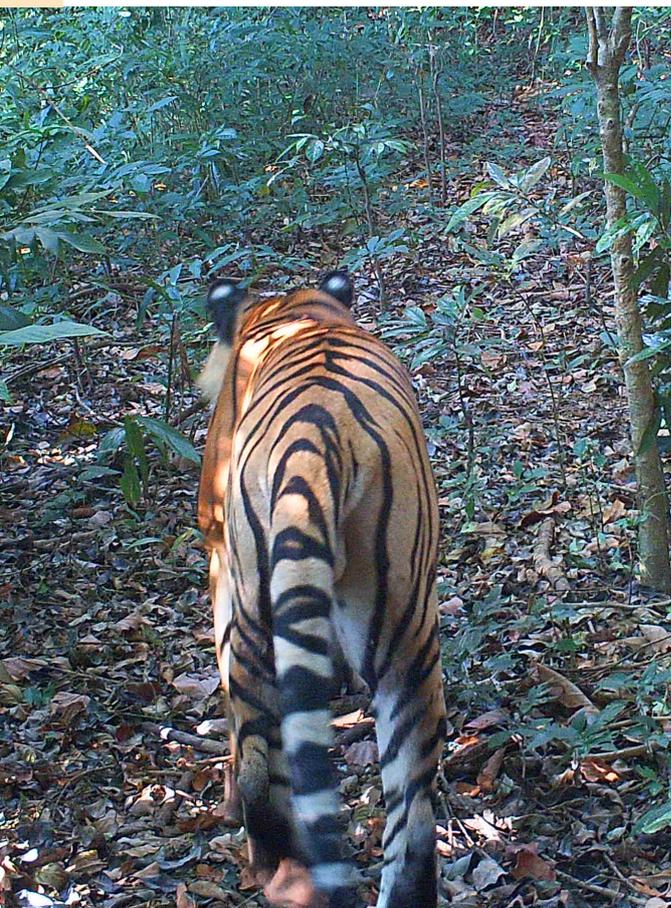
Unfortunately, government and industry proposals for megaprojects in the Salween River Basin threaten both the rich biodiversity and indigenous Karen heritage of the area.



Can a battlefield be turned into an indigenous-run sanctuary for endangered species?

The answer is yes. The Salween Peace Park initiative builds on more than a decade of community-based conservation work. The survival of this landscape and its biodiversity thus far can be explained by the indigenous Karen environmental ethic that integrates sustainable livelihoods, nature protection and democratic governance. This cultural heritage is an invaluable asset to a world facing species extinction and climate change.

Myanmar is tentatively emerging from military rule and civil war. Embracing this opportunity, Salween Peace Park proponents argue for a sustainable alternative to megadams, strip mines, and top-down protected areas like national parks, all of which require the colonization of indigenous land. In the context of violent conflict and staunch public opposition, plans for massive projects will fail. But as they fail they risk reigniting war and continuing devastation of communities and the environment.



What is the current status of the Salween Peace Park?

A longstanding partnership between Mutraw District communities, the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) and the Karen National Union (KNU)¹ has established wildlife sanctuaries and community forests for the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources.

These foundations of the Salween Peace Park are proof that alternative, community-based sustainable development and conservation initiatives can work. The first Peace Park consultation was held in May 2016 with more than 300 participants. An elder council and secretariat are at work in each township, gathering community input and explaining the Peace Park concept. The next consultation is scheduled for December 2016.



Indigenous communities are key to conservation

The heart of the Peace Park initiative is the indigenous Karen system known as *kaw*:

- a physical area and a social institution for sustainable land governance
- a complex communal arrangement that integrates indigenous ecological knowledge, protected wildlife areas, rotational upland fields, taboos against hunting keystone species, and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms

The continued viability of wildlife habitats in Karen areas is testimony to the wisdom of the *kaw*. The Salween Peace Park initiative currently includes 29 *kaw*² and aims to protect and revitalize the *kaw* system among more communities as a sustainable alternative to megaprojects, as well as a way for refugees and displaced people to reintegrate into Karen State with minimal disruption of the natural environment.

A living vision, not just a national park

The Salween Peace Park is a grassroots, people-centered alternative to the previous Myanmar government and foreign companies' plans for destructive development in the Salween River basin. Instead of massive dams on the Salween River, we see small hydropower and decentralized solar power. Instead of large-scale mining and rubber plantations, we call for eco-tourism, sustainable forest management, agroforestry and organic farming. Instead of megaprojects that threaten conflict and perhaps the resumption of war, we seek a lasting peace and a thriving ecosystem where people live in harmony with the nature around them. The new Myanmar government has promised to lead the country toward a devolved, federal democracy. The Karen are not waiting idly for this: the Salween Peace Park is federal democracy in action. It is indigenous self-determination and community protection of natural and cultural heritage in action.

¹ The KNU is the de facto ethnic government that steadfastly opposed military dictatorship in Myanmar, but has recently signed a ceasefire agreement with the central government.

² See map of proposed Salween Peace Park at back.

Map of Salween Peace Park

