

Sustainable Forest Management

Reflections on Over a Decade of Indigenous Karen Community Forests







Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest is an intact and healthy ecological system located in Lae Kee Village, Luthaw Township, Mutraw District of Kawthoolei, Burma



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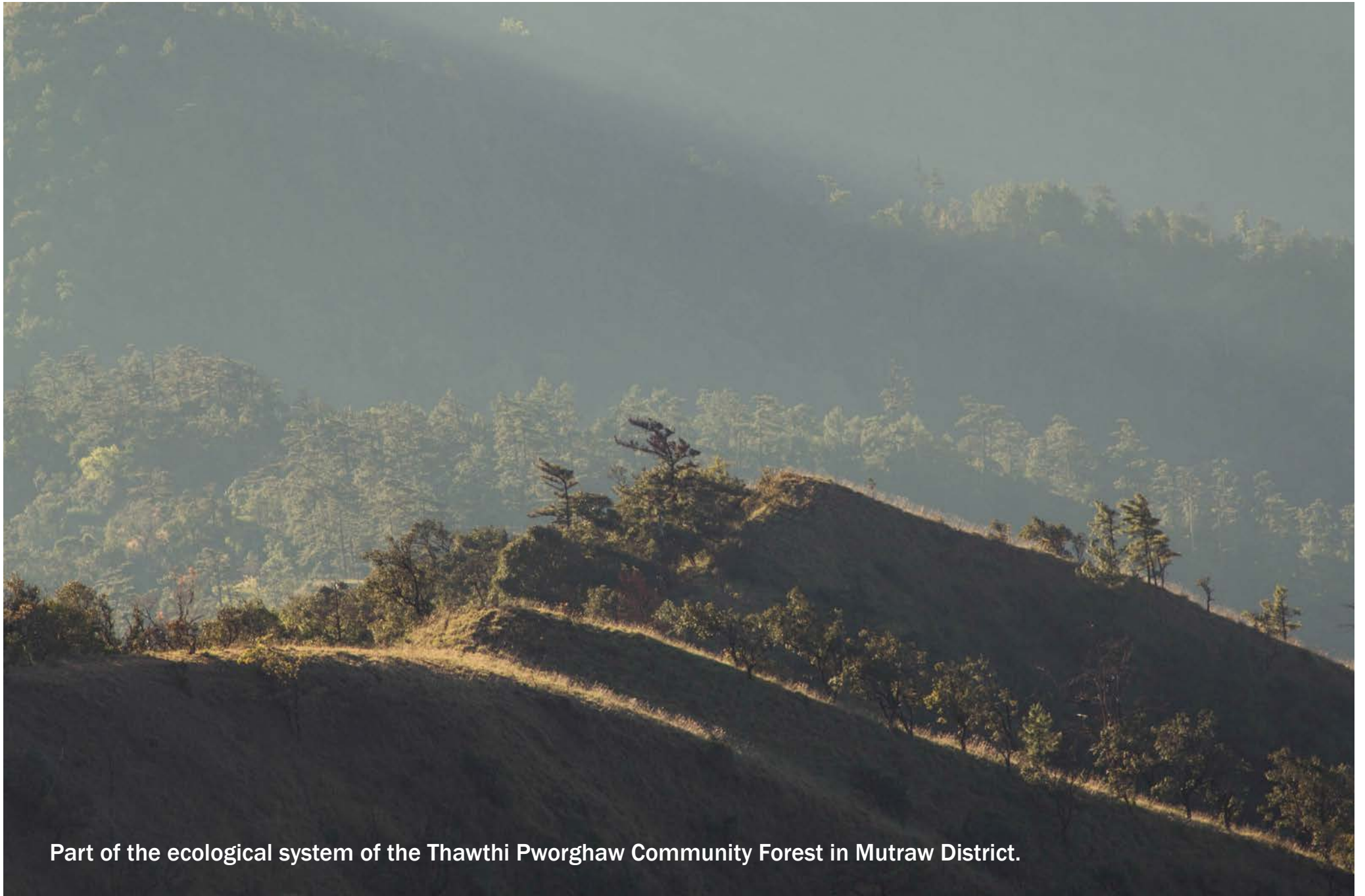
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Part of the ecological system of the Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest in Mutraw District.



**Watershed area in the Htee The Blu Community Forest in Noh T'Kaw Township,
Dooplaya District of Kawthoolei, Burma**

Foreword

I am really thrilled by the sight of so many stunning photographs in this photo essay book. As "a picture is worth a thousand words", I believe that each one of these images truly conveys an understanding, a sense of meaning, and a feeling which words alone cannot describe. I have not been to the places or communities where these photos were recorded. Yet, these photos have convinced me that these Indigenous Karen communities have an inextricable relationship with their forests. Throughout all of these pictures, I can see that people are talking to their community forests, and the forests are talking back, together creating a joyful and friendly dialogue! The value and importance of forests to the local communities are visible in their daily livelihood activities: I can see the dignity, pride, and sense of identity of the local communities that has grown out of being with their forests. With these initial expressions, I truly believe that the readers will capture the meaning of each photo presented in this book about our Indigenous Karen people and their community forests. I invite you to let the photos tell you the whole story in all of its details.

This photo-essay book tells the story of the Indigenous Karen people's way of life, their traditional knowledge of sustainable practices, and their management and conservation of these forests and their biodiversity. The photos used in this book were documented in three KNU Forestry Department-certified community forests, all of which have been established and managed by the local communities for more than a decade. I hope that this first case study of these three community forests in Doo Tha Htoo, Mutraw and Dooplaya districts will one day reflect all of the other community forests in Kawthoolei as well.

In addition, I hope that these pictures can bear witness to and advocate for Indigenous-led community forests or, more broadly, any type of Indigenous-led conserved area/territory as the best conservation-governance model available. These territories are due the full recognition, protection, and promotion of all national governments. May these Indigenous-led territories demonstrate to decision-makers that respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples' land and territories are crucial for protecting nature and sustaining biodiversity. If these rights are left ignored, the majority of the world's critical biodiversity – this overwhelmingly found in areas or territories governed by the world's Indigenous Peoples – will vanish, endangering the planet's life systems and bringing forth ever-worsening planetary crises.

Just as these photos have spoken to me and as the forests documented here continue to speak to their local custodians, I wish for everyone reading this and all the people watching over their own community forests that they might be able to hear the voice of the forest in the same way through these coming pages. May the bond between us and our forests (or Kaw - ancestral territory / territory of life) be strong and ever-lasting.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Indigenous people at Paw Ghe Kee, Lae Kee and Htee The Blu villages, KNU Kawthoolei Forestry Department leaders, co-workers and the photographer for their great contribution towards the making of this beautiful photo-essay book.



Saw Paul Sein Twa
Executive Director

Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest

Paw Ghe Kee Village, Bilin Township,
Doo Tha Htoo District of Kawthoolei

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Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest

Lae Kee Village, Luthaw Township,
Mutraw District of Kawthoolei

A dense tropical forest with many trees and vines. The scene is filled with green foliage and numerous tree trunks, some of which are covered in thick, brown, spiny vines. The lighting is natural, suggesting a daytime setting in a lush, overgrown environment.

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Htee The Blu Community Forest

Htee The Blu Village, Noh T'Kaw Township,
Dooplaya District of Kawthoolei



Waters, Forests and Lands and the Indigenous Karen Peoples

Believed to naturally possess supernatural powers that included the ability to predict future events, our ancestors instructed us to care for the land and preserve living terrestrial and aquatic beings with whom we share the planet in an intricate and intimate web of life. We recognize that we are able to survive due to the well-being of the living things that comprise the biodiversity of these complex ecosystems. Our elders are aware that if we deplete these resources rapidly through over-extraction, over consumption and overexploitation, the biodiversity that enriches our lives will go extinct and we will have undermined our own survival. We carry an interdependent relationship with this biodiversity and so must live harmoniously together with it.

For Indigenous Karen peoples, the *Hta*¹ is an important tool used by our ancestors to communicate these messages with us. Traditionally, the *Hta* is used to give instruction, guidance, discipline, and metaphor. It is used during judicial process/review revolving around Kaw boundary disputes. According to our elders, those who communicate with each other by using the language of *Hta* are highly regarded as wise and knowledgeable. A simple phrase from a *Hta* can carry many different meanings and as such is hugely important for Karen people’s cultural identity.

An example of a Hta teaching the stewardship of Nature:

On Water:

ဒွန်ဘုအိန်လၢထံဖိခံ, ညှဉ်လံာ်အိန်လၢထံဖိခံ
Daybue Oh Ler Htee Poe Kee, Nya Li Oh Ler Htee Poe Kee
ဒွန်ဘုအိန်မူထီဉ်က့ၤထံ, ညှဉ်လံာ်အိန်မူထီဉ်က့ၤထံ
Daybue Oh Moo Htaw Kay Htee, Nya Li Oh Moo Htaw Kay Htee
ဒွန်ဘုအိန်သုတမၤသံ, ညှဉ်လံာ်အိန်သုတမၤသံ
Daybue Oh Thu T'mar Thee, Nya Li Oh Thu T'mar Thee
ညှဉ်လံာ်ဒွန်ဘုမူန့ၢ်ထံ, မူဝဲပမူပိာ်အံ
Nya Li Daybue Moo Nay Htee, Moo Wei Per Moo Hpo A'kee

This *Hta* discusses the critical importance of aquatic species such as fish and frogs for maintaining water storage and supporting sustainable productivity indefinitely. In this poem, our Indigenous elders instruct us not to kill them all, nor destroy their natural habitats because we human beings greatly depend upon them.

On Forests:

ပမ့ၤကသံမၤလိာ်လီၤ, ပပုၤကသံမၤလိာ်လီၤ
P'mwee K'thi Mar Hlo Lor, P'war K'thi Mar Hlo Lor
သ့ၣ်ခိဉ်ကသံအိန်ကတီၤ, ဝဉ်ခိဉ်ကသံအိန်ကတီၤ
Thay Kho K'thi Aaw K'taw, Wa Kho K'thi Aaw K'taw
ကတီၤသ့ၣ်လီၤယုာ်အသီ, သ့ၣ်လီၤကတီၤယုာ်အသီ
K'taw Thoot Lor Kay A'thaw, Thoot Lor K'taw Hkhu A'thaw
သ့ၣ်လီၤယုာ်ဒီးချာ်စိၤကြိၤ, ထီဉ်ခ့ထီဉ်ကိးမိဉ်ဘဉ်အီၤ
Thoot Lor Hkhu Dor Kler Hsoe K'raw, Hto Kay Hto Kaw Mo Bar Aaw

This *Hta* tells us that, before our ancestors passed away, they instructed us to use and preserve our forests, keeping them intact in some places and allowing the forests to grow back where they were cut so as to sustain traditionally protected keystone species such as hornbills.

On Kaw Ancestral Land:

ထံလီၤသံးပုၤအိန်ဝ်အီၤ, ပုၤလီၤစုၤပုၤအိန်ကတီၤ
Hti Lor Thi Pwar Aaw Wa Aaw, Pwa Lor Shar Pwar Aaw K'taw
အိန်ကိာ်ကတီၤကိာ်မ့ၢ်ဂ့ၤ, ဖိသဉ်လၢခံကအိန်က့ၤ
Aaw Kaw K'taw Kaw May Ghay, Poe Li Ler Khee K'Aaw Kay

Lest we encounter water scarcity, deforestation and forest degradation, it is critical for us to care for and preserve the land for our future generations.

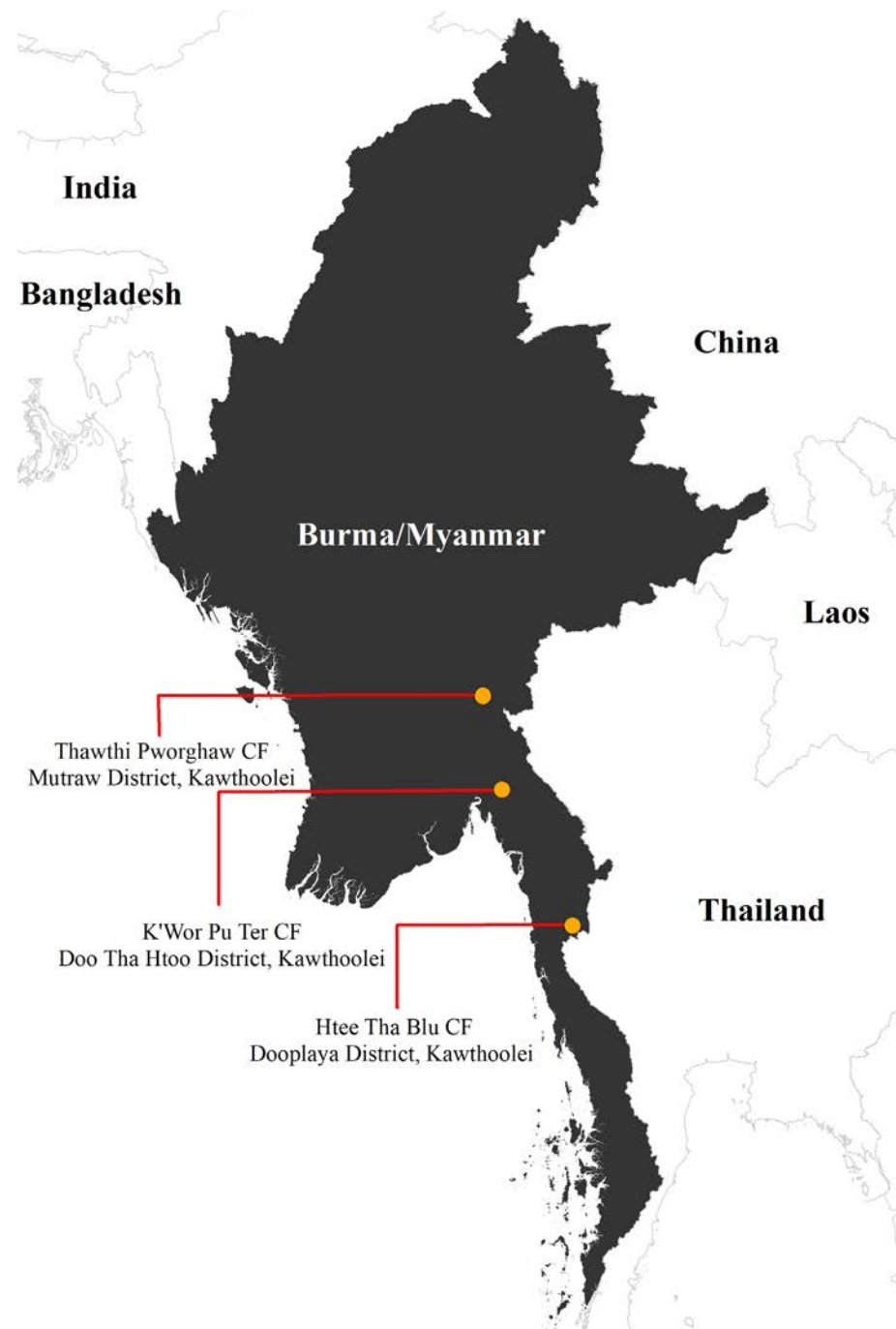
¹ *Hta* (ဝါ) is a Karen word meaning Poem

Executive Summary

In order to reflect on more than a decade of Indigenous Karen community forestry, and to identify what makes Karen management practices successful, KESAN and KFD staff conducted field assessment case studies in three community forests in three different districts in late 2019. These included K'Wor Pu Ter CF of Doo Tha Htoo District, Thawthi Pworghaw CF of Mutraw District and Htee The Blu CF of Dooplaya District. Information was gathered on customary forestry management/governance best practices, ecological benefits, forest cover conditions, and threats, challenges, and opportunities to strengthen the governance capacity of both local CF communities and the KFD. This photo-essay, "Sustainable Forest Management: Reflections on Over a Decade of Indigenous Karen Community Forests" was published as a result with the aim to build stronger partnerships in sustainable forest governance among/between local communities and KFD in Kawthoolei.

The remaining forests in the world, along with the biodiversity they sustain, are under immense pressure. This may prove to be the most serious of all environmental problems. Unsustainable large-scale developments including superhighways, expansion of urbanization, industrial agriculture, commercial logging, extractive mining, and hydroelectric dam construction are key driving factors that have changed and transformed our intact forest landscapes. Too often in our world, forests have been turned into barren and degraded lands. The serious consequences that we will face in our lifetimes as a result of an unsustainable fossil-fuel driven economy include natural disasters, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, food insecurity and starvation, mass displacement and migration, and gross social inequity. This is a global crisis that ultimately may result in global ecosystemic and economic collapse.

In the face of massive deforestation and forest degradation around the world and the failure of conventional wildlife conservation efforts to protect biodiversity in critical locations, non-governmental organizations, some government officials, and individuals in the private sector are aware that, unless Indigenous peoples' rights to their lands and territories are



defended and their roles as stewards of Nature are recognized and upheld, further deforestation and destruction of habitat is inevitable. The concept of community forestry is useful in empowering Indigenous peoples' and local communities to manage and protect their lands. For Indigenous Karen peoples in Kawthoolei, while the concept of "Community Forestry" introduced by the United Nations FAO might seem new and alien, forest conservation and the intergenerational stewardship of natural resources will certainly be familiar, as it has been practiced since the time of our ancestors.

Some instances of effective forest conservation that Indigenous Karen practice include the preservation and protection of wildlife corridors, preservation of different classes of sacred lands, watershed conservation areas and the continuation of traditional Ku rotational farming which maintains the forest in differing stages of regrowth. By preserving and protecting both pristine and fallow forests, they hope to enable the biodiverse and bountiful forest to continue to host many species of herbal medicines, food plants and wild animals while ensuring their sustainable management for generation after generation.

According to a study published in the journal *Frontier in Ecology and the Environment*, Indigenous Peoples either manage or own more than one-third (36%) of the world's remaining pristine forests². We believe that the intact forested lands inhabited by Indigenous Karen peoples of Kawthoolei³ are among these, though some of these richly biodiverse forests are considered farmlands, they play a critical and interdependent role in Karen daily lives and livelihoods. These forest resources and the forests themselves are an integral part of the Karens' traditional culture, spirituality and identity, this inseparably tied to Karen ancestral lands and forests. Forests are the supermarkets of their day to day subsistence economy and the pharmacy from which they obtain herbal medicinal plants for the community's health needs. They are also a source of forage and fodder for livestock, the producer of soil fertility for sustainable agriculture and a factory that produces materials needed for construction of houses, Blaw meeting halls, schools, clinics, religious buildings and other structures. Furthermore, the forest watersheds provide clean water for the community. More importantly, forests are the sanctuaries for Karen peoples in the long years of civil war and in their too frequent experiences of forced displacement.

While some areas of the forests remain healthy, there are still significant factors leading to ongoing deforestation, forestland degradation and biodiversity loss in Burma, including areas where Karen dwell under the governance of the Karen National Union (KNU). Among its responses to forest loss and degradation, the Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KFD) officially promoted the establishment of community forests to empower local communities in sustainable forest management and governance so they can conserve the forests around them. Through this grassroots and decentralized approach to environmental conservation and protection, the initiative helps increase community participation, strengthen the local community's sense of ownership over their lands, increase their natural resource management skills, educate and empower them in a meaningful and inclusive decision-making process for the future of their surrounding ecosystems, and fulfill their daily livelihoods needs. From the official establishment of the first community forest in 2004 up until the publication of this photo-essay book, 264 community forests have been established⁴ or are in the process of being established across all 7 districts of KNU administrative territories.

2 <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/01/Indigenous-lands-hold-36-or-more-of-remaining-intact-forest-landscapes/>

3 Karen areas are referred to KNU's governed territories of the seven (7) districts, such as Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton), Taw Oo (Taungoo), Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglaybin), Mergui-Tavoy (Tenesserim)

Mutraw (Papun), Dooplaya, Pa-An (Hpa-an) respectively

4 According to KESAN's database, 193 community forests have been certified by the KFD while 71 more CFs are in the application and approval process for CF certification



Making flattened bamboo stems (Pue Dah) to be used for house construction in Mutraw District.





Conducting a forest assessment in the Htee The Blu Community Forest

K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest

Paw Ghe Kee Village, Bilin Township,
Doo Tha Htoo District of Kawthoolei

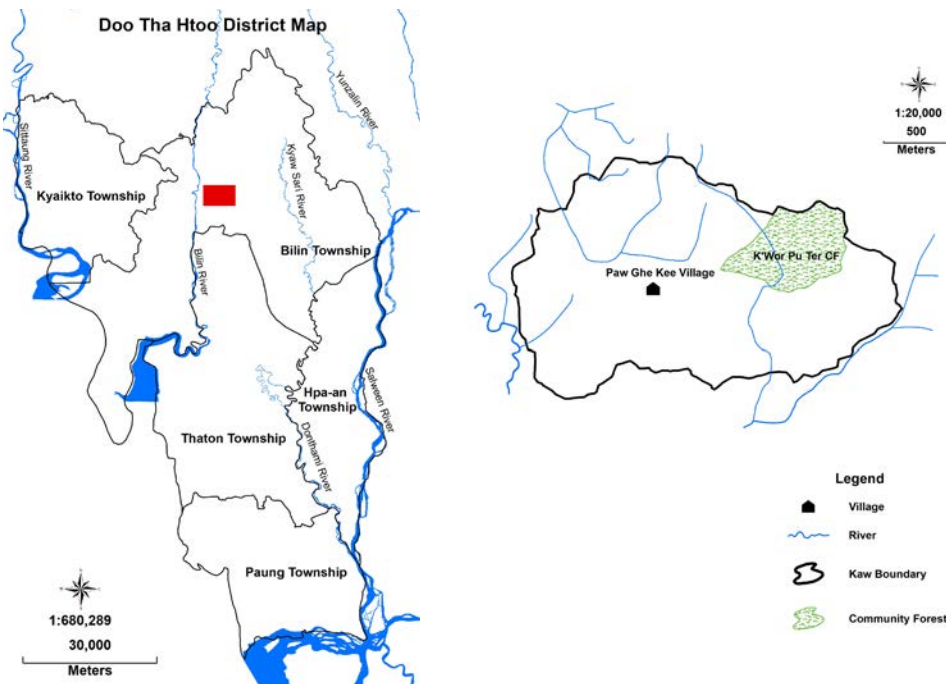
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Factsheet about K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest

- 1 Set aside as a community forest area in 2004
- 2 Covers 101.47 acres
- 3 Located in Paw Ghe Kee Kaw, Mae Naw Ther Kee Village Tract, Bilin Township of Doo Tha Htoo District
- 4 Achieved official certification from the Kawthoolei Forestry Department in 2014
- 5 Greatly improved forest cover and condition with increasing numbers of wildlife species and considerable regeneration of herbal medicinal plants
- 6 The CF is collaboratively managed and governed by the members of 26 Indigenous Karen households



A Primer on K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest

Established in 2004, K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest is the first CF in Kawthoolei. The community forest is collectively managed by the Indigenous Karen community of Paw Ghe Kee Village. K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest is categorized as a mixed deciduous forest and has a total geographical area of 101.47 acres. The main livelihood activities of the 26 households that collectively and collaboratively manage the forest are wetland paddy and orchard cultivation along with livestock rearing.

The community forest used to be fallow rotational farmland of those local people displaced by the civil war and the Burmese army's military offensives. At the time it had little wildlife and no tree canopy. However, now after more than a decade of forest management and conservation, the people of Paw Ghe Kee have witnessed considerable positive changes including increased tree canopy cover, the return of wildlife and orchids, and an increase in the amount of other non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The most remarkable of the tangible impacts resulting from the establishment of the community forest is the regrowth of medicinal plants vital to keeping community members healthy.

With the goal of maintaining good health while preserving and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge, skills and practices relating to herbal medicines, the community of Paw Ghe Kee set up a traditional medicine clinic. According to the resident herbalist, over 300 hundred people come annually for traditional treatment. In 2014 the Kawthoolei Forestry Department of the KNU officially certified K'Wor Pu Ter as a community forest after meeting all the relevant requirements. Geographically, Baw Kyoe Mountain and cliff are located to the north of the forest, Hpa Wa Hta Village is to the east, Khaw Htee Hta Village is to the west, and to its south is Noh Khae Hta Village.



A sketch map of the Kaw customary lands drawn up by the Paw Ghe Kee community.

Indigenous Karen people from the Paw Ghe Kee community actively assess the health and status of their community forest



K'wor Pu Ter Community Forest of Paw Ghe Kee Village

Paw Ghe Kee is an Indigenous community located in Mae Naw Ther Kee Village Tract, Bilin Township in Doo Tha Htoo District of Kawthoolei, Burma. According to local elders, the name of the village (Paw Ghe) literally means “the orchid originates” as there were an abundance of orchids growing in the heavily forested watershed areas near to the village. They say the village was established over 200 years ago. The local community’s main sources of livelihoods are Ku/rotational farming, wetland paddy farming, animal husbandry, orcharding, agroforestry and managing convenience stores. Their agroforest plantations and orchards are mostly combinations of crops such as sesame, betelnut (areca nut) palms, betel leaves, fan palms, rubber, pomelo, kaffir lime, elephant foot yam, coconut, tea and jengkol (dogfruit).

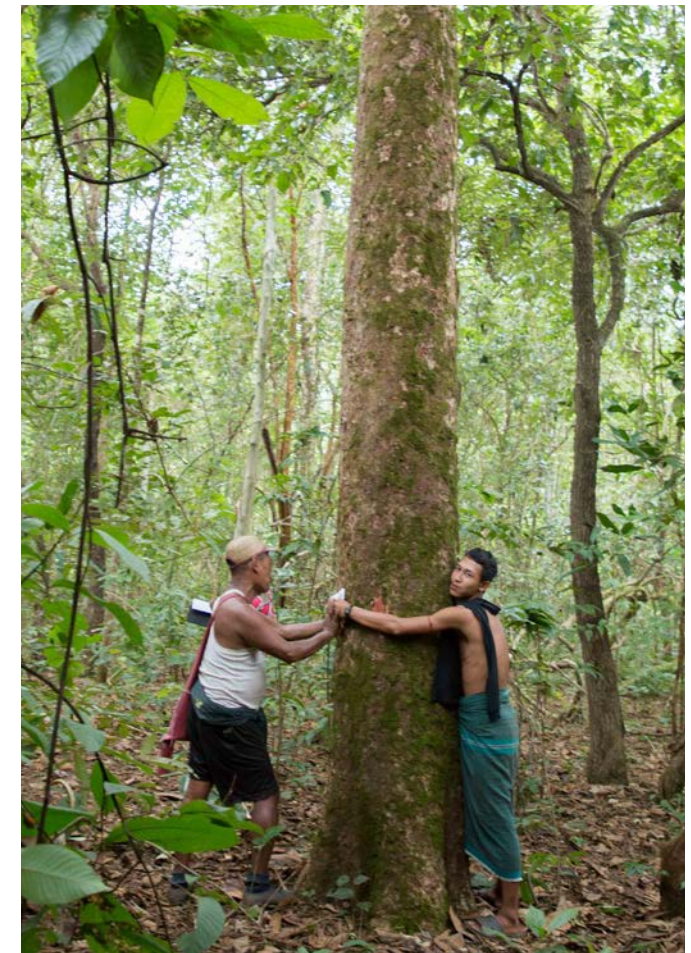
Before the Burmese army launched its notorious “Four Cuts” counter-insurgency campaign in 1977, the area around Paw Ghe Kee used to mostly be biodiversity-rich fallow forest in various stages of regeneration alongside dense and healthy primary forest ecosystem and biodiversity. Due to the Burmese military’s ferocious offensive against Indigenous Karen people rife with human rights violations, there was widespread forced displacement and deforestation. The Indigenous Karen community of Paw Ghe Kee is acutely aware from this difficult experience that effective

and sustainable natural resource management is vital to their livelihoods and way of life. They were determined to develop solutions that would heal the environmental damage done by desperate families trying to survive.

Faced with the problems of deforestation and in search of practical solutions, in early 2004 local community leaders and members mobilized, consulted, and worked together to establish a community forest which they named K’Wor Pu Ter Community Forest. The resulting community forest has a total coverage of 101.47 acres. Much of this land had once been cleared for cultivation by the displaced Karen peoples who had fled to the area and to grow survival crops during the Burmese military’s “Four Cuts” campaign in the late 1970’s but had returned to an advanced state of fallow land. Medicinal plants are a distinctly beneficial forest resource used by local communities since their ancestors’ times. As a result, they have developed the knowledge, skills, and practice needed to help treat their own as well as their neighboring communities’ ailments with herbal medicine. To preserve and revitalize the traditional knowledge of remedies, a traditional medicine clinic was set up in Paw Ghe Kee in 2006.

K’Wor Pu Ter Community Forest was granted an official certificate of recognition and registration by the Central Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KFD) in 2014. Testimonials given by local communities reveal that there has since been a return of more wildlife, an increase in forest canopy coverage, the

regeneration of over thirty various kinds of herbal medicinal plants, and the increasing abundance of NTFPs in the forest since the establishment of the Community Forest over a decade ago. These are all positive changes which the local Indigenous community of Paw Ghe Kee have witnessed and benefited from.



The community forest provides an abundant and sustainable source of firewood as a form of renewable energy for cooking and heating







Livestock rearing is one of the main livelihood activities of the Paw Ghe Kee communities



Students enjoying a bicycle ride after school in Paw Ghe Kee Village





An Indigenous Elder

At 83 years old, Pee Sein Myine (Grandma Sein Myine) is the oldest of the Paw Ghe Kee villagers and the only person able to clearly tell of the historical experiences of the community. Pee Sein Myine's mother Naw Thein Mya, her grandmother Naw Mi Aye, and her uncles built the first and, at the time, only house in the area that is currently known as Paw Ghe Kee. Her mother was just an adolescent at that time. According to Pee Sein Myine, it has been over 200 years since Paw Ghe Kee Village's first settlement. When her elders first inhabited this land there was an abundance of orchid vines in the dense forest watershed. The village gradually expanded after the relatives of Pee Sein Myine's mother and grandmother joined them in Paw Ghe Kee and had children of their own. When Japanese soldiers invaded Burma during World War 2, she and other family members were forced to flee for their lives and take refuge in the forest. At the time, they were overtaken with fear of the Japanese soldiers' brutality.



Pee Sein Myine sharing her experiences about the establishment and settlement of Paw Ghe Kee Village.



Animal husbandry is one of the main livelihood activities of local Indigenous communities.

The majority of local Indigenous inhabitants practice Buddhism as their main religion, but retain some animist beliefs



An unpaved road to the village enables outsiders to carry out trading activities with the village





Youth from the village pose for a photo before going to work in their paddy fields



A typical thatched house and orchard in Paw Ghe Kee



Naw Win Kyi, Herbalist, Paw Ghe Kee Village

The Herbalist

Naw Win Kyi is an experienced herbalist who provides treatment for local people at the community's traditional medicine clinic. She gained her knowledge and skills practicing traditional medicine and its remedies from her grandfather Pu U Tha Chit. She claims to treat over 300 patients every year for various ailments, and cumulatively she has provided more than 3,000 treatments for her patients over the 10 years since the clinic was established. According to her, common as well as serious illnesses under her treatment include epilepsy, rabies, gastrointestinal disorders and diarrhea, mental illnesses, paralysis, acrohypothermy, diabetes, wound and cuts, abscesses, low blood pressure, migraine headaches, and a range of women's diseases. The majority of patients of the Paw Ghe Kee traditional medicine clinic can't afford the high costs and fees associated with traveling to be treated at hospitals or private clinics in town. Having a strong faith in Buddhism, Naw Win Kyi said that whenever she successfully heals a patient, she feels like building a pagoda. She claims that most of the herbs and medicinal plants are collected from the K'Wor Pu Ter community forest tract. Aside from conducting traditional medicine treatment, Naw Win Kyi is also actively involved in the conservation of the community forest, in social work and in community health related matters in Paw Ghe Kee Village.

Naw Win Kyi's hope is for her seven children to follow in her footsteps to continue her traditional medicine practice. However, her sons have married and live with their own families far away. The daughter who lives with her is currently the only practitioner of her special and unique traditional treatment. Naw Win Kyi asserted that, *"I don't want to see the loss of this knowledge and these practices that in my lifetime I acquired from my grandfather. Thus, I'm obliged to pass them on to future generations"*.

Naw Win Kyi tells of a middle-aged man from a mountainous village who was bitten by a green snake. “Before coming to see me, he had gone to see a doctor in the city, but after learning that he would be charged one million Kyat⁵ for the treatment as well as being informed that his leg would be amputated, he decided not to continue with that course of treatment. He was advised to instead try traditional remedies. He came to see me for the treatment with a terribly swollen leg from the bite. I had to extract the toxin from the dirty abscess, clean the wound and apply herbal medicines. After attending his wound for two months at the clinic, his leg was successfully healed, and he was able to work on his farm again”. For the Karen of Paw Ghe Kee, the K’Wor Pu Ter Community Forest is an invaluable pharmaceutical resource where we can collect and harvest a variety of medicinal plants to cure our ills.



⁵ Kyat is Myanmar currency





Local Indigenous people participate in forest monitoring and assessment in K'wor Pu Ter Community Forest



Land Tenure Security

Systems of governance and management of customary land tenure called “Kaw” have been practiced by Indigenous Karen communities in Kawthoolei for many generations. The customary land collectively managed by the Indigenous Karen of Paw Ghe Kee is known as “Paw Ghe Kee Kaw” and encompasses a total of 931 acres. The different types of customary land use in this area include wetland paddy, Ku/rotational farming, agroforestry orchards, community forest and watershed conservation, religious and sacred grounds, public lands such as clinics and schools, burial grounds, and residential areas. The tenure rights of the community are recognized as socially legitimate and are protected by the Karen National Union (KNU), though not by the central Burmese regime.

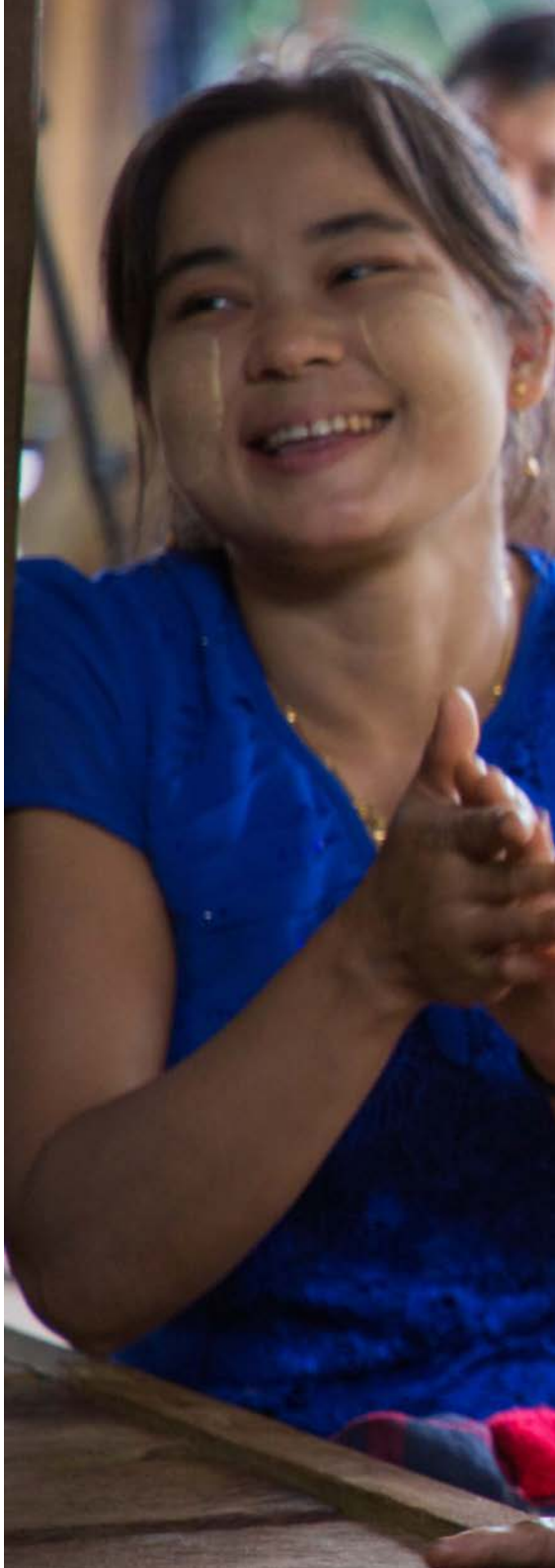
A villager who is a farmer and rights holder in the Paw Ghe Kee Kaw shows her land tenure certificate issued by the Kawthoolei Agriculture Department of the KNU.



Indigenous Karen peoples in Paw Ghe Kee Kaw are checking their land tenure certificates issued by the Kawthoolei Agriculture Department of KNU



Community members receive land tenure certificates from a KNU official







Participants in a workshop for confirming customary Kaw land boundaries





Community members give their free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) during a forest monitoring and assessment session for the K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest

A graphic representation of the Paw Ghe Kee community's seasonal calendar





Local people take part in forest monitoring and assessment for the K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest



Identifying and recording herbal medicines in the K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest



Indigenous foresters often use modern technology such as GPS to monitor and assess their forests



When establishing the K'wor Pu Ter Community Forest in 2004, community members had to assess the forest conditions and define the community forest boundaries (photo by KESAN)



The Paw Ghe Kee community and Kawthoolei Forestry Department officials collaborate in monitoring the K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest in 2019



Documentation and consultation during the assessment of the K'Wor Pu Ter Community Forest







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Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest

Lae Kee Village, Luthaw Township,
Mutraw District of Kawthoolei



View of Thawthi Kho⁶ and the stunning mountain ranges

⁶ *Kho* (ခိတ်) is the Karen term for mountain peak

A Primer on the Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest

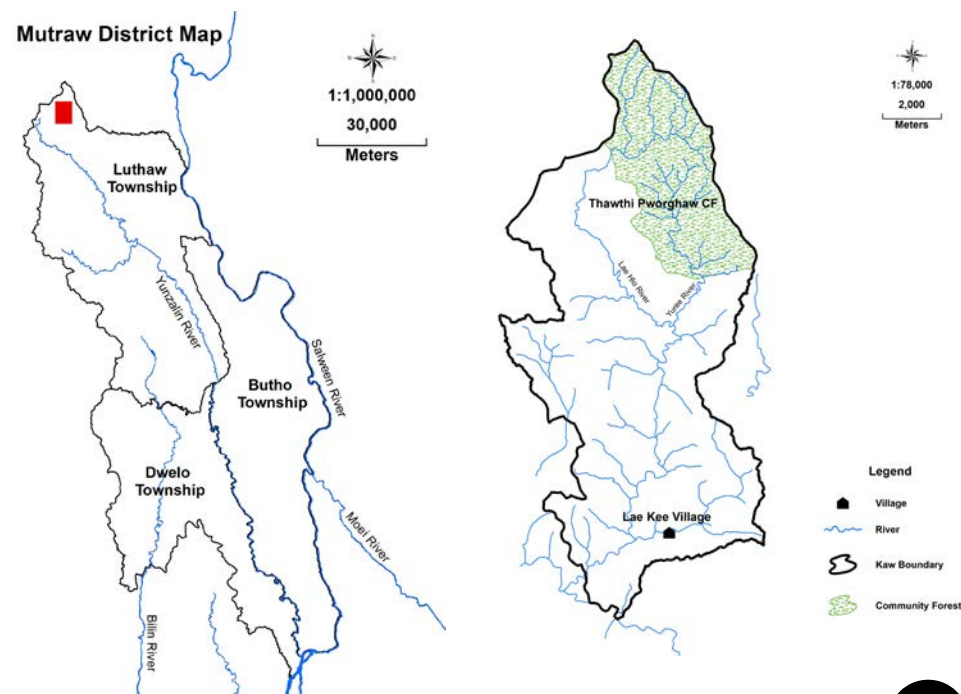
Established in 2011, the Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest is located in the Kaw ancestral lands of Lae Kee Village in the Salween Peace Park that encompasses most of Mutraw District of Kawthoolei. Historically, Lae Kee Kaw was named after Saw Lae Mu Der, the original settler of what is now the Lae Kee Kaw. The Lae Kee Kaw covers over twenty thousand acres and is collectively governed by 37 households. Historical accounts reveal that Lae Kee Kaw has been inhabited for ten generations after it was first settled. Local Indigenous communities' sources of livelihoods include wetland farming, Ku/rotational farming, and animal husbandry.

Initially, the community forest was collaboratively established by three local Indigenous communities—Lae Kee, Hsi Day, and Khu Ghaw—and was named Thawthi Community Forest. However, in 2016⁷, the name of the community forest was formally changed to Thawthi Pworghaw since its forest landscape also includes Pworghaw Mountain, which is sacred for local people. The community forest now directly managed by Lae Kee Indigenous community covers 5,466 acres and secured its CF registration certificate from central KFD in 2016.

Many years before the establishment of the community forest, the local area underwent severe deforestation and forest degradation as a result of military offensives led by the Burma Army. This was complemented by sporadic forest fires started the Burma Army, and the forced displacement of the local villagers. The local Indigenous communities' ultimate goals are to protect the legendary and sacred Pworghaw Kho and Thawthi Kho and preserve their ancestral lands.

Factsheet about Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest

- 1 The Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest was established in 2011 by local Indigenous communities
- 2 The CF covers an area of 5,466 acres in total
- 3 Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest is located in Lae Kee Kaw, Kay Pu Village Tract, Luthaw Township, Mutraw District
- 4 The Community Forest received an official CF certificate from the Central KFD in 2016.
- 5 The legendary and sacred Thawthi and Pworghaw mountains are well protected and preserved in the CF.
- 6 Since the CF's establishment, the populations of endangered wildlife species found in the forest have increased significantly
- 7 The CF is collectively protected and managed by 37 households of local Indigenous communities



7 Moo. SSB, 2016. Khesorter, Thawthee Pworghaw Wildlife Survey, Karen State, Burma



Wooden placards put up by local foresters, surveyors, and students during their field visit to Thawthi Pworghaw CF



Local Lae Kee villagers and KFD officers conduct forest monitoring in Thawthi Pworghaw CF



Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest, Lae Kee Village, Luthaw Township, Mutraw District





An aerial view of Lae Kee Village, Luthaw Township, Mutraw District of Kawthoolei









Saw Mae Meh, Chairperson of Thawthi Pworghaw
Community Forest's Committee

Testimonial

“By creating this community forest, we aim to protect available water resources and improve the forest’s condition, while stabilizing the climate, and enhancing the sustainability of natural resources for future generations.”

“After eight years of community forest management, we’ve observed many positive changes. These include improved access to water resources, increased climate stability, and growing numbers of wildlife in the forest. This has been evidenced by growing sightings of wild boars, gaurs, hoolock gibbons, and Indochinese leopards. We’ve even observed tiger footprints too.”

“We have observed traditional keystone species such as hoolock gibbons, tigers, gaurs, damar deer, muntjac, serow, wild boar, monkeys, bears, dholes, Phayre’s leaf monkeys, giant black squirrels, rufous-throated partridges, bar-backed partridges, silver pheasants, jungle fowl and many others. We have either physically seen these animals or found considerable evidence for their existence such as signs of foraging/hunting, footprints, and wallows. As gaur and hoolock gibbon are traditionally protected animals, we were prohibited from hunting them by our ancestors. Our ancestors told us the hoolock gibbon’s call is so piercing that it could empty the surrounding forests and banyan trees. It is said that those who hear the call of the hoolock gibbon are often struck by a profound sense of loneliness. When we were forcibly displaced [in the war], the hoolock gibbon’s calls helped conceal cries of our children from the Burma Army. Hoolock gibbons have a special cultural significance for the Karen people because they don’t eat our paddy rice and also have difficult pregnancies. Because of this, it is said that any man who kills a gibbon will cause his wife to have a difficult birth”.



Indigenous Karen people in Lae Kee Kaw



A variety of tubers, vegetables, and spices harvested from Ku rotational farm

Traditional Sources of Food

Fermented cucumber is a staple food for the Indigenous Karen community in Lae Kee Kaw. Naturally sun-dried cucumber can be preserved for the entire season, but fermented cucumber spoils after three months. Any type of cucumber planted on Ku/rotational farms can be pickled. The procedure for preparing fermented cucumber includes harvesting cucumber from the farms, washing it, cutting it into two pieces, extracting its seeds, spiralizing the cucumber, and finally drying the spiral cucumber under the sun. The dried spiral cucumber is washed again before being stored in a Maw bamboo container. After preserving in the storage for two to three days, it turns into a fermented cucumber. Using this natural process, cucumber fermentation has been practiced since our ancestors' time.









The Lore of Thawthi Kho and Pworghaw Kho (Cultural Sacred Mountains)

Thawthi Kho and Pworghaw Kho are renowned sacred mountains situated in Lae Kee, in Indigenous Karen people's ancestral lands. Geographically, the face of Thawthi Kho overlooks Mutraw District while the ridge of the mountain stretches into Karenni State. The neighboring communities around Thawthi Kho include Pwa Doh Village to the east, Lae Kee Village to the west, Hee Daw Khaw Village to the north, and P' Khoe Village to the south. According to Lae Kee elders, Thawthi Kho is the sacred birthplace for, and the home of, many mythical beings and nature spirits. According to legend, Karen people originally came from this mountain as well. Spiritually, Indigenous Karen communities in Lae Kee believe that the deceased who led a decent and honest life on Earth will return to Thawthi Kho to have a peaceful and happy afterlife. In contrast, Pworghaw Kho is regarded as a place for death, evil people, and those who have led a dishonest life during their time on Earth.

Indigenous local elders explain that the reddish surface on the northern and southern sides of the mountain indicate that communities farming there will have the fertile soil needed for productive crops. Traditional taboos around the mountain forbid the slaughtering of animals

with blood and the drinking of alcohol. This prevents the performance of various ceremonial rituals. Wherever Indigenous Karen Animists live, they will always mention Thawthi Pworghaw Mountain in their chants and prayers whenever they perform ceremonial rituals. Description of forests, mountains, hills, rivers, and wildlife in traditional folktales define Indigenous Karen's intimate connection with, and genuine respect for, nature.

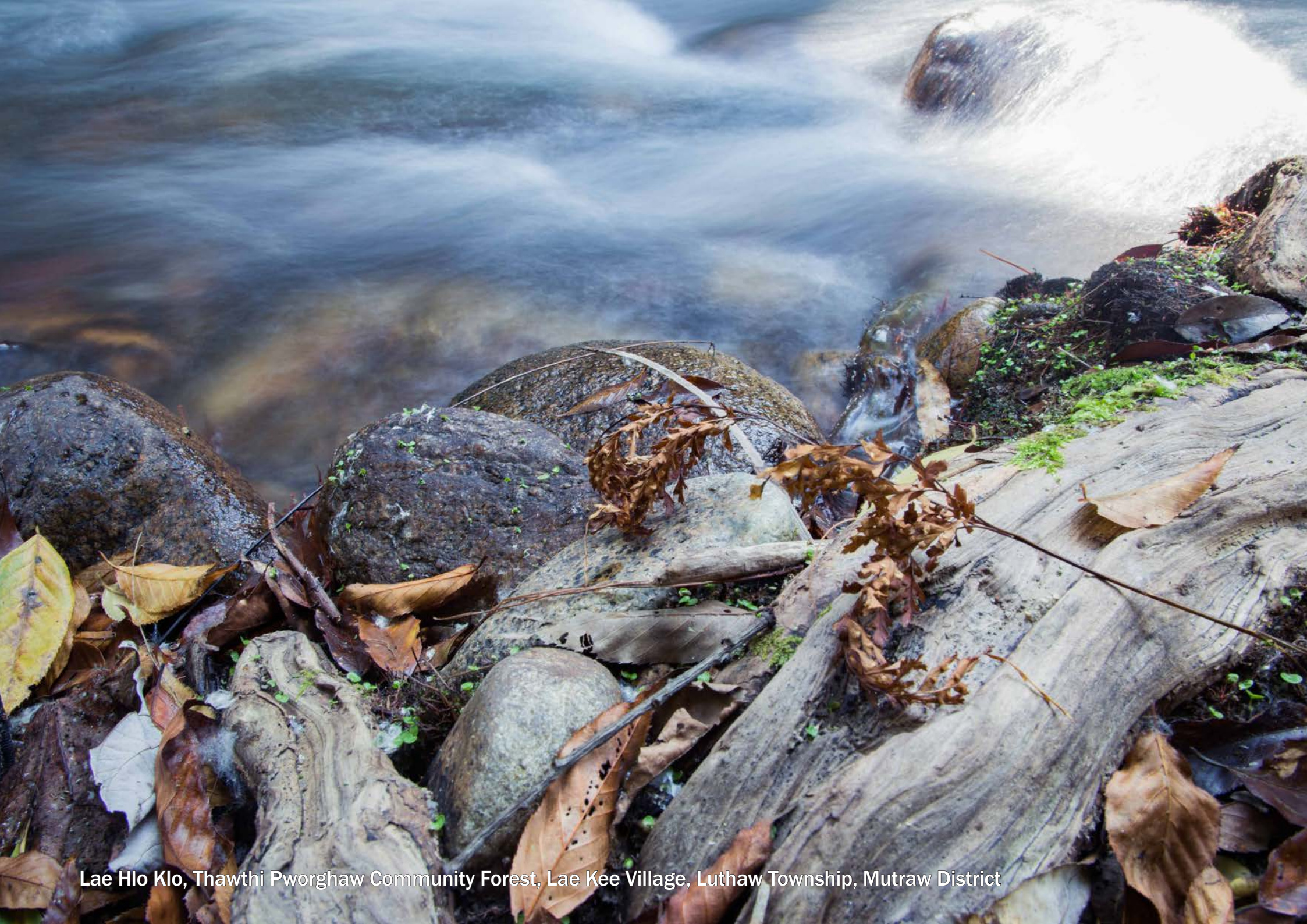
Thawthi Kho has an altitude of 7,592.52 ft (measured using GIS) above sea level and is recognized as the highest mountain in Kawthoolei. It is the origin for more than ten watershed basins. It is the watershed for three major rivers, including Ler Hay Hlo Klo⁸, Lae Hlo Klo, and K'Bu Hlo Klo. Several rivers that flow into Karenni State originate from Thawthi Pworghaw Mountain as well. These are Hser Hlo Klo and Hpae Hlo Klo, and Khoe Hlo Klo and Klee Hlo Klo that watershed catchments are originated from Pworghaw Kho are flowing toward Taw Oo District of Kawthoolei.

It is also said that Thawthi Kho is the birthplace of our Karen legends such as Pu (Grandfather) Maw Taw, Pu K'Ter, and Pu Htoe Mae Pa. Pu K'Ter dug a hole with a spear and left a spear mark on the mountain afterwards. As a result, black bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*) plantations still exist on

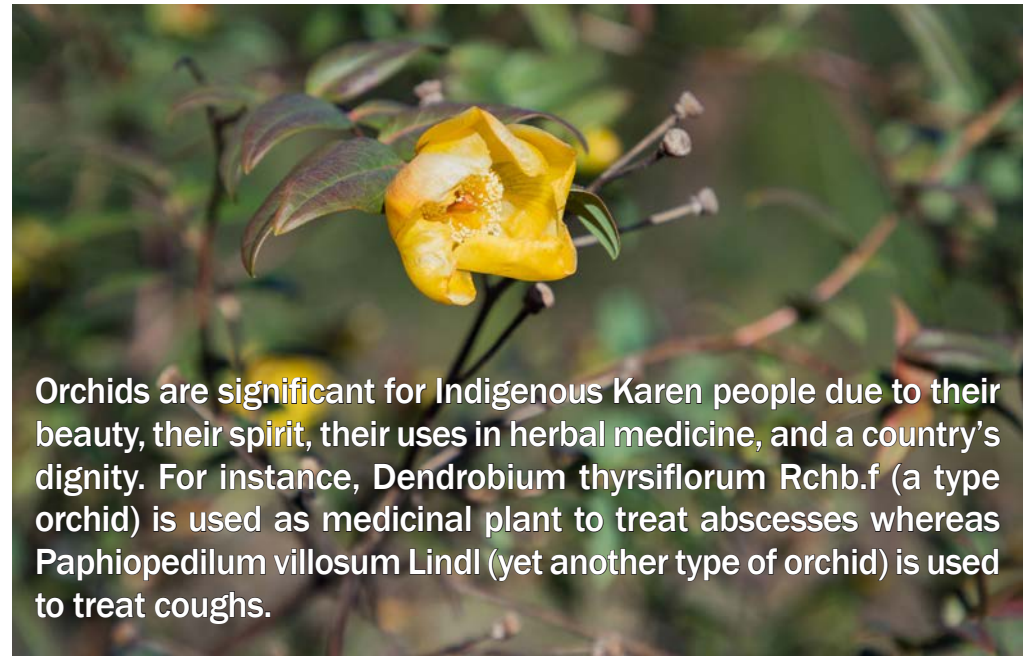
Thawthi Mountain. In the past, though visitors to the mountain could often hear the sounds of villagers pounding rice, roosters crowing, and children playing, they often couldn't find villages nearby. To this day, eggplant and onion naturally grow on the mountain. Despite its 7,592.52 ft. altitude, there also used to be a pool fountain on the peak of the mountain. Red and yellow *Kaempferia* herbal plants (a type of aromatic ginger) which are traditionally believed to possess hidden powers also used to grow on Thawthi Kho. Additionally, you are prohibited from taking orchids from Thawthi Kho home. If one violates these traditional taboos, one would get lost in the forest during their travels home.

Local communities also say that a flock of black stork (*Ciconia nigra*) return every year to Thawthi Kho for tax payment. They collect fisheyes from the sea, spiraling around the mountains' bases before reaching the peak of sacred Thawthi Kho and paying their tax in the form of fisheyes. After paying their dues and performing other ritual ceremonies, this flock of black stork then flies back to their natural habitat.

⁸ Klo (ꨀꨂ) is the Karen term for river



Lae Hlo Klo, Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest, Lae Kee Village, Luthaw Township, Mutraw District



Orchids are significant for Indigenous Karen people due to their beauty, their spirit, their uses in herbal medicine, and a country's dignity. For instance, *Dendrobium thyrsoiflorum* Rchb.f (a type orchid) is used as medicinal plant to treat abscesses whereas *Paphiopedilum villosum* Lindl (yet another type of orchid) is used to treat coughs.



**Paw Kha (*Lomatogonium carinthiacum*
(Wulf.) Reichb.)**

Paw Kha is an Indigenous medicine flower which only grows in Thawthi Mountain. Paw Kha can be used in prevention and treatment. It is, for instance, used to treat include fever, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and body aches. In line with their traditional practices, villagers must conduct annual controlled burnings of the forest in order for the seeds of Paw Kha to spread and germinate in the surrounding areas.



***Hta* about a Nature Spirits' pool on Thawthi Kho**

သီသံဉ်ခိဉ်ကွံအိဉ်တကွံ, မုာ်ပါမုာ်လီၤလိာ်ကွံထံ

Thawthi Kho Kwee Oh Ter Kwee, Mu Kha Mu Lor Loe Kweh Htee

သီသံဉ်ခိဉ်ကွံအိဉ်တခါ, မုာ်ပါဘုဉ်တညဉ်ဆဉ်ဝါ

Thawthi Kho Kwee Oh T'Kar, Mu Kha Bu Der Nya Hsa Wa

သီသံဉ်ညဉ်ပုၤထီဉ်တတုၤ, တုၤညဉ်ဖာဘိညဉ်ဖာသူ

Thawthi Nya Pla Htaw T'tu, Tu Nya Per Baw Nya Per Thoo

There was a pool on sacred Thawthi Kho where a nature spirit (*Mu Kha*) was playing in a water pool, breeding Nya Hsa Wa (hampala barb). Even though *Nya Pla* (*neolissochilus* sp., a type of fish) can't reach Thawthi Kho due to its high altitude, Siamese bat catfish and *Oreoglanis macroptera* (another type of fish) can make it there.

A Nature Spirits' Pool on the Sacred Thawthi Kho

Before the British set up its military camp on sacred Thawthi Kho during the Second World War, the mountain had a nature spirits' pool in which nature spirits bred hampala barb. Local Indigenous elders who visited the pool even made a poem about it, entitled “*Thawthi Kho Htee Oh T'kar, Mu Kha Bu Der Nya Hsa Wa*”.

There was a traditional taboo that prohibited the carrying of deadly or destructive weapons on Thawthi Kho. Other ethnicities who didn't belong to this Mountain were also forbidden from using the mountain. However, the establishment of a British military encampment during the Second World War on the slopes of Thawthi Kho negatively affected the sacred mountain's habitat. According to legend, this intrusion by the British eventually forced the nature spirits and other mythical beings to migrate elsewhere.

It was on 31st of January 1945 when the British established a military base on Thawthi Kho. A military hospital, arsenal, food rations, and military training fields for new Karen conscripts were constructed on Thawthi Kho. Trenches as well as landmine fields were set up around their military camp. The military encampment of the British troops in Thawthi Kho lasted for seven months during World War Two. Local elders claim that the British troops believed that there was valuable treasure in the nature spirit's pool and therefore detonated it. Afterwards, water in the pool dried up and the hampala barb fish that had grown before were killed and, eventually, permanently lost. On August 7, 1945, the Japanese empire troops who bypassed Lae Kee Kaw made a military move to attack the British troops and take over their fortress on Thawthi Kho. After a week-long intense and hostile battle between the British and Japanese troops, the Japanese troops declared their unconditional surrender on August 14, 1945 and withdrew.



The leftover military equipment from the British troops on Thawthi Kho



A spectacular view of the sacred Thawthi Kho and the surrounding nature





A prayer house on sacred Thawthi Kho





Community forest security personnel and Kawthoolei Forestry Department officers conducting forest assessment in Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest



1. Indochinese leopard



3. Dhole



2. Gaur



4. Asian black bear



Indigenous Karen and Biodiversity

Biodiversity is the most critical component of the sustainability and integrity of the natural ecosystem. The clean air that we breathe, uncontaminated water that we drink, and fertile soil that feed us and sustain our survival on this Earth are the result of the well-being of the natural ecosystem. However, this biodiversity which has proven so important for our collective well-being is declining at an unprecedented rate. Anthropogenic activities such as deforestation, natural resource extraction, commercial agriculture, hydroelectric dam-building, superhighway construction, and urban expansion have wrought irrevocable damage upon the natural habitats of wildlife.

Traditionally, Indigenous Karen peoples have played an instrumental role in effective wildlife conservation. For instance, years after the Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest was put in place, local communities have reported the return of several wildlife species, some of which fall under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List categories and criteria for Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), and Vulnerable (VU) species. Protection and conservation of biodiversity, wildlife, and the natural habitats of animals isn't just important for the sustainable livelihoods and biocultural system of Indigenous Karen people. The decentralized community-led conservation of Karen peoples significantly contributes to the accomplishment of a number of global targets, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #15 in particular is prominent amongst these.

1. The Indochinese leopard is categorized as a critically endangered (CR) species according to the IUCN Red List. It can be found in Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest.
2. Gaur is known as a vulnerable (VU) species according to IUCN Red List. It can be found in Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest.
3. The Dhole is categorized by IUCN Red List as endangered (EN) species. It is also found in Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest.
4. According to IUCN Red List, Asian black bear is categorized as vulnerable (VU). You can find this species in Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest.

(Photo Courtesy: Karen Wildlife Conservation Initiative (KWCI) and Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KFD))

1. Chinese Serow footprint



2. Indochinese leopard feces



3. Wild boar footprint at a wild boar wallow site





Ler Hay Hlo Klo, Thawthi Pworghaw Community Forest









A dense tropical forest with many trees and vines. The scene is filled with green foliage and thick, brown tree trunks. Some vines with small thorns are visible in the foreground.

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Htee The Blu Community Forest

Htee The Blu Village, Noh T'Kaw Township,
Dooplaya District of Kawthoolei



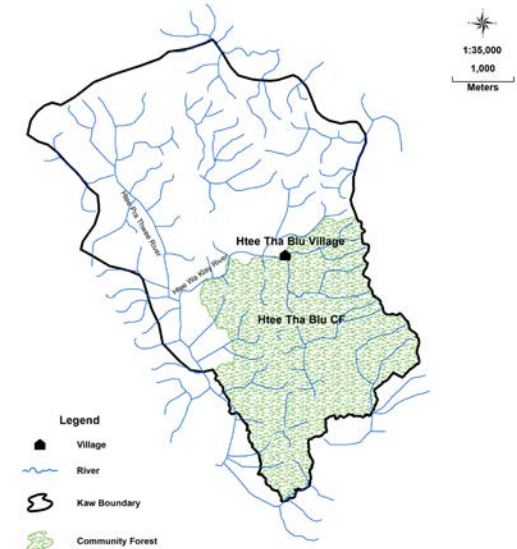
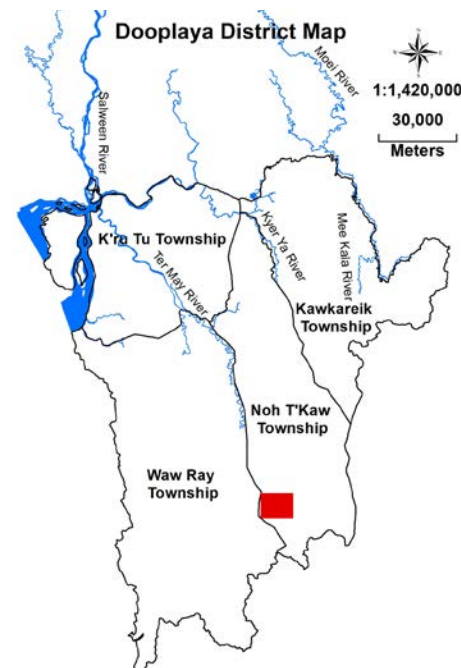
A Primer on Htee The Blu Community Forest

Htee The Blu Community Forest is located in Htee The Blu Village, Megatha Village Tract, Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District of Kawthoolei, Burma. Htee The Blu forest is a mixed deciduous forest that used to be heavily dense, pristine forest. Nevertheless, in the late 1980s, the forest was aggressively logged due to a series of commercial concessions. Negative impacts of deforestation and forest degradation included increased water scarcity and other social and livelihood problems for the local community. To overcome the social and ecological problems that resulted from deforestation and forest degradation in their territory, local Indigenous community members started to mobilize themselves in order to help protect and conserve the remaining forest areas in 2005.

Htee The Blu Community Forest, which has a total territorial coverage of 2,199.4 acres, is collectively managed and conserved by 27 households. Htee The Blu Indigenous community received their CF certificate from the central Kawthoolei Forestry Department of the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2012. Geographically, to the east of Htee The Blu CF is Lay Ta Ghaw Village, to its west is Lay Wa Ploe Village, Htee Saw Mi Mountain is located in the north and The Ba Wa village is located in the south.

Factsheet about Htee The Blu Community Forest

- 1 Established in 2005 by local Indigenous community.
- 2 Land coverage of the CF area is 2,199.4 acres.
- 3 Located in Htee The Blu Village, Megatha Village Tract, Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District.
- 4 Received an official CF certificate from the Central KFD in 2012.
- 5 Benefits of the CF are the restoration and improvement of watershed areas and forest conditions.
- 6 The CF is collectively protected and managed by 27 Indigenous Karen households.





A stunning view of forests and mountains surrounding Htee The Blu Village



The Community Assembly Hall in Htee The Blu Village

Htee The Blu Village and Community Forest

Htee Tha Blu Village, which is also known as Lay Pla Soe, is a small Indigenous Karen community situated in Megatha Village Tract, Noe T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District of Kawthoolei, Burma. The main sources of livelihoods for the 27 households of Htee The Blu Indigenous community’s include Ku/rotational farming, orchard plantations, animal husbandry, small convenience shop management, and the sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as jengkol (dogfruit), thatch, and palm leaves.

Local Indigenous communities from Htee The Blu experienced a series of Burma Army offensives that forced them to flee from their homeland. This was accompanied by large-scale logging concessions to Thai commercial logging companies in the Htee The Blu Forest area which caused massive deforestation.

In 1997, there was a military offensive launched by the Burma Army in Dooplaya District that caused massive displacement of Karen Indigenous People. In the years

between 2001 and 2005, only a few years after the Burma Army’s military operations, international as well as domestic logging companies undertook large-scale commercial logging in Htee Tha Blu area.

Water is one of the greatest resources for Htee The Blu Indigenous community. To sustainably manage and restore forest watershed areas, Htee The Blu Indigenous community mobilized in support of the conservation of their forests, eventually working together to establish their own community forest in 2005. According to Saw Law Eh, Chairperson of Htee The Blu Community Forest’s Committee, for community members, one of their main goals when establishing the community forest was, “to improve the quality of water storage and the availability of water resources so that local communities wouldn’t have to experience water shortages that seriously impacted their daily use of water and their sustainable livelihoods”. Additionally, the restoration of forests and the protection of wildlife and their natural habitats are important reasons as to why community members have established the community forest.

As Saw Law Eh continues, “though the term community forest would be brand new for us, we are passionate about protecting our forests to the best of our knowledge and abilities. We’ve received capacity building training for forest management and eventually obtained an official CF certificate from the central Kawthoolei Forestry Department of the KNU in 2012. Forest conservation has wrought multiple benefits for our local community. For instance, we currently have 10 streams in our village. The watershed basins of the five of the ten streams originated in our forest. These include Htee The Blu Klo, Htee Nya Lee Klo, Htee Ler Klay Klo, Naw Thi Na Klo, and Lay T’Plah Klo.”







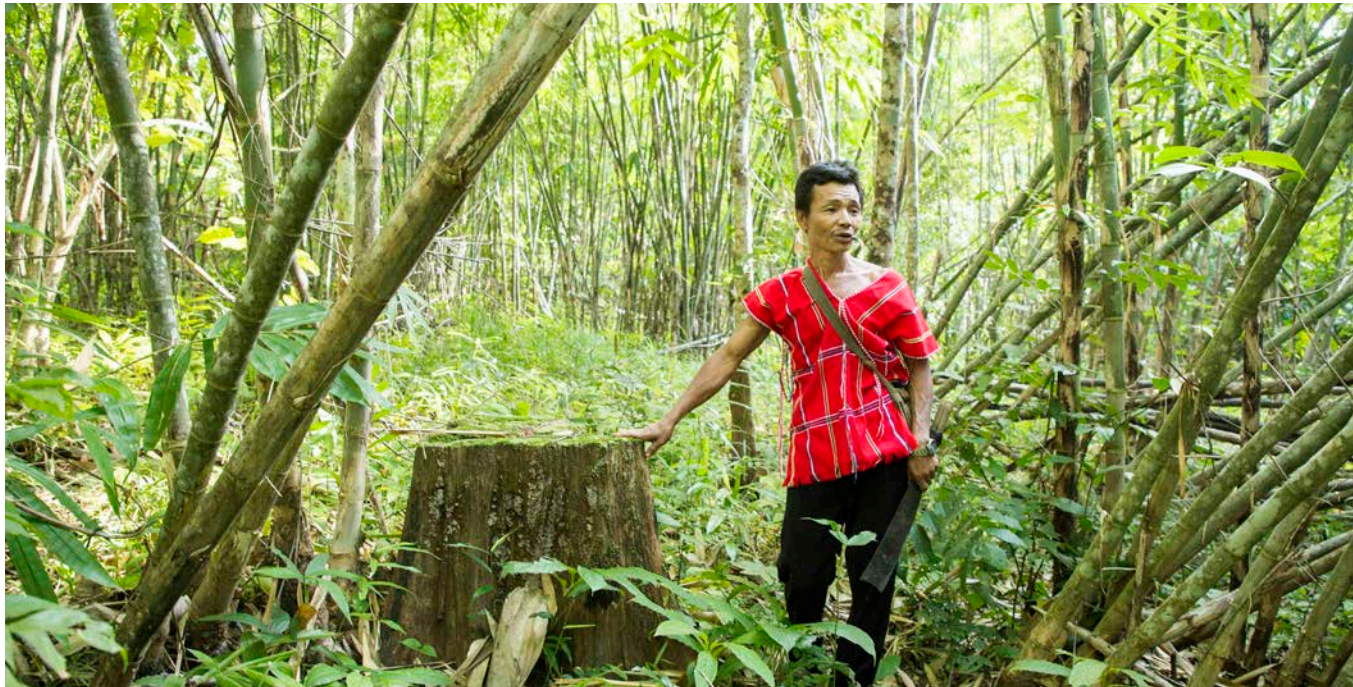
Traditional livelihoods of the Htee The Blu Indigenous community



Indigenous woman in Htee Tha Blu Village tending her betelnut nursery







Battlefield, Commercial Logging, and Deforestation

Before the 1988 and 1997 Burma Army's military offensives and commercial loggings, Htee The Blu forest used to be an old-growth forest full of pristine biodiversity and ecological values. The protracted civil war has displaced hundreds of thousands of Karen civilians. According to Saw Law Eh, after the war, the Burmese military regime granted logging concessions to Thai companies for large-scale timber extraction in Htee The Blu forestland which resulted in massive deforestation and forest degradation. Between 2001 and 2005 domestic logging companies carried out more large-scale commercial logging in Htee The Blu forest. For many community members, the severe environmental and social problems that the Htee The Blu Indigenous community have experienced from deforestation has been unbearable.



The remaining tree stumps in Htee The Blu forest after commercial logging carried out by logging companies in the last three decades.



Local Indigenous peoples participated in forest monitoring and biodiversity assessments in their community forest, Htee Tha Blu village







The Forest of Hope

Despite the fact that civil war and deforestation has negatively impacted every aspect of the lives of Htee The Blu Indigenous community, they are resilient and hopeful. The restoration of their forests and degraded land is their ultimate goal. Intercommunal disputes caused by hunting and tree girdling frequently occurred during the initial stages of the establishment of the CF because of unclear boundary markings and the lack of available information.

According to Saw Law Eh, “when the CF was initially established, we endured lots of negative criticism from the neighboring communities because they weren’t aware of our work in forest conservation. We even experienced a death threat. Since our forest was officially certified and our leaders have begun to support our project, there have been no more intimidating threats”.

The community forest initiative was started in 2005 by local Indigenous peoples of Htee The Blu. In 2008, we received capacity building training and technical support from the Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KNU) and Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) in strengthening and advancing our forest protection and conservation activities. Currently, we have 27 households. Through this community

forest, we hope to restore and improve the quality of the forest, improve the quantity as well as quality of water resources for our daily use and livelihoods, protect and create a sanctuary for wildlife animals so they won't become extinct, and manage and preserve natural resources in a systematic and sustainable manner for our present and future generations.

Naw Nan Yi, another Htee The Blu Community Forest Committee member stresses that “the alarming rate of deforestation happening in other communities is the key motive for us to protect and conserve our forests and natural resources for the sake of our children and grandchildren in the future”.

Htee The Blu Community Forest received a CF certificate from the Central KFD in 2012 and has a geographical coverage of 2,199.4 acres. Saw Tha Wah, one of KESAN's staff in Dooplaya District who supports Indigenous communities in community forest activities, expressed that, “the local community will face a number of challenges in the future unless the community forest is officially established and registered with a central KNU certificate”. KFD's leaders from Dooplaya District further asserted that commercial logging concessions can't be granted in Htee The Blu Community Forest because it was officially registered and

certified by Central KFD. Local Indigenous communities are urged to comply with and help realize the fourteen CF rules of the KFD. After over a decade of work in forest restoration, Htee The Blu Community Forest now has 68 different tree species, 14 bamboo species, 49 herbal medicinal plants, 16 orchid species, 42 wildlife species (birds, mammals, reptiles), and plenty of edible vegetables, ferns, and tubers. Strong collaborative partnerships between the local Indigenous community and the KFD are key to conflict resolution. Due to the local Indigenous community's enthusiasm and passion for forest and natural resources management and conservation and their strong leadership, they have been able to continue to benefit from their community forest.



Testimonial

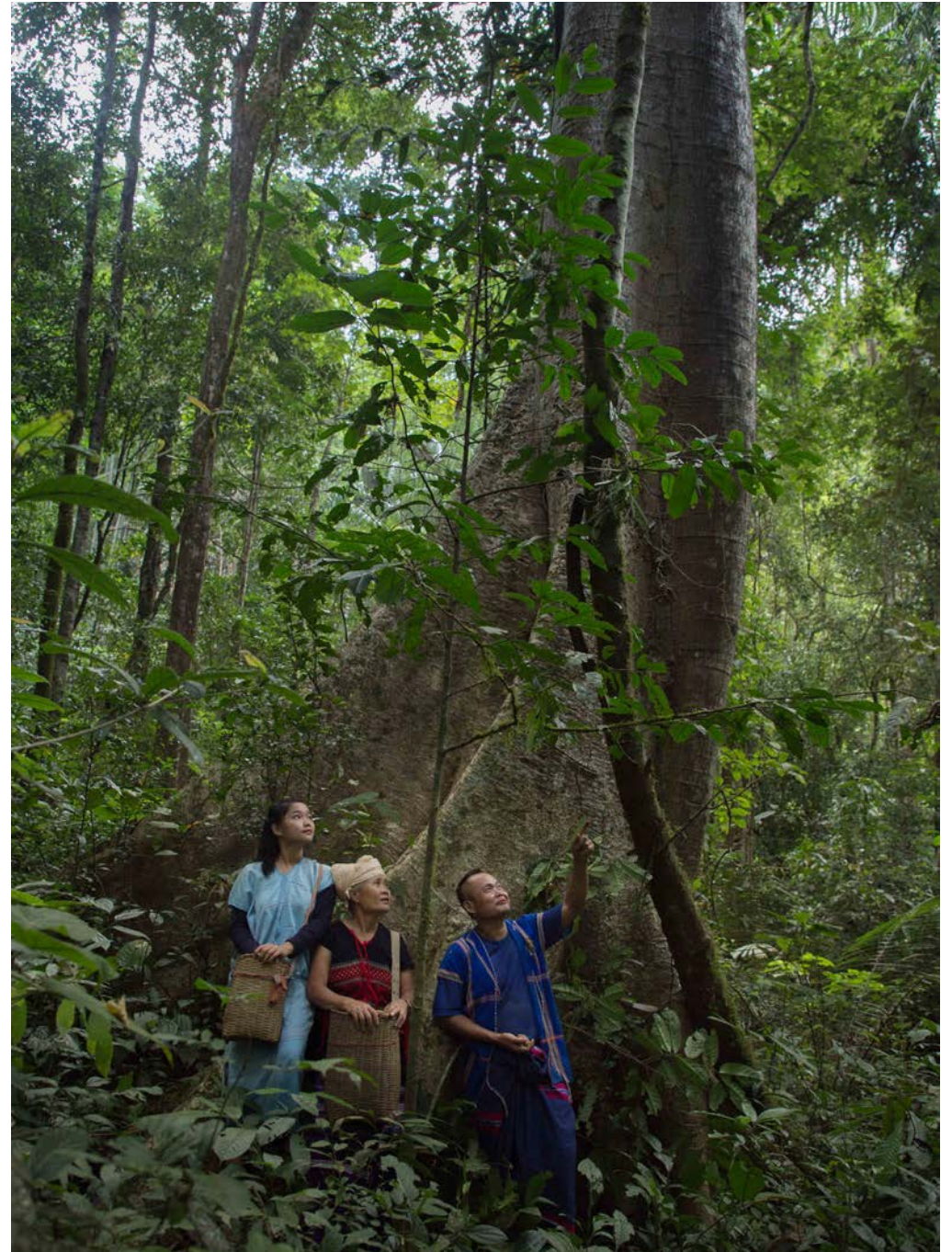
“The most important benefits gained from the 15 years of forest restoration and conservation is water storage. Improvement in the water quality, forest conditions, and soil fertility have contributed to the local community’s sustainable livelihoods. Local peoples are able to collect edible vegetables and tubers, fish, and frogs in the forest and use them in accordance with the community forest’s rules and regulations”.



Saw Law Eh, Chairperson of Htee The Blu Community Forest's Committee









A boy from the village drying rice paddy, Htee The Blu Village





The Indigenous community in Paw Ghe Kee Kaw, Bilin Township of Doo Tha Htoo District





Local Indigenous peoples during forest monitoring and biodiversity assessments in their community forest, Htee Tha Blu village

Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

KESAN is a community-based, non-governmental, non-profit organization that works to improve livelihood security and to gain respect for Indigenous people's knowledge and rights in Karen State of Burma, where the violence and inequities of more than 70 years of civil war have created one of the most impoverished regions in the world. Realization of KESAN's vision is based empowering community, securing the peace, protecting environment, lands and livelihoods.

Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KFD)

The KFD, the Forestry Department of the Karen National Union (founded in 1947), is a democratic political organisation, seeking equality and self-determination, human rights, democracy and equality in a Federal Union of Burma. KFD's mission is to play the leadership role in forest governance and biodiversity and wildlife conservation through systematic management and protection of forestlands, and effective development, implementation and enforcement of forest policy, law, acts and rules and regulations throughout Kawthoolei. Additionally, KFD is one of the KNU's departments that protects, recognizes and promotes customarily forest-based tenure use and management rights of Indigenous Peoples in KNU's administrative territories of Kawthoolei.

Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN)

Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to protect the world's rainforests and to secure the legal rights of their inhabitants. It is one of the largest rainforest organizations in the world, and collaborates with around 70 local and national environmental, Indigenous and human rights organizations across the world. RFN supports people in securing their rights and protecting rainforest to prevent policy and business interests from contributing to rainforest destruction, and to consolidate policy and practice that protect it. Since 2017 RFN has supported Karen communities in Kawthoolei to stand up for their forest rights, providing advice and the financial means for communities to demarcate and secure their community forests and ancestral territories.

