



# 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)<sup>1</sup> has established wildlife sanctuaries and community forests for the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources. Mutraw communities have also been mapping their customary kaw territories and traditional socio-ecological management practices, highlighting the invaluable indigenous and natural diversity that they encompass.

These foundations of the Salween Peace Park are proof that alternative, community-based sustainable development and conservation initiatives can work. Three Peace Park public consultations were held between 2016 and 2018, where the community laid out their visions for the Salween Peace Park, and established the foundations for a transparent and inclusive Peace Park governing committee, guided by a community-designed Salween Peace Park Charter due to be ratified through popular vote.



## Indigenous communities are key to conservation

The heart of the Peace Park initiative is the indigenous Karen system known as kaw, which is a term meaning:

- 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 has mapped 132 kaw<sup>2</sup> and will continue to protect and revitalize the kaw system, according to villagers' desires. The kaw, as well as other forms of customary Karen ways-of-life and livelihoods, serve 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.

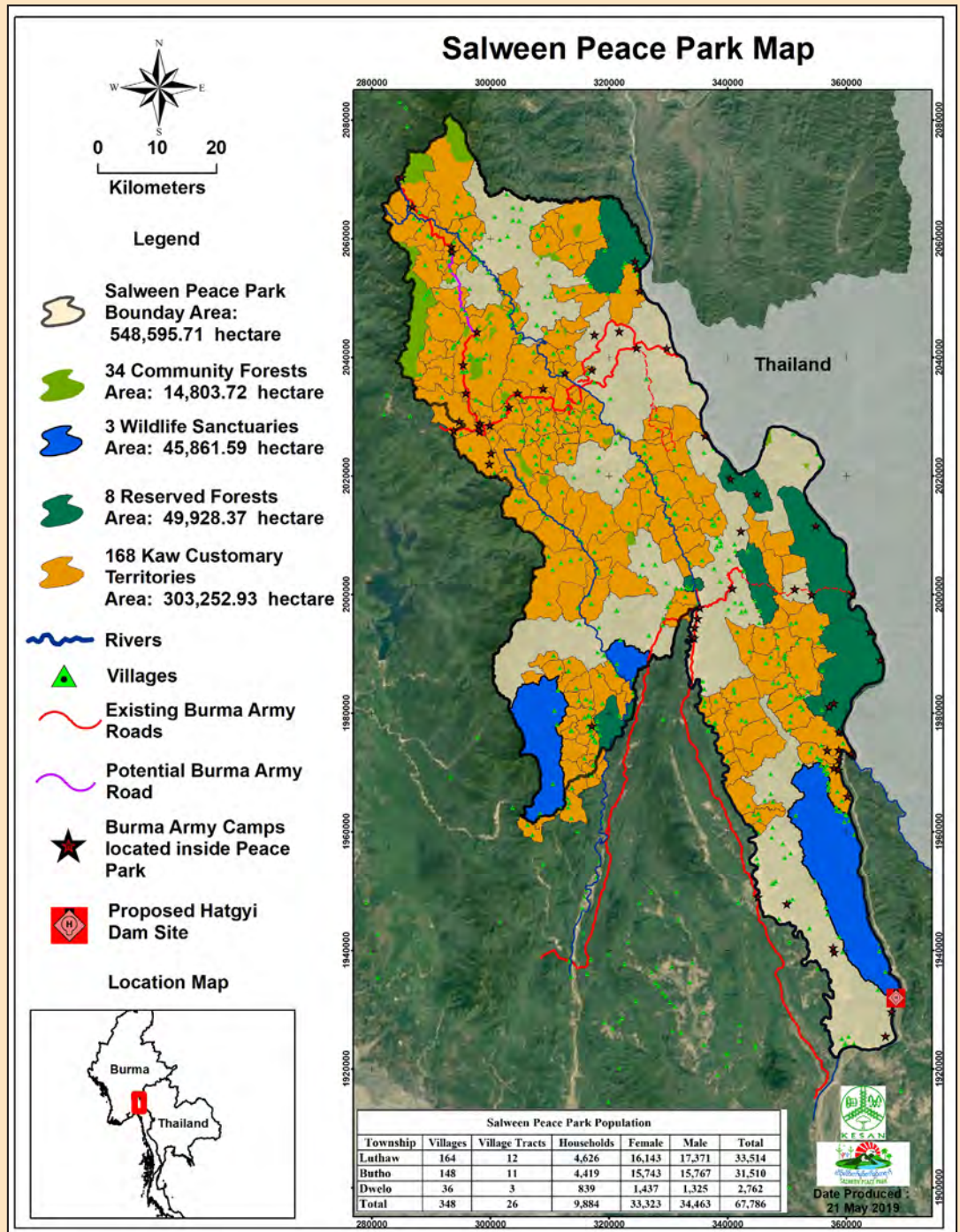
<sup>1</sup> The KNU is the de facto ethnic government that steadfastly opposed military dictatorship in Myanmar, but has recently signed a ceasefire agreement with the central government.

<sup>2</sup> See map of proposed Salween Peace Park at back.

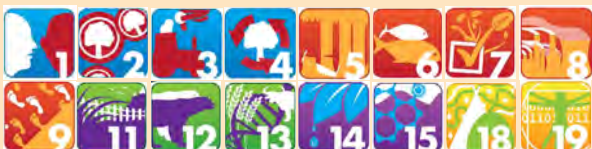
# Map of Salween Peace Park

## A Global Contribution

The Salween Peace Park isn't just important to the lives and socio-ecological system of the Karen indigenous people. It also plays a key role in achieving more global targets. The Peace Park protects some of the world's most endangered animal and plant species, and is home to almost seventy thousand indigenous Karen who have lived with and protected the forest and its resources for generations. Through perpetuating Karen indigenous bio-cultural conservation the Salween Peace Park contributes to global efforts of climate change mitigation, poverty alleviation, biodiversity conservation, and the promotion of peace-alongside furthering the realisation of important international declarations, guidelines, and conventions, including:



- The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- The 1991 International Labour Organisation's Convention 169
- The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- The 2012 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure
- The 2015 Paris Accords agreed at the 21st Coalition of Parties
- The 2011 Aichi Biodiversity Targets
- The Sustainable Development Goals



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