

Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park (TTIP)



Mountains in the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park

In the face of generations of Burman-chauvinist oppression, state-perpetrated violence against Indigenous Karen peoples, and exploitative resource extraction in Taw-Oo District, the eight Karen sub-groups of Taw-Oo District have come together in defence of their right to protect and practice their unique traditional cultures.

Throughout periods of rule under the dominant Burman government constitutional powers, including the military-drafted 2008 constitution, have neither protected nor guaranteed Indigenous Peoples and ethnic nationalities rights in Burma. Furthermore, the centralised land use policy of the Burmese government threatens to undermine the customary tenure security and practices of Indigenous Peoples on their land, forest and water resources. As a result, large-scale logging has denuded Taw-Oo's rich natural landscape and strangled the deep connections that local Indigenous Peoples carry with their environment.

In response to this, Taw Oo District leaders have begun carrying out their own forest management efforts. In 2019, community leaders and members decided to commit themselves to establishing the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park with the goal to protect Indigenous Peoples and local community's rights in the future. Their vision? A community-led conservation and governance project that places at its centre the unique cultural heritage and traditions that are so important to this diverse group of Indigenous Peoples.

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The View of Pworgaw Kho and the Taw Oo Landscape from Thawthi Kho, taken in 2020

Preserving Biodiversity by Practicing Culture

The Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park aims to establish a space where Indigenous People are free to maintain and practice their traditional culture while sustainably managing their land, natural, and biodiversity resources.

In order to achieve this, the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park will:

1. Revitalize and protect Taw-Oo Indigenous Peoples' traditions, culture and unique worldview
2. Strengthen Indigenous Peoples' governance and management of their ancestral territories and natural resources
3. Preserve bio-cultural diversity of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park so that its rich ecological system can continue to thrive and benefit both present and future generations
4. Enable Indigenous People of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park to determine their own sustainable development path

A Landscape, Alive with Meaning

The TTIP is replete with important Karen cultural heritage sites and teeming with diverse wildlife. The Thawthi Pwor Gaw Kho, Pweh Hee Kho, Pwe Hee Kho, Kee Ku Kho, Htee Rue Kho, Khe Khay Daw Wildlife Sanctuary, Pee Thoo Kho, Baw Mu Kho, Losamaw Kho, Lu Toe Kho, Thet Kue Kho and Panaso Kho are all important sites with significant religious and cultural meaning for Karen people that are found within TTIP. The Leh Lo, Kei Lo,



A Peacock in Khe Khay Daw Wildlife Sanctuary, Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park



Moh Nay Pwa Karen with their Traditional Karen Drums in early 2021

and Beh Thaw Lo Rivers are also culturally important rivers which run through the park. Finally, rare wildlife such as the tiger, guar, long-tailed goral, banteng, wild water buffalo, hare, and a number of bird species call the Taw-Oo area home.

More than this, the communities of TTIP are proud practitioners of their traditional cultures. Cultural and religious practices remain hugely important across the Kanyaw Wah (white Karen), Keh Bah, Paku, Paku Maw Nay Pwa (Moh Nay Pwa), Paku Taler

Pwa (Saler Pwa), Mo Pwa, Bwe and Ka Yaw Karen sub-ethnic groups within the TTIP. A documentation research project for the TTIP revealed, for instance, in Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township alone villagers had maintained 126 Karen Bronze Drums and 10 traditional Bronze Gongs. On top of this, vast areas of TTIP continue to be administered according to the traditional Kaw system, a governance and decision-making structure that enshrines values of consensus and natural resource conservation.



A leopard cat in Khe Khay Daw Wildlife Sanctuary, Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park.



A woman from a Moh Nay Pwa area holds a Moh Taw Nwa, a traditional instrument of the Moh Nay Pwa

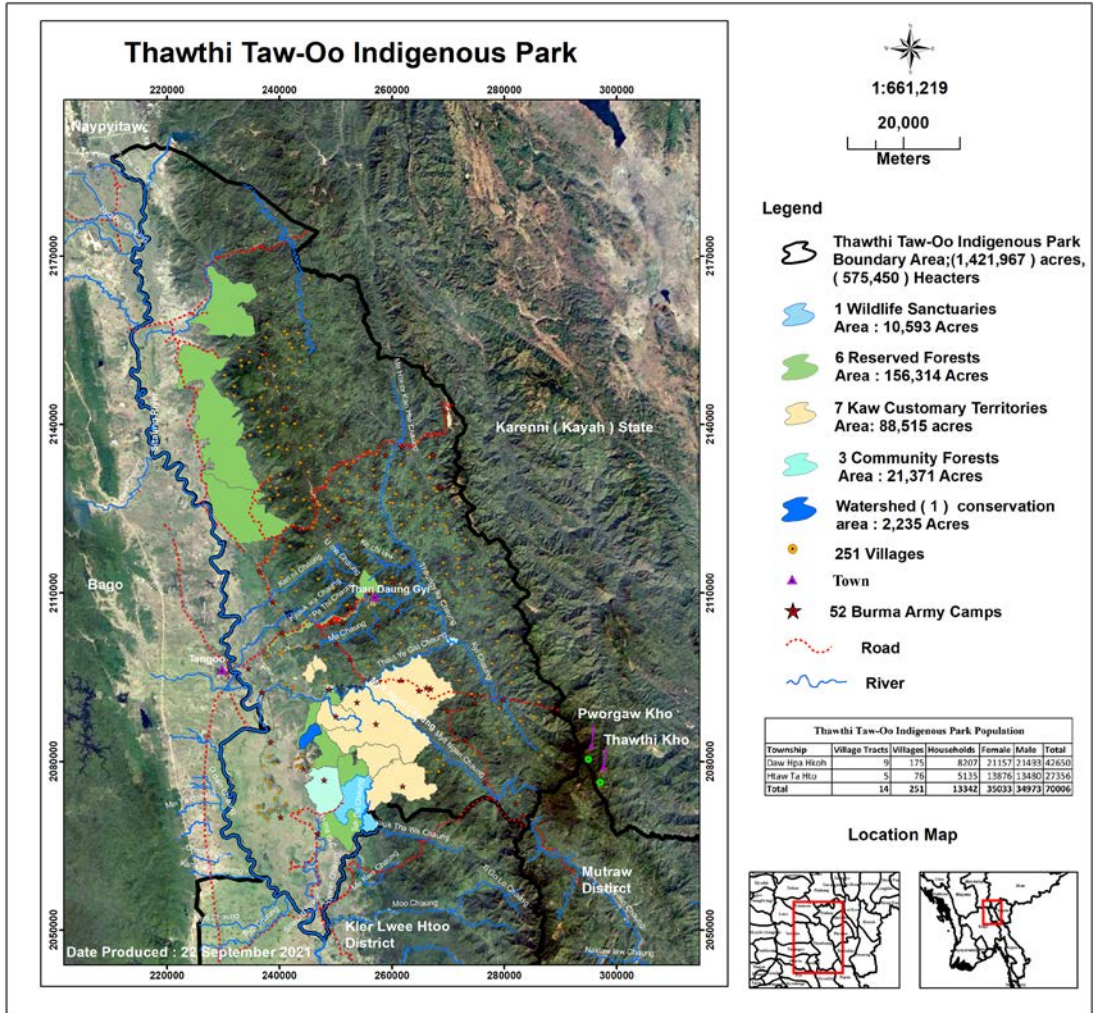


Traditional musical instruments and clothes of Keh Bah Karen (Photo by Keh Bah Affair)

Deep Spiritual and Geographical Connections

The Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park is located in the Northwest portion of Karen State, bordering Pago Division to the West and Karenni State to the Northeast and the Salween Peace Park to the East. This park, like the Salween Peace Park, would encompass a significant area (1,421,967 acres/ 575,450 hAs/ 5,754 km²) and hundreds (estimated

251) of Karen communities. The Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park carries a strong geographical and spiritual connection with the nearby Thaw Thee Phgaw Ghaw Peace Park in Karenni State and the Salween Peace Park in Mutraw District, with the highly significant and powerful spiritual mountain Thawthi Kho sitting at the confluence of these three indigenous lands.



Proposed area for the TTIP

What comes next?

As in the Salween Peace Park, there will be a wide range of actors involved in upholding, and implementing, this vision of the TTIP. A 29-person Steering Committee composed of local leaders, community members, and CSO representatives was formed in September 2019. They are currently tasked with overseeing and coordinating work around the establishment and implementation of the Indigenous Park. In the future, the TTIP will be administered by a General Assembly composed of community representatives, KNU administrators, and Karen civil society representatives. Pre-existing Protected Forest areas (Reserved Forests, Community Forests, Wildlife Sanctuaries) will be included as part of the TTIP.

There is still much work to be done. Collectively, the TTIP stakeholders are currently moving towards completing five major steps.



Revitalized Kaw Governance Meeting on Land and Forest Management in 2020

1. Complete the demarcation and mapping of the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park

Local communities and the KNU authorities have already formally demarcated most of the outer boundaries of the Park. This demarcation is especially crucial where boundaries lie near mixed-control areas and/or Karenni State. After hearing and resolving any conflict over border demarcation, maps will be shared with local communities and KNU staff in order to ensure that the correct boundaries have been recorded.

2. Systematic recording and documentation of local culture and history

The experiences and knowledge passed on from many generations have allowed these Karen communities to live in harmony with the nature around them while also enabling them to use their natural resources sustainably in order to support their daily lives and needs. Community-



Community consultation on the revitalization of Mwee Hlo Keh Der Kaw



Community consultation on the revitalization of Kaw in Mwee Hlo Keh Der Kaw

based research has already begun in order to record and document the practices and sacred sites that still exist within the TTIP. After this preliminary research is completed, public consultations will be conducted to verify findings and clarify plans to support the Karen Indigenous traditions and practices.

3. Raising community members’ awareness about their rights and entitlements

In order to ensure that TTIP community members are aware of their rights and the processes to attain them, members of the TTIP Steering Committee and Karen CSO representatives plan to facilitate training on FPIC, Indigenous rights, and the KNU Land and Forest Policies.

4. Land and Natural Resource Management Rules and Regulations Research and Documentation

Although the local Karen communities have been effectively managing their lands and natural resources in a sustainable manner for many generations, many of the guiding principles and regulations that they have used and implemented have not been written down. As such, work has begun on recording these agreed-upon practices so that the TTIP Governing Body will be able to oversee the practices in each area.

5. Drafting of the TTIP Charter and conducting a public referendum

Just as the Salween Peace Park has done, the TTIP will have a Charter drafted and adopted before the Park is officially launched. This Charter will serve as the guiding document for how the TTIP will be structured and governed. In order to accomplish this, a Charter Drafting Committee will be established in order to aid in carrying out this process. Following drafting, the charter will be shared with communities prior to a Charter Referendum. This will be done so as to ensure that community members within the TTIP agree to the TTIP’s structure and governance model. If the Charter is approved, an official launch ceremony will then be conducted so as to mark the TTIP’s inauguration.



Consultation on confirmation of Thawthi Taw Oo Indigenous Park and Salween Peace Park boundaries



Revitalized Kaw governance and land and forest management meeting in 2020

A Timely Vision

While Burma continues to reel from the military Junta's coup of early 2021, the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park provides a vision for what might be, if only the military elite would respect the aspirations of local communities from across Burma. As in the Salween Peace Park, the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park is a declaration of the agency of the local Karen communities. This is a culturally-rooted vision of democracy, federalism, and environmental protection in which the desires, traditions, and worldviews

of the local indigenous peoples—rather than the cruelty, coercion, and cynicism of the forever brutal Tatmadaw—are given voice.

Ultimately, the Indigenous Karen communities in Taw-Oo aspire for a world in which they might be able to define peace, development, and well-being on their own terms. The establishment of the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park is an important step towards reaching these aspirations.

