



Declaration of commitment of the Indigenous Karen People to preserve the wildlife in the Salween River Basin (Waklay Hta Declaration)

Date : July 7, 2022

Place : Salween Peace Park, Mutraw District/ Brigade # 5

Because the Salween River Basin is endowed with several ecosystems including mixed deciduous, dry dipterocarps, pinus, montane, and hill evergreen forests, it hosts many wildlife species of global significance. Iconic wildlife species include the Tiger, Dhole, Green Peafowl, Chinese Pangolin, Sunda Pangolin, Indochinese Leopard, Elongated tortoise, Gaur, Eastern Hoolock Gibbon, Great Hornbill, and Grey Peacock Pheasant.¹

Co-habiting with these wildlife species in our ancestral territories reaffirms our Karen identity and deep relationship with nature through our traditional belief systems and cultural practices. These traditions allow us to respectfully manage and sustain our natural resources, while maintaining a balance with our animal and plant neighbors.

With the ongoing political conflicts, climate change, COVID-19 pandemic, and other factors leading to greater livelihood insecurity, Karen Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices about environmental stewardship and wildlife preservation have been gradually diminishing in Kawthoolei.

¹ The Tiger (*Panthera tigris*) (EN), Green Peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) (EN), Chinese Pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*) (CR), Sunda Pangolin (*Manis javanica*) (CR), Indochinese Leopard (*Panthera pardus* ssp. *delacouri*) (CR), Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) (VU), Eastern Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock leuconedys*) (VU), Great Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*) (VU), and gray peacock-pheasant (*Polyplectron bicalcaratum*) (LC) are protected under KFD regulations in accordance with traditional Karen Indigenous hunting taboos, while the Dhole (*Cuon alpinus*) (EN) and Elongated tortoise (*Indotestudo elongate*) (CR) are being proposed to the protected list.





To preserve the Eastern Landscape of the Salween Peace Park and protect endangered wildlife species, the Mutraw District Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KFD) has already implemented policies and regulations which are enforced through its field officers. In addition to this, local Community Ranger groups have been formed to enforce the rules and regulations about wildlife preservation, and to monitor poaching and illegal logging in the Salween River Basin. These ongoing efforts will never be enough on their own- we must simultaneously take steps to revitalize Karen Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices, while increasing local communities, CSOs and all stakeholders' engagement in wildlife preservation measures.

In order to work together to achieve these goals, we, the local communities of the Salween River Basin, along with representatives of Mutraw District Administration; the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO); the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA) Brigade #5; representatives of the Forest, Agricultural, Mining, Education and Cultural, Finance and Revenue Departments; the Salween Peace Park Governing Committee and its working groups; the Karen Women's Organization (KWO); the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN); Kheshorter Community Forest, and local boat drivers, hunters, and ethnic alliances have convened a historic gathering on June 27 – 28, 2022 at Waklay Hta Village, Kaupu Village Tract, Butho Township, Mutraw District/Brigade #5. A total of 135 participants attended the two-day gathering, themed: **'Promotion of Karen Traditional Knowledge, practices of wildlife conservation and management in the role of community rangers.'**

The aims of this gathering were:

1. To raise the awareness and values of Karen Indigenous Knowledge, traditional practices, beliefs and taboos that have allowed the sustainable management and preservation of natural resources and wildlife for generations.
2. To increase public awareness about the roles the Community Rangers play in wildlife conservation.
3. To foster cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders in enforcing forest and wildlife regulations of the Kawthoolei Forestry Department (KFD) and the traditional practices, beliefs and taboos of the Indigenous Karen People.

Topics covered in the two-day gathering included: (1) the significance of preserving biodiversity in Salween River Basin, (2) wildlife survey results recently completed in the Salween Basin, (3) comparisons of wildlife conservation by Indigenous Peoples with Western scientific approaches, (4) KFD regulations and enforcement/penalties for violations, including customary penal codes, and (5) the presentation of the three-year report and future plans of local Community Rangers.

The following action points were agreed upon:

1. Conduct more wildlife preservation awareness-raising campaigns.
2. Recruitment of more Community Rangers and a commit to ensuring they are equipped with the skills needed for their job.
3. Establishment of a Community Rangers Advisory Committee.
4. Revitalization of sacred sites and clear designation of non-hunting areas so that wildlife can breed and thrive.
5. Strict enforcement of regulations and penalties for poaching or illegal trading of wildlife species which are listed as Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), Vulnerable (VU), or other traditionally prohibited sacred species.



6. Issuance of a moratorium on the hunting of both male and female of Sambar Deer at all times in the Salween Basin in order to regain a viable population.
7. Issuance of a special order prohibiting the hunting of wild animals while swimming across the Salween River or while entering village areas in compliance with traditional beliefs and taboos.
8. Prohibition of electro-fishing in the Salween River and all its tributaries or streams.
9. Reforestation of degraded forest areas and wildlife corridors.

Finally, we, the participants at this gathering agree to give our full consent and commitment to increase collaboration for wildlife protection/ wildlife law enforcement; to promote Karen indigenous knowledge and practices about wildlife management; and to comply with KFD wildlife regulations, so that we, and our wildlife neighbors, will continue to co-exist and thrive in the Salween River Basin of the Salween Peace Park.

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