



Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park Primer

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Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park overview

The Indigenous People of Taw-Oo District have been experiencing numerous challenges from many years, starting with the era of Burma's Feudal Rule, through the colonial period and to various periods of rule by the Central Burma Government. Under their unjust laws, the Indigenous People in Taw-Oo District have been suffering from subjugation and oppression, like an unforgettable tragic nightmare. The Central Burma Government Policies seek to dominate and oppress the Taw-Oo Indigenous People, as well as to allow the Central Burma Government greater access to this area's rich natural resources.



Through the collective leadership of local Indigenous People representatives, KNU Taw-Oo District leaders, and community religious leaders, there have a series of initiatives and events held in order to protect Indigenous ancestral lands and strengthen local governance systems. It is envisioned that these actions will allow the Indigenous People to attain self-determination, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park (TTIP). Through collective commitment and power-sharing, the TTIP seeks to create a space for respect and rights of the Indigenous People, sustaining of this area's bountiful natural resources, and where we can attain genuine peace for Indigenous People and their future generations. These are the lands of our indigenous ancestors, a place where we envision a resolution of the more than 70-years armed conflict, so that the next generation does not have to experience this anymore.





The TTIP aims to increase public participation in a Federal Democratic system and to decentralize powers related to political, economic, educational, and environmental affairs through a focus on strengthening grassroots leadership, governance and administration. Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park, therefore, stands as an innovative example of how the aspirations of a genuine Federal Democracy can be attained that will benefit not only the people within the TTIP, but all people living throughout the nation.

“Before the King of Burma, the British colonizers, political parties, and the government recognized by the United Nations, the indigenous people had already established their own customary governance systems in their regions and villages.”

Padoh Saw Eh Wah, Committee Leader, Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park

Why establish an Indigenous Park?

Like other districts under the administration of the Karen National Union, Taw-Oo District has also been enduring over 70 years of civil war and conflict. This conflict has resulted in a great number of disrupted lives and casualties. Furthermore, its consequences include escalating mass evacuation, widespread illegal land grabbing, forest degradation, devastation of rivers, dwindling wildlife populations, and the desecration of cultural sites. Besides these negative actions, the invading Burmese Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) have also been supporting large-scale infrastructure projects such as dam construction, creating significant problems and disputes in the Taw-Oo District.

After the Burmese Army staged a coup on February 1, 2021, armed conflict between revolutionary groups and the Burmese Army has escalated across the country, resulting in significant restrictions on movement for indigenous people in the



Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park. There has also been increasingly frequent interrogations while travelling, increased drone surveillance, heavy artillery shelling, and airstrikes, posing many threats to the inhabitants of the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park. The launching of weapons and airstrikes aimed at schools, workplaces, and churches constitutes a violation of the United Nations Human Rights Laws pertaining to children, education, and religious freedom. Targeting civilians undermines the authority of the international court and violates the rights of the TTIP indigenous people.

Furthermore, our global ecosystems remain in a precarious condition. Globally, there are three main interlinking environmental threats that are of serious concern to international organizations, governments, and all peoples of the world: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. On July 28, 2022, the United Nations declared access to clean and healthy environment a universal human right.¹ Damaging environmental rights equates to violating universal human rights. Therefore, protecting and managing environmental biodiversity is the responsibility of all human beings.

To effectively address and resist these significant challenges and threats, the leaders of the Taw-Oo District, together with the local indigenous people, are earnestly committed to establishing the Thawthi Taw Indigenous Park. The TTIP aims to establish a governance system rooted in protecting and sustaining the Indigenous Peoples' unique cultural heritage and fostering coexistence. In order to achieve these goals, a number of activities have been and/ or will be conducted, including researching/ revitalizing customary governance, researching indigenous customs and cultural belief systems, establishing a forest conservation body, and protecting rivers from harm. Currently in the TTIP, the focus is to engage and build support among the people residing within TTIP, and to ratify guidelines and policies that will enable an effective governance system to be established.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1123482>



*Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination.
By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their
economic, social and cultural development.*

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Article 3



The vision of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park

In the struggle for self-determination, which is our inherent birthright alongside the right to strengthen our indigenous heritage, the vision of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park has emerged as:

To protect our ancestral lands, safeguard our environment, revitalize our culture, and learn how to responsibly governing our lands, environment, and ecosystems for present and future generations.

To reach this vision, TTIP has established the following four goals:



Revitalization and protection of Taw-Oo Indigenous Peoples' traditions, culture and unique worldview.



Strengthening Indigenous Peoples' capacity to effectively govern and manage our ancestral territories and natural resources.



Preserving the bio-cultural diversity of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park so that its rich ecological systems can continue to thrive and benefit both present and future generations.



Enabling the Indigenous people of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park to determine their own sustainable development path.

Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park location and population

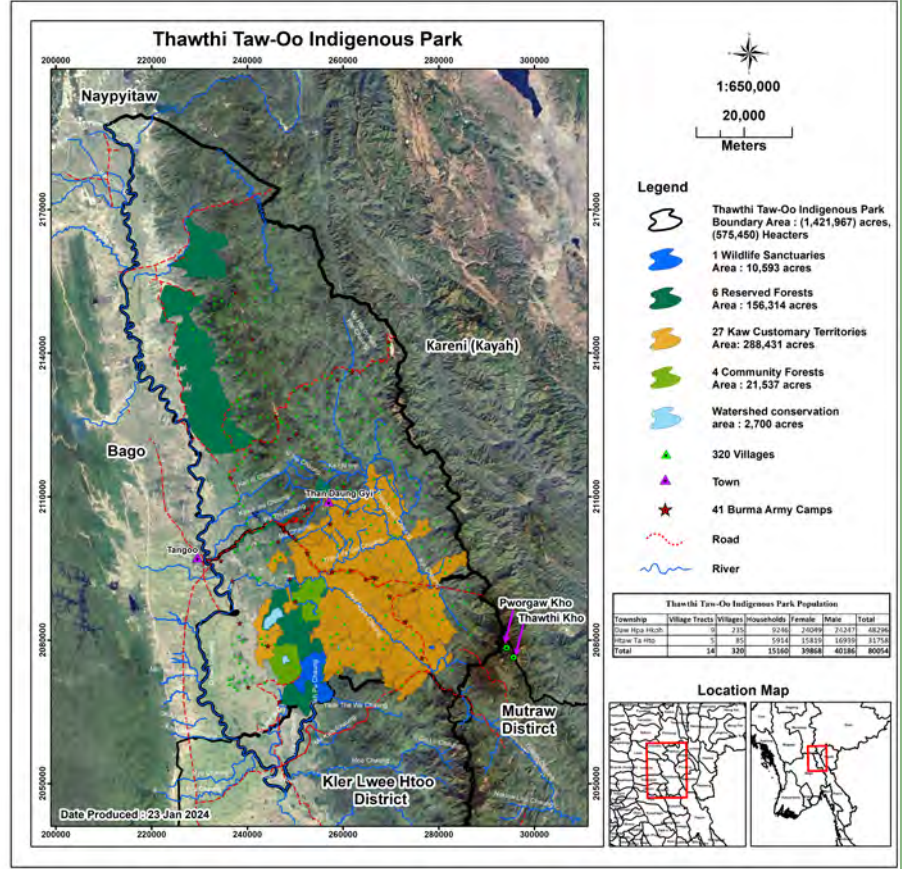
Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park is situated in the northern region of Kawthoolei in Taw Oo District. It is bordered to the north by Karenni State, to the east by Mutraw District (and the Salween Peace Park), and to the west by Bago Division. The TTIP covers 1,421,967 acres (5,754 km²) and is home to more than 70,000 persons from 320 villages within its boundaries. TTIP is adjoined by the Thawthi Pworghaw Peace Park in Karenni State and the Salween Peace Park in Mutraw District, with significant spiritual connections to Thathi Kho and Pwor Gaw mountains (see Significant Cultural/ Historical/ Natural Areas section below for more details).



Map of Myanmar/Burma



Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park
Taw-Oo District



Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park Timeline

2018

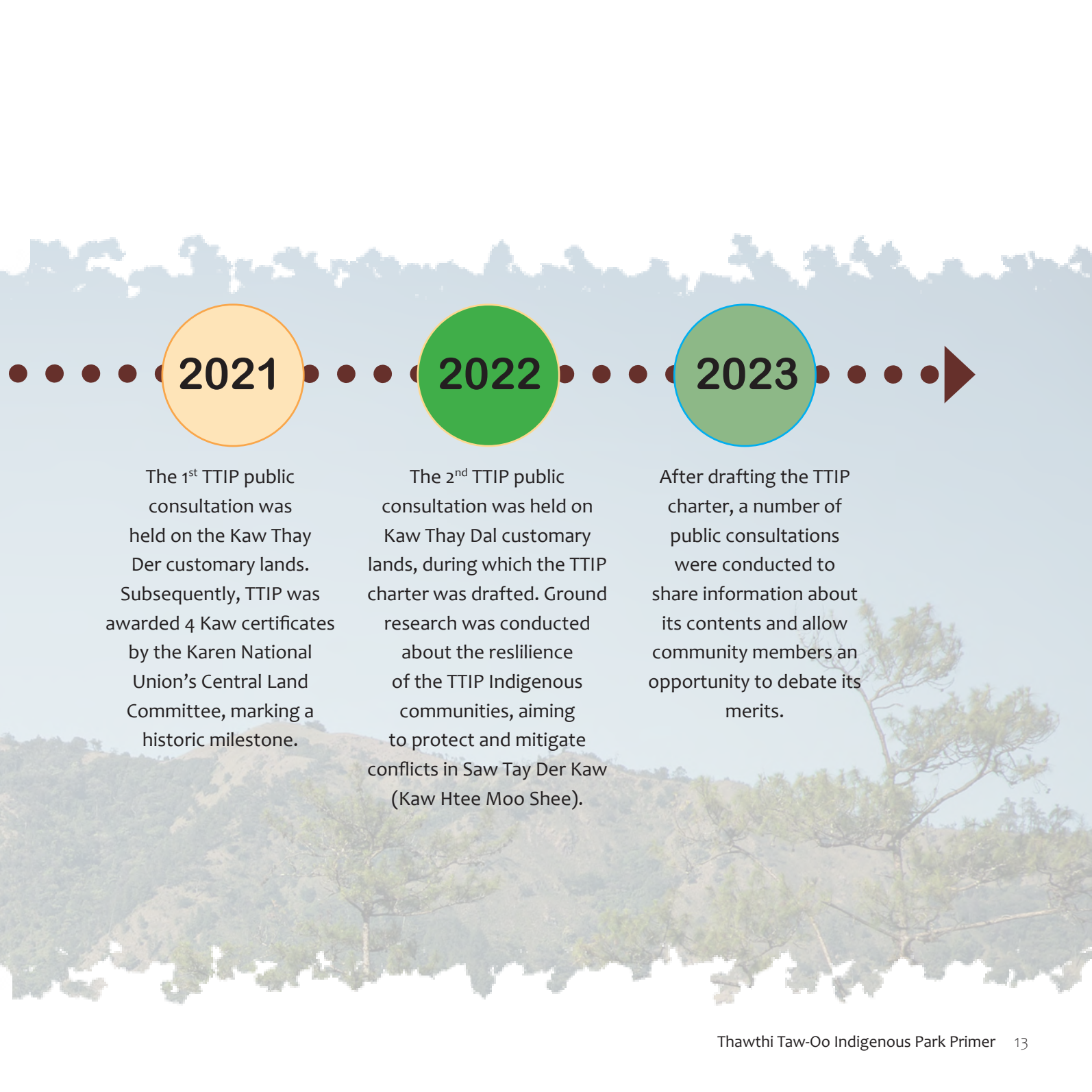
The leaders of Taw-Oo district, grassroots communities, religious leaders, and local community organizations convene for consultations aimed at collaboratively establishing Thathi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park.

2019

The name “Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park” is selected during public consultations, followed by the formation of a 29-person Steering Committee (SC). The SC drafts the TTIP vision and goals, conducts a territorial analysis, demarcates the outer boundaries, and agrees about the importance of proceeding with the initiative.

2020

Research and data gathering on indigenous customary laws is conducted, as well as research about Kaw (Karen customary lands) management, natural resources, wildlife, spiritual beliefs, and historical accounts, in order to feed into the drafting of the TTIP Charter.



2021

The 1st TTIP public consultation was held on the Kaw Thay Der customary lands. Subsequently, TTIP was awarded 4 Kaw certificates by the Karen National Union's Central Land Committee, marking a historic milestone.

2022

The 2nd TTIP public consultation was held on Kaw Thay Dal customary lands, during which the TTIP charter was drafted. Ground research was conducted about the resilience of the TTIP Indigenous communities, aiming to protect and mitigate conflicts in Saw Tay Der Kaw (Kaw Htee Moo Shee).

2023

After drafting the TTIP charter, a number of public consultations were conducted to share information about its contents and allow community members an opportunity to debate its merits.



Year 2018

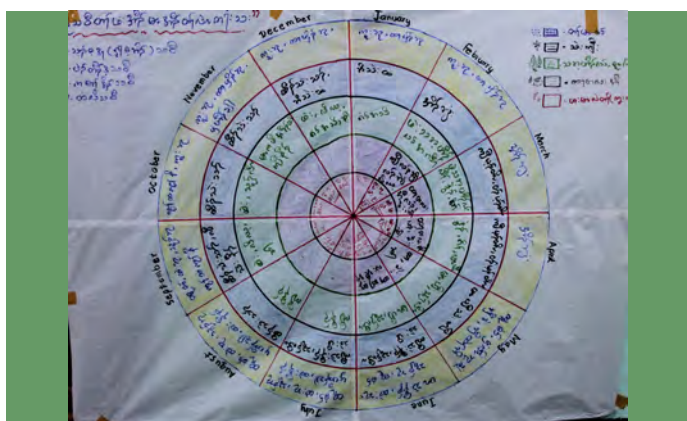


Leaders from Taw-Oo district, alongside local Karen communities and religious leaders, initiated consultations and collaborative efforts towards establishing the Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park. During this period, Taw-Oo district leaders facilitated consultations and discussed the protection of ancestral territories at Hto Lwe Wah High School, Per Hti Area, Htaw Ta Htu Township. During this consultation, leaders from the Salween Peace Park, as well as representatives from Karenni were invited to share their experiences and strategies for protecting ancestral territories and enhancing cooperation.



Year 2019

In 2019, the name “Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park” was approved through consultation, and the formation of a 29-persons Steering Committee was completed. This committee was tasked with drafting the vision and goals of the TTIP, conducting a territorial analysis, demarcating outer boundaries, revitalizing customary governance structures, compiling ground data records, establishing community forests, and reassessing the status of Reserved Forests and Wildlife Forests.



Year 2020

In the process of drafting the TTIP Charter, discussions were held to draw up a just and equitable governance structure. Also during this year, research was conducted to collect data on indigenous customary law, as well as the management of Kaw lands, natural resources, wildlife, spiritual beliefs, and historical aspects, to feed into the drafting of the TTIP charter. Additionally, a number of field research activities were completed, including case studies on indigenous people's spiritual beliefs, sacred locations, and traditional instruments such as drums.





Year 2021

Under collective leadership and with the support from the Indigenous peoples towards the realization of their vision, the inaugural public consultation for TTIP took place in Maw Thay Der Kaw. During this consultation, TTIP was awarded 4 Kaw certificates from the KNU's Central Land Committee, marking a historic milestone. Indigenous peoples from various communities, including the K'nyaw Wah (White Karen), Kay Ba, P'Ku, Maw Nay Pwa (Moh Nay Pwa), Moh Pwa, Bweh, and other ethnic groups, participated in this event. Also at this event, the steering committee established a number of working group committees to be responsible for the implementation of activities for each sector within the TTIP.

Year 2022

In December 2022, steering committee members and leaders from Taw-Oo District conducted the second public consultation in Kaw Thay Der. Based on inputs gathered during consultations among the indigenous communities, the TTIP charter was drafted. A case study research initiative was undertaken in Saw Tay Der Kaw (Kaw Htee Moo) to garner insights into indigenous peoples' experiences and strategies for adapting agricultural practices during climate change.





Year 2023

With the support of our collective leadership, the TTIP Charter was released in 2023. The TTIP Charter Committee, comprised of former TTIP Steering Committee members, conducted field visits to raise awareness about the Charter, facilitate discussions on its contents, and assess the level of interest among indigenous communities in TTIP. Upon obtaining the signatures of indigenous individuals indicating their acceptance of the charter, the TTIP Charter will be officially approved. By December 2024, the plan is for the TTIP to be officially ‘launched’ and declared as the ancestral lands of the Indigenous peoples to the global community. At that time, the governance structure of TTIP will be established as outlined in the charter during the TTIP General Assembly. The members of the TTIP General Assembly will include representatives from the local indigenous communities, KNU representatives, and Indigenous civil society organizations.

Significant Cultural/ Historical/ Natural Areas in Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park

Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park is imbued with Indigenous traditions and rich in natural resources. The mountains hold religious, cultural, and historical significance for indigenous communities- some of the most note-worthy mountains include Thawthi Kho, Pworghaw Kho, Pwe Hee Kho (Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain), Kaser Doh, Kaser Kiku, Pee Thu Kho, Baw Mu Kho, Lo Sa Moh Kho, Lu Toe Kho, and Pa Nar Soe Kho. A number of rivers and streams also play pivotal roles in the park's landscape, including P'rel Lo Klo, Day Lo Klo, Yaw Lo Klo, Klay Lo Klo, Play Lo Klo, Pa Shaw Lo Klo, and Kay Chaw Lo Klo. Noteworthy wildlife species such as tigers, bison (wild cows), wild goats, wild cows, wild buffalo, deer, and various bird species can be found within the TTIP.



The TTIP Indigenous People possess knowledge regarding the conservation of their culture, traditions, and natural resources for the benefit of both present and future generations. The area is rich in diverse and abundant ecosystems, which contributes significantly to mitigating climate change. TTIP serves as a safeguard for indigenous communities, empowering them to manage their land effectively and thereby enhancing overall quality of life, maintaining nutritional standards, and supporting efforts to alleviate economic hardships within the community.



Pwe Hee Kho (Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain)



The importance of spiritual beliefs and cultural sites is significant in the TTIP. As mentioned, the park encompasses numerous hills, mountains, valleys, hot springs, and ancestral territories. Among these places, Kaser Doh, Pwe Hee Kho (Naw Bu Baw Prayers Mountain), Kaser Kiku, Thawthi Kho, and Pworghaw Kho are especially held in great esteem and are regarded as sacred spiritual sites. These places are part of the unique cultural heritage for the Indigenous communities of the TTIP.

Kaser Doh

Kaser Doh is a famous and culturally significant place for the TTIP Indigenous people. Situated in the Per Hti Area of Htaw Ta Htu township, Taw-Oo district, Kaser Doh is an important part of the ancestral stories passed down through generations. For example, Kaser Doh is featured in the legend of Pee Naw Nwe. One remarkable feature of this mountain is its shape, which resembles that of a human figure when viewed from different angles. According to local lore, if someone loses their way in this mountain and encounters a river, stream, pool, or cave, they will never be able to find their way back to these places again to show others. Places of special powers can only be perceived by those with the ability to see; they cannot be seen by everyone. According to indigenous beliefs, spirits with gold and silver bodies occasionally return to this mountain. For local residents, this mountain provides numerous beneficial items, including a variety of foods, fruits, vegetables, herbal roots, materials for building houses, and wildlife for hunting. At the summit of Kaser Doh, the soil is highly fertile, making it ideal for cultivation, while the soil in the lower parts of the mountain is less suitable. For the local indigenous people, this place is sacred and deserving of respect, honor, and recognition, hence it should be fully protected.



Kaser Kiku and Kaser Pwe Hee Kho

Kaser Kiku and Kaser Pwe Hee Kho (also commonly known as Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain) mountains are historically well-known and culturally significant areas, recognized by generations of TTIP Indigenous people, as our Mwee Wah Kho Pwar Wah Kho (ancestors) have told us. Kaser Pwe Hee Kho stands at 4,825 feet. While Kaser Kiku is fully covered by vegetation, Kaser Pwe Hee Kho is characterized by its stone escarpments.

Kaser Pwe Hee Kho is well known for its spiritual powers. According to legend, Naw Bu Baw was a woman of great power, and wherever she settled, the land was fertile for farming. Villages close to these mountains sometimes see the shadow of Naw Bu Baw, indicating fertile farming conditions. Ancestors have described the area around Naw Bu Baw Prayer Mountain as a place where spirits with gold and silver bodies fly.

Thawthi Kho and Pworghaw Kho

Thawthi Kho and Pworghaw Kho are where unique cultural heritage sites and are sacred places for fairies and individuals with extraordinary spiritual powers. Our Mwee Wah Kho Pwar Wah Kho (ancestors) have also told us that Thawthi Kho and Pworghaw Kho were the birthplaces of the Karen people. According to traditional beliefs, when those who live have lived virtuously pass away, will reside peacefully and with eternal joy at the Thawthi Kho mountain.

Pworghaw Kho is also known as the highest mountain in Kawthoolei. Numerous natural streams flow through Thawthi Kho and Pworghaw Kho. In Thawthi Kho, there are three major streams: Hay Lo Klo, Lel Lo Klo, and Bu Lo Klo. In Pworghaw Kho, the prominent rivers branches that flow back to Taw-Oo District are the Khoe Lo Klo and Klee Lo Klo. Ancestors have mentioned that holy figures such as Pu Maw Taw, Pu Ka Ter, and Pu Htot Mel Par also resided in this area.



Thawthi Kho

The ancestors passed down a story through generations about how the big birds used to pay taxes with fish eyes once a year to the Thawthi Kho mountain. These large birds would travel to the sea, then return to Thawthi Kho mountain, circling the mountaintop three times to reach its highest sacred place. After paying their tax with fish eyes and making donations, the big birds would return to their home.

An Indigenous Approach to Climate Change Mitigation and International Recognition

During this critical time, a healthy resilient environment is needed to support sustainable biodiversity. The ability to live life peacefully and in balance with nature is under threat, so now that all human beings must join together to restore balance. The three main interlinked ecological threats faced by humans are climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

TTIP and our Indigenous communities play an important role in working to mitigate these problems. Protecting our Kaw ancestral lands, maintaining wildlife habitats within our forests, and safeguarding rivers are all activities that will mitigate environmental challenges, while also fulfilling the United Nation’s commitment to “Nature-based Solutions.” These approaches and strategies will protect and revitalize ecosystems to ensure environmental sustainability, which is crucial for human well-being.²



² <https://www.iucn.org/our-work/nature-based-solutions>



Kaw systems are based on local indigenous peoples’ traditions, culture, and the connections between indigenous beliefs and nature. In the Karen language, Kaw means “land” or “country”. It encompasses forests, rivers, beliefs, spiritual sites that are governed and administrated using Indigenous traditions that protect all the life and systems within a Kaw.

Since 2019, there have been a number of consultations with KNU authorities to implement formal registration procedures for the existing ancestral lands, which are known as “lands filled with natural resources.” 23 Kawes have been demarcated within the TTIP, with 4 of them already receiving recognition from the KNU’s Central Land Committee in 2022, with the others already receiving recognition from local and District KNU officials.

To protect their rich ecosystems and address the challenges of climate change, TTIP Indigenous communities have been planting long-term crops like cardamom, betel nut, durian, areca trees, djenkol, mangoes, coconuts- which do not require cutting and provide significant environmental benefits. Furthermore, this practice helps protect and maintain tree canopies for various wildlife species, replenishes natural soils, cleans rivers, regulates weather patterns, reduces the impacts of climate change, purifies the atmosphere, and decreases the levels of carbon dioxide. Agroforests areas are constantly replanted to support the well-being of local indigenous communities while also meeting the food needs.

In the TTIP, various components of the ecosystems such as birds, reptiles, terrestrial animals, aquatic animals, mammals, vegetation, and rivers are at the forefront of protection and conservation efforts. The park provides space for all the inhabitants and life in protected areas, which includes one Wildlife Sanctuary, six Reserved Forests, and four Community Forests. Additionally, there are seven areas designated for the protection and maintenance of rivers and streams. TTIP serves as a safe place for wildlife and plays a crucial role in mitigating climate change and environmental threats.





Through the collective actions of the TTIP Indigenous communities, a comprehensive vision has been developed to enhance territory livelihoods and well-being, mitigate climate change, and ensure the security and sustainability of natural resources. In July 2023, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the TTIP as “an innovative nature and rights-based solution for tackling biodiversity loss and climate change”³. This United Nations-level recognition provides an opportunity and platform to increase awareness, support, and participation from governmental and social organizations, as well as individual contributors.

3 <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/thawthi-taw-oo-indigenous-park-ttip>



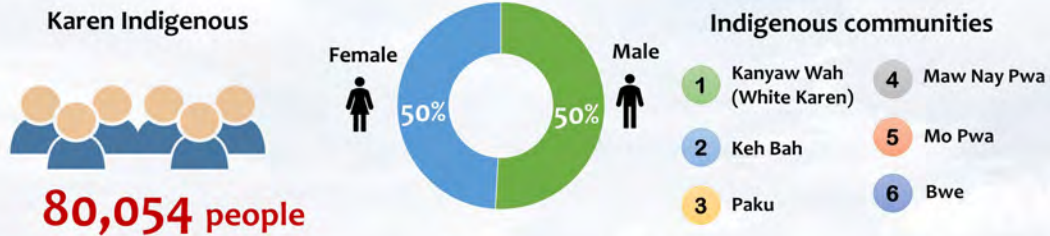
Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park Infographic

Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous People, Article 4

Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park

“The Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park aims for decentralized governance policies which promotes indigenous rights and empowers the local communities in Taw-Oo District, with a focus on self-governance rights.



Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park Boundary Area

1,421,967

Acres



320 Indigenous Villages



27 Kaw Customary Territories



7 Watershed Conservation



6 Forest reserves



4 Community forests



1 Wildlife Sanctuary

