



Women's Research Group: Safeguarding Ecology and Karen Traditional Knowledge



This book is a product of the collaboration between Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) and Women4Biodiversity for the 'Building Resilience and Weaving Gender-Responsive Approaches to Biodiversity Governance' project.

This project aims to strengthen gender-responsive ecosystem restoration approaches and integrate them into national goals and international commitments through research and documentation of women-led ecosystem restoration in sites in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The project, initiated by Women4Biodiversity, follows a three year practice to policy roadmap. It is implemented with the funding support of Sida through SwedBio at Stockholm Resilience Centre.

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Preface

The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) emphasizes the importance of protecting and restoring landscapes for collective well-being. Indigenous peoples manage 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity, and recognizing their rights and knowledge is essential. Despite progress, contributions of Indigenous peoples and women remain under-documented. Multilateral agreements, like Target 23 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF), aim to integrate gender perspectives, but gaps persist.

In Myanmar, Indigenous Karen women, key to ecosystem restoration, are often overlooked. This book celebrates the groundbreaking achievements of the Women's Research Group in Salween Peace Park, Myanmar, highlighting their key successes in biodiversity restoration and gender-responsive approaches. Through their collaboration with local communities, research initiatives, and preservation efforts, this group has become a model for building resilience and weaving gender-responsive approaches to biodiversity governance.

More than just a story of resilience, this book serves as a guide and motivator for communities worldwide. By sharing the tools, strategies, and wisdom learned, it empowers readers to establish their own Women's Research Groups, fostering stronger relationships between people, land, and nature.

Myanmar

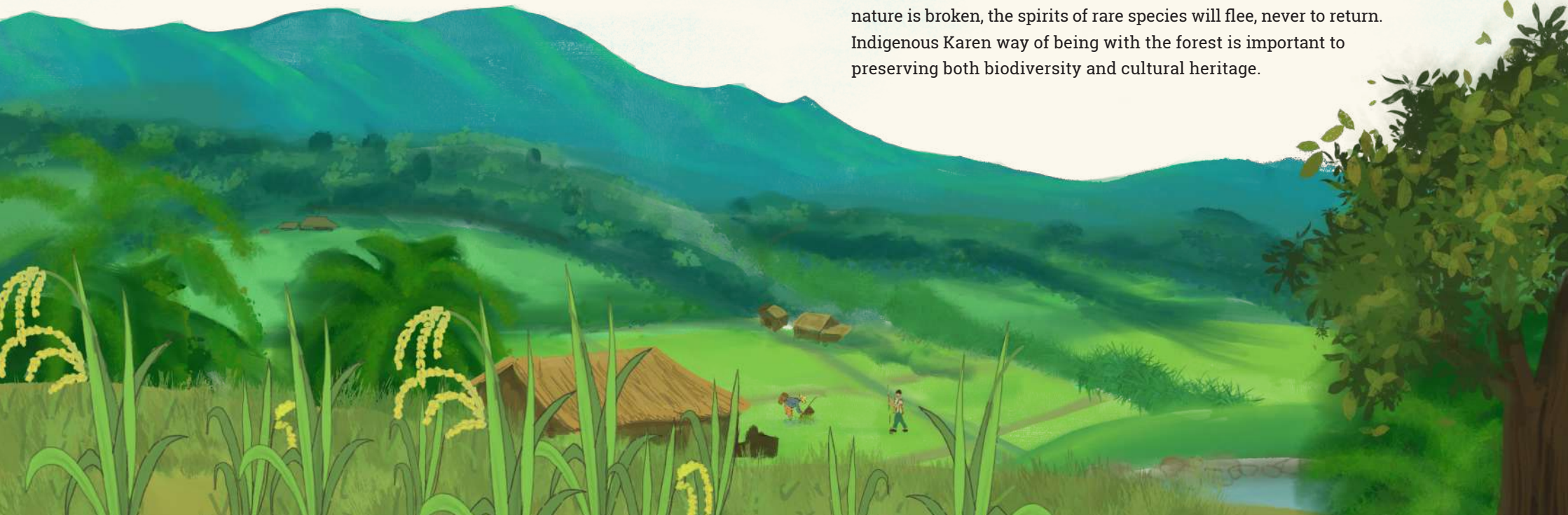
Myanmar, Southeast Asia's second-largest country, spans 676,578 square kilometers and features a diverse range of landscapes, from tropical deltas in the south to the rugged foothills of the Himalayas in the north. It is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse countries in the world, divided into seven states, seven regions, and one union territory. Situated in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, Myanmar is home to numerous endangered species but faces severe environmental threats. Ranked as the second most vulnerable country to climate change, it grapples with habitat degradation driven by overexploitation, logging, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure development.

Amid these challenges, Indigenous Karen communities of the Salween Peace Park, Kawthoolei, southeast Myanmar, stand as a beacon of community-led restoration, where local efforts aim to preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Karen People and Communities

The Indigenous Karen people of Kawthoolei have long protected the rich biodiversity there, guided by a deep respect for their natural environment and a belief in the importance of maintaining proper relations with more-than-human beings, including spirits. Conservation is not about managing land, water, or species as material objects but about upholding these sacred relationships, which have been passed down through many generations. Our livelihoods—wet-rice paddy farming, rotational upland farming, and agroforestry—are intricately tied to the forest, which provides fertility for their crops and regulates the local microclimate. Despite challenges from conflict and climate change such as displacement, land grabbing, and erosion of traditional place-based knowledge systems, our communities continue to sustain themselves through the forest, harvesting food, medicines, and non-timber products in ways that respect nature.

Our traditions inform sustainable practices, such as customary prohibitions against overhunting, and taboos about land use in different areas such as mountain tops and watershed areas. If harmony with nature is broken, the spirits of rare species will flee, never to return. Indigenous Karen way of being with the forest is important to preserving both biodiversity and cultural heritage.



The Salween Peace Park is a community-led conservation area in Myanmar, dedicated to protecting biodiversity and preserving Indigenous cultural heritage.



Salween Peace Park Map

Karen State

- 43 Community Forests
- 6 Wildlife Sanctuaries
- 9 Reserved Forests
- 295 Kaw Customary Territories

The Salween Peace Park

Indigenous Karen people have lived on their lands for thousands of years, maintaining a reciprocal relationship with nature. However, the past century, particularly the last 70 years, has brought conflict, leading to displacement and environmental destruction. In response, the Salween Peace Park (SPP) was established, covering over 6,000 square kilometers of biodiverse landscape in Mutraw district, Karen State, Kawthoolei.

The SPP is home to more than 100,000 people and includes some of the region's last remaining tracts of intact rainforest, which shelters species like tigers, clouded leopards, gibbons, and Sunda pangolins. The Salween River, Asia's longest free-flowing river, is the lifeblood of our people. Our communities manage the park through an inclusive democratic governance structure, ensuring local people and leaders can converse on equal footing.

Through collaboration among local communities, Karen National Union (KNU) leaders, and civil society organizations (CSOs), along with the revitalization of Indigenous conservation practices, the SPP has established wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves, community forests, and demarcated Kaw customary lands.

The SPP embodies a vision of an alternative to top-down, militarized, destructive development. It is founded on three pillars:

- 1) self-determination,
- 2) ecological integrity, and
- 3) cultural survival.

War and Loss of Knowledge

Burma gained independence from the British in 1948, but Karen people were not granted rights to our ancestral lands, and our demands for autonomy were not met. We have been struggling for self-determination until now.

In the 1960s, the Burmese army initiated a campaign against the Karen known as "Four Cuts."

This included terrorizing villages, burning forests, and forcing entire Karen communities to relocate severing access to our natural resources and ancestral domains.

As Karen people, knowledge, culture, and way of life is deeply connected to the land we live on. There are many traditional ceremonies that we can only conduct on our ancestral lands. War and displacement has caused a loss of our traditional knowledge and practices.





The Creation of Community Forests

To protect our lands, water, and way of life, local communities organized together with the KNU's Forestry Department and the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network to strengthen our relationship with our forests, wildlife, and each other. We held meetings and formally established Community Forests and Wildlife Sanctuaries, demarcating our territories and revitalizing our traditional taboos around wildlife use and protection, with the understanding that the wellbeing of nature is directly linked to our own wellbeing.

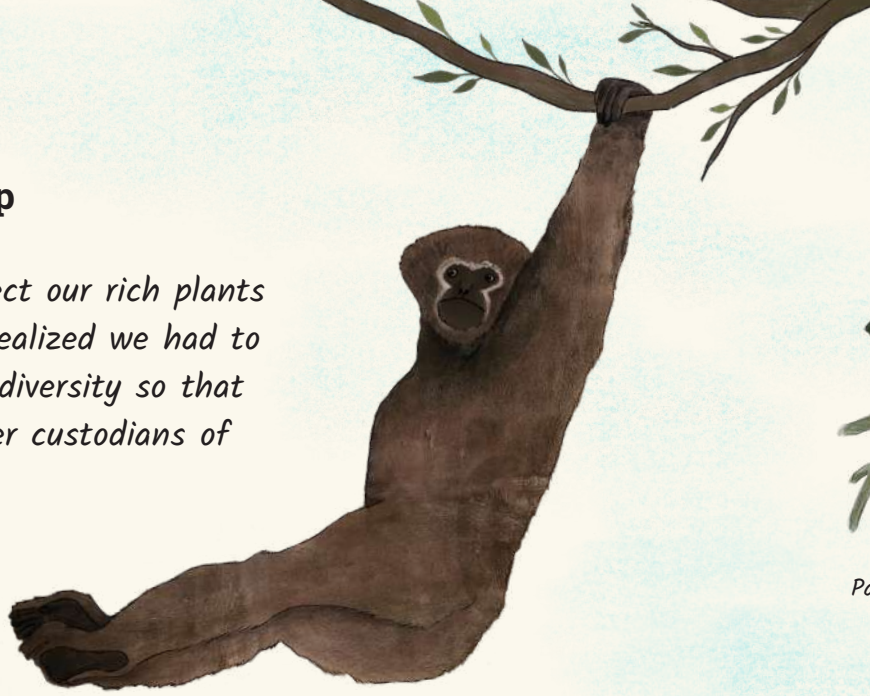
'We, who drink water, must take care of the waters. We, who eat from the land, must take care of the land. Only when we maintain the balance, will our wellbeing be sustained'

- Karen proverb



The Women's Research Group

"In order to protect our rich plants and wildlife, we realized we had to document the biodiversity so that we could be better custodians of our territories."



*Paw Ter Moo Eh Kwar
(orchid)*



*The Blut
(betel nut)*



*Ther Yaw
(turmeric)*

Karen scholar from Luthaw Township, Saw Sha Bwe Moo, started to carry out research in Kho Kay, and Kheshorter forests in 2010. He joined with locals to research gibbons which led to greater efforts to protect them in the local area.

While conducting research, it became clear that women have their own unique perspectives and knowledge. Women value different species to men, such as herbal medicines, cloth dyes, and different foods and materials. Women also play key roles in our communities as wisdom holders, teachers, and mothers - passing down generational knowledge.

Therefore, we started the Women's Research Group.



The Work So Far

We researched orchids, mushrooms, and gibbons, and now we are researching fish and ethnobotanical species. Our research combines science and traditional knowledge, including the knowledge from our elders. Our research helps our communities to know the rich life that exists in our territories, and how we can collectively protect it.

“Whenever we conduct research, we cooperate with the local leaders, researchers, and villagers; therefore, we can solve the research’s complex questions and challenges as much as possible.”

- Naw S’lah Paw

Women and young people have become more active leaders in the work of restoring biodiversity in their areas.

Naw Paw Tha, for example, runs a tree nursery and germination center which grows indigenous plant species. Each year, we plant many trees to restore degraded forest areas and provide food and habitats for wildlife.



“The important thing is to preserve our ethnobotany plants, fish, or other species that still exist in our area.”

“**Nya Koh (walking catfish)** is what I like the most. When I conducted a fish survey, I found that Nya Koh took care of their babies very well during hatching. That surprised me as I never knew about it before.

The spawning period of Nya Koh is from June to July. As they breed in shallow water, their spawning eggs are visible so it is easier to find and catch them. I love the way they look after their babies and they look so beautiful to me.

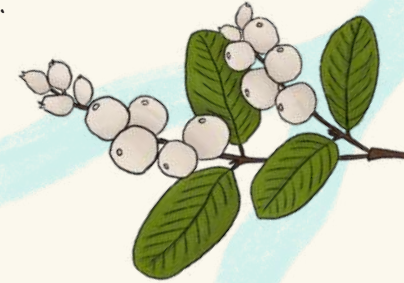
Also during our survey, we found that some fish species left their eggs or babies after hatching and then later the other fish species came and ate their eggs.”

- Naw Kenralel Moo



“One of the plants that I like is **Mae Ko Pla Poe (Indian snowberry)**. It is an edible plant and one of the traditional medicines. When you get diarrhea, you can boil their root and drink it then you will get better very quickly. It does not cause any problems to your body and is free because it comes from nature. If you eat betel nut with its leaves, it is more colorful and tasty.”

- Naw Swen Ler Paw



“One species I like is **Day Bu (Kuhl’s Creek Frog, *Limnodynastes kuhlii*)**. They are in marshes and river sources, and our Karen people believe that they are one of the most important species that preserves the aliveness of the river, therefore, they are essential for our lives. As they maintain the water, our ancestors did not usually catch them for food. Our forefathers said that if there were no Day Bu, then the river could not be alive. Therefore, our indigenous people need to conserve this frog so it does not go extinct.”

- Naw S’lah Paw



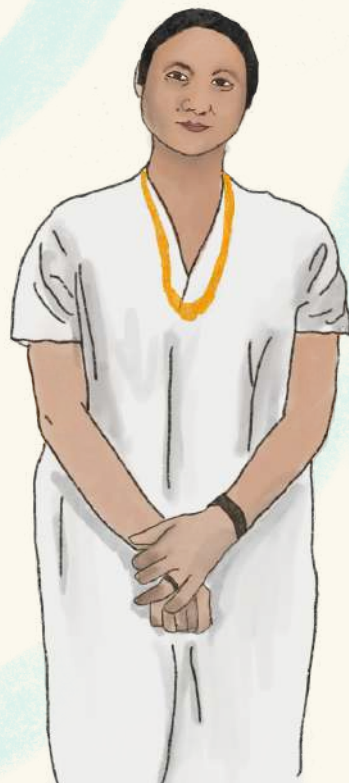


“One of my favorite animals is **Hto Bu Kha (Asian fairy bluebird)**. Hto Bu Kha in our animist belief system is a sacred bird and it has its own story. Animists respect them as they believe that this species is the spirit of rice.

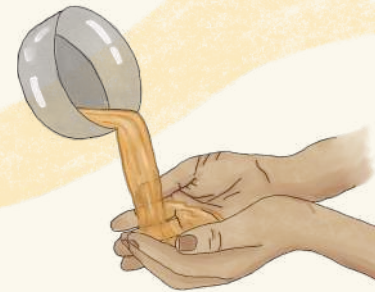


They eat insects that kill rice paddy and always live in paddy fields. In our traditional beliefs, during the weeding and harvest, people give thanks to Hto Bu Kha and ask them for help so that they will receive enough rice at the end of the year. They have to keep food for Hto Bu Kha first, and then they eat later. They believe that if they do not give Hto Bu Kha's food, they also will not have any rice to eat. Our indigenous people have a taboo of killing this bird species.”

- Naw Yen Poe



“Among species of plants, **Ther Yaw (turmeric)** is one of my favorites because its root, leaf, flower, and stem can be eaten and used in various ways such as food, herbal medicine, materials, and other purposes. For example, Karen people use turmeric powder - putting it in water then washing their heads to wash away bad things that happen in their dreams and anything related to a bad thing.



I usually bake loach fish with turmeric leaves. The curry will be more delicious when you cook the meat, whether raw root or turmeric powder. When I got into a motorcycle accident, the blood flowed from my mouth so I mixed turmeric root with some water and then drank it twice a day after that I felt better and was able to ride the motorcycle again without going to the hospital and getting X-rays. I like turmeric and would like to grow it more in my village.”

- Saw Hser Pwer Moo



Caring for Territories of Life

Through our biodiversity research, we document and preserve the invaluable knowledge of our people, ensuring it is passed on to future generations. Empowered women, armed with this research, can advocate for the protection of our natural resources and inform governance decisions that promote sustainable development for the benefit of our communities. The Women's Research Group, a diverse team of women with expertise across various fields, collaborates closely with local community members—women, men, and youth alike. By involving villagers, we build deeper connections and ensure our work reflects the needs of the people.

Our group also works alongside local leaders from the Karen National Union (KNU) and relevant departments like forestry, livestock, and fishery to strengthen both their activities and ours. With the support of local villagers, leaders, and organizations, we continue our research across our territories, reviving traditional knowledge and enhancing conservation efforts.

We share our progress through meetings and awareness campaigns, recognizing that this work is vital for the future of our people, our culture, and the life that thrives in our forests and waters.





The Women Research Group with community members



Research on fungi



Crossing a makeshift bamboo bridge while researching



Community members attending an awareness campaign

About KESAN

The Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) was the first wholly Karen indigenous organization to address social and environmental problems that the people of Kawthoolei have faced over many decades. KESAN was founded in 2001 by members of the Karen Nature Conservation Group (KNCG) that had been formed by a group of motivated young Karen students and teachers on the Thai-Burma border. 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 75 years of civil war have created one of the most impoverished regions in the world.

KESAN's approach is based on the principles of democratization from "Free, Prior and Inersity advocates for genormed Consent" to support the development of sustainable rural livelihoods.

Find the Women's Research Group reports at www.kesan.asia

Find out more about KESAN's work with communities, contact KESAN at info@kesan.asia

About Women4Biodiversity

Women4Biodiversity advocates for gender equity in biodiversity conservation. We believe that 'Living in Harmony' with nature requires recognizing women's and girls's roles and rights with holistic solutions. We champion these principles through collaboration across the three Rio Conventions (UNCBD, UNCCD, and UNFCCC) for a more inclusive future.

Learn more at www.women4biodiversity.org



“Hopefully, our women’s research efforts will succeed, and others will come to know about our work. I hope that women will achieve equal rights with men, and that future generations will inherit healthy forests, plentiful water, fresh air, and plants.”

- Naw S’lah Paw

