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Women-Led Community Restoration of Biodiversity in Kawthoolei, Myanmar



About Salween Peace Park (SPP), Kawthoolei

- Despite its richness, Myanmar's biodiversity faces major pressures from deforestation, conflict, and climate change.
- Established in 2018, SPP spans 6,746 km², covering 443 villages, and is democratically governed by the Karen National Union (KNU).
- Karen communities use *Kaw*, a socio-ecological system integrating ecological stewardship, cultural traditions, and spirituality.
- Indigenous Karen women, through the Women's Research Group (WRG) supported by Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), is leading ecosystem restoration, knowledge revitalisation, and governance.
- Founded in 2010, WRG is working to strengthen SPP's environmental, cultural, and self-determination goals, elevating grassroots women's knowledge for peace, ecological integrity, and cultural survival.



Reasons for Restoration: *Upholding Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)*

- For 70 years, communities have suffered exploitation, displacement, and the "Four Cuts" strategy.
- Endangered species like orchids and pangolins have been trafficked, violating local customs and traditional taboos.
- SPP is collectively governed, protected, and managed by 15 indigenous Karen communities.
- Karen communities practice ancestral teachings that emphasise sustainable and reciprocal environmental stewardship but these practices have yet to be formally recognised.
- Reviving ecosystems and Karen cultural-spiritual practices is key to sustainability.

Threats and Challenges

- Initial community resistance to the WRG.
- Social norms dictate women's roles.
- Myanmar faces ongoing threats like military attacks, land grabs, illegal logging and wildlife trade.
- Increasing climate risks.
- Limitations in connectivity and security restrict mobility and coordination efforts.

During Restoration: *Revitalising TEK through research and awareness-raising*

- Indigenous Karen women have unique, often undervalued, knowledge about various species of plants and animals.
- Clear need to focus on women's knowledge for the sustainability and success of restoration efforts.
- The Women's Research Group (WRG) conducts biodiversity research blending traditional knowledge with modern scientific methods.
- Women and men members actively participate in governance, resource management, forest monitoring, tree nurseries, germination centres.
- Strengthening of governance mechanisms through a formalisation of customary land management systems.



Recommendations

- Recognise Indigenous governance systems and women's roles in biodiversity conservation and restoration, supporting global targets like KM-GBF Target 23.
- Formally acknowledge Indigenous ecosystem restoration strategies under Article 8(j) of the CBD.
- Ensure Indigenous women's access to land and resources for livelihoods and conservation.
- Promote collaboration among NGOs, CSOs, and CBOs to advance gender equality, inclusive conservation, and women's leadership.
- Provide flexible, sustainable funding for Indigenous women researchers to apply and strengthen traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in restoration projects.

Sustaining Restoration: *Reviving ecosystems and Indigenous leadership*

- Biodiversity rebounded, with endangered species like gibbons, tigers, hornbills, deer, fish, and orchids recovering.
- Wildlife corridors established, featuring firebreaks, signboards, and community protection stations.
- KNU strengthened policies against illegal orchid trade.
- Sustained documentation of local species of animals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and food, proved crucial for the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).
- Training indigenous Karen women in biodiversity research has empowered them to actively protect natural resources while building their confidence, leadership, and decision-making skills.



Read the full story by Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

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