

THE SPIRIT OF PAW KLO:

Indigenous Communities Protect and Sustain their Ancestral Territories

Myanmar
by Esther Wah

Paw Klo in the Tanintharyi Region of Myanmar is another story of a community-driven initiative that conserves, protects and defends its territory, despite not being recognized by the central Myanmar government. Their territory is not just rich in biodiversity, but also widely known for their herbal medicines and traditional healers. The Karen communities in this area see physical health of humans and health of the environment as intertwined. This makes them persist in protecting their lands amidst the militarization of the nation and all the threats of destruction to their forests that this change brings.

PAW KLO TERRITORY

- Paw Klo is a Karen territory located in Dawei District of Tanintharyi Region and makes up an important part of Tanintharyi Region's landscape of life, part of one of Southeast Asia's biggest expanses of low elevation evergreen forest.
- The area is home to 16,000 Karen Indigenous People who depend on orchard farming and forest-based livelihoods, and vast areas of pristine evergreen forest containing extensive endemic and vulnerable flora and fauna, including Malaysian sun bears, clouded leopards, and tigers.
- It is a community-driven initiative that has been managed for millennia by Karen communities who have cared for this landscape.
- While the central Myanmar government does not recognize this territory, seeing it as virgin land open for development, communities throughout the territory have worked hard to conserve, protect and defend it from a range of different threats, and the area is locally recognized as an ICCA. The Karen National Union recognizes the territory, and supports local communities in their efforts to conserve the area.



KASER DOH

Found at the northern edge of Paw Klo sand, it is considered a sacred mountain for the Karen. The territory is widely known for its herbal medicines and traditional healers who are famous across Kawthoolei.

Karen communities see physical health of humans and the health of the environment as being intertwined and interconnected. Destruction of the forest or water systems can cause illness to the community, as spirits are disturbed. For this reason, Indigenous communities take much care in the protection of their territory.^[1]

The territory contains different types of forest - some forests are used for local livelihoods where communities enforce tight restrictions over resource use.

Indigenous Karen communities have formed community-based organizations through which rules and regulations are developed and enforced. Local forest committees sustain biodiversity by monitoring forests and resource use in the area. Research committees conduct local knowledge research of forest resources, and forest and water committees are responsible for enforcing democratically developed rules and regulations.

CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS TO PROTECT PAW KLO

- In 2010, Myanmar and Thai companies were awarded a 2,100-acre mining permit to extract lignite coal from the northern expanses of the territory. The project stood to destroy vast tracts of rich forest, grab lands of communities from three villages, and pollute the primary water source of over 16,000 people.
- Communities in the area mobilized and campaigned tirelessly to halt the mining project in their territory. They held local campaigns, conducted research on their resources and worked with lawyers and civil society organizations to halt the project.
- On February 1, 2021, a military coup triggered a resurgence of violent conflict, and now Indigenous territories across Myanmar face uncertain futures.

Indigenous communities throughout Tanintharyi Region pledge that they will fight until the end of the world to protect their ancestral forests and lands despite insurmountable threats. **Communities shall continue to monitor forests, enforce their rules and regulations, and defend the biodiversity of their lands. Together, they are committed to winning their cause.**