

Destruction and Dollars: The Tragedy of Myanmar's Environment

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Myanmar, a southeast Asian nation and former British colony once known as Burma, has received a substantial amount of negative publicity in the Western media. This attention has been focused almost entirely on the country's internal politics, and with good reason: among the many questionable actions undertaken by its military government in recent years are a violent crackdown on peaceful protests led by Buddhist monks and the repeated extensions of Nobel Prize-winning, democratically-elected opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest. However, this single-minded emphasis on the junta's admittedly abysmal human rights record ignores an even larger problem with potentially far more detrimental long-term consequences. While the West occupies itself with photogenic orange-robed monks marching in the streets for democracy, the rapid destruction of Myanmar's environment which provides the financial lifeblood of the junta has gone almost entirely unnoticed.

Myanmar is blessed with a wide array of valuable natural resources. More than 80% of the world's teak trees are found within the country's forests ("Ancient Forests Stripped"), and a full 95% of commercially-sold faceted rubies are sourced in Myanmar (DeLeon). Myanmar also has control over a wealth of energy sources. The country's strong rivers provide an immense capacity for the generation of hydroelectric power ("Myanmar signs deal with Chinese"), and Southeast Asia's largest proven gas reserve, the Shwe field, is located within its territorial waters ("Our friends in the north"). Myanmar is also home to a diverse assortment of wildlife, much of which is considered endangered or threatened: as of 2003, the World Bank Environment

Department had identified a total of 112 threatened mammal, bird, fish, and plant species within the country's borders.

In the face of strict sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union, and other Western nations as a result of Myanmar's abysmal human rights record, environmental exploitation provides the country's regime with one of its only viable sources of revenue. Senior General Than Shwe's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), as Myanmar's military government is officially known, has been ruthlessly taking advantage of the environment as a means of generating the income necessary for it to remain in control. British NGO Mines and Communities notes that "Burma's military dictatorship gets almost [all] of its money from selling contracts to exploit natural resources" (MAC). Officially, the highly lucrative forestry industry, for instance, is completely state-owned, while the mining sector is open only to private investors who agree to participate in a profit-sharing scheme with the junta's Ministry of Mines ("Investment Opportunities"). Hydroelectric dams are being built as joint ventures between the government and foreign companies, and natural gas exploration takes place under similar arrangements ("Dirty dealings").

Deforestation is one of the most significant environmental crises plaguing Myanmar and one of the largest sources of financial support for General Shwe's regime. While forests covered more than 60% of Myanmar as recently as 1960, today, less than 30% of the country's land is forested (York). According to a 2004 report issued by the World Bank on the state of the country's environment, deforestation in Myanmar progressed at an alarming 1.36% annual rate during the 1990s. This represents a pace of destruction nearly twice as fast as the 0.76% average among all low income countries and nearly nine times as fast as the 0.16% average in the rest of

the East Asia and Pacific region (World Bank). Disturbingly, the speed of this deforestation is accelerating: international NGO Global Witness estimated in a 2005 report that trade of timber across the China-Myanmar border had increased by nearly 60% over just the prior four years.

A large proportion of the logging activity in Myanmar occurs in Kachin State, a region sandwiched between China and India, the country's two largest trading partners. This area, which has been described by biologists as "very possibly the most bio-diverse, rich, temperate area on earth," has been particularly devastated by deforestation (Howell). By 1998, the World Resources Institute had already identified "massive soil erosion, sedimentation of rivers, increased flooding, and acute dry season water shortages" in Kachin State occurring as a direct result of reckless logging activity. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has listed the Kachin State habitat as "vulnerable" and neighboring regions as "critical or endangered" (Olson and Dinerstein). The joint United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Nature Conservation and National Parks Project has advocated for the establishment of an area in Kachin State earmarked for the protection of the threatened Himalayan takin, musk deer, red panda, and wolf (Blower). The rampant deforestation occurring in the region seriously imperils this diverse ecosystem.

The impact of Myanmar's high deforestation rate, however, reaches beyond the country's natural environment. The destruction of Myanmar's forests is also responsible for a number of acutely tangible effects on the nation's human population. In 2008, the world watched in horror as Cyclone Nargis hit the country's coast, causing nearly 150,000 fatalities and over \$10 billion USD in losses, placing the storm among history's costliest both in terms of loss of life and economic impact ("Asian bloc to handle Burma aid"). Tens of thousands of further casualties

may never be identified as a result of decay and the limited government response to the crisis (“Dead May Never Be Identified”).

The effects of this natural disaster were significantly exacerbated by Myanmar’s widespread deforestation. Between 1924 and 1999, the Irrawaddy Delta where Nargis struck lost a full 83% of its mangrove trees (UNPO). Scientists have long recognized the important role these trees play in protecting coastal regions. Their root systems have been repeatedly shown to have a strong dampening effect on the large waves created by tropical storms, significantly decreasing the damage and casualties incurred. A 2005 International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) study conducted following the 2004 Asian tsunami found that in two otherwise similar villages, the village with intact mangrove forests suffered only two casualties, while the one without experienced nearly 6,000 deaths (Kinver). In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan blamed the wanton destruction of Myanmar’s mangroves for magnifying the nation’s problems, noting at a meeting in Singapore that “encroachment into mangrove forests, which used to serve as a buffer between the rising tide, between big waves and storms and residential areas [has continued] ... all those lands have been destroyed” (Kinver).

Despite the widespread problems associated with the country’s deforestation, Myanmar’s ruling junta continues to encourage the unrestricted exploitation of timber resources. This is hardly surprising. Logging serves as the SPDC’s second largest source of valuable foreign currency reserves, contributing \$427.81 million, or 15%, to the 2004/2005 total (Global Witness). The state-owned Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE), which is officially responsible for all logging operations, routinely gives control of wide swaths of forest to politically favored

entrepreneurs and local, ethnic warlords in exchange for their continued support of the junta (Global Witness). Individual army units also routinely engage in unofficial logging enterprises for both personal profiteering and as a means of making up for a shortfall in government funding (Global Witness). The vast majority of the profit generated as a result of deforestation is never seen by the locals who most directly experience its negative consequences. Instead, the treasuries of the SPDC and a select few politically-connected individuals and corporations are dramatically enriched while the local population and wildlife suffer.

Extensive mining for precious stones and valuable minerals has also significantly contributed to the devastation of Myanmar's environment. UK-based NGO Mines and Communities notes that Myanmar's "extractive industry has ... [among the] worst environmental impacts of any sector." While the SPDC's Ministry of Mines (MoM) theoretically considers the environmental impact of mining operations before issuing permits, in reality, the entire system is "devoid of environmental protection and dominated by the elemental purpose of securing revenue" for the junta and its business partners (Smith 218). Indeed, the country's mining laws state that "all naturally occurring minerals found ... under the soil (*sic*) shall be deemed to be owned by the State" (Moody 18). As a result, under a 1988 law regulating private and foreign investment, the government must be a partner in any mining enterprise, and all mining contracts must be approved by the MoM (Smith 223-224). Since this policy was instituted, the junta has profited from direct foreign investment in mining to the tune of US\$534.19 million ("Foreign investment hits US\$7.6 billion").

The impacts of mining in Myanmar have recently begun to attract international attention. A combination of concern over the environmental impact of Myanmar's precious gems and the

country's abysmal human rights record have elicited a response from international gem merchants and jewelry producers. In the country's November 2007 gem auction, the most recent for which figures have been released, the number of participating merchants had dropped from nearly 4,000 the previous July to approximately 3,600 (Human Rights Watch). In addition, major retailers, including Tiffany & Company, Bulgari, and Cartier, have banned the use of gemstones sourced in Myanmar in their products ("Myanmar's repression rubies"). While the United States and European Union have implemented laws prohibiting the import of jade and rubies of Myanmar origin, most of the country's gems are first sold to traders from China, Thailand, and other Asian nations without such restrictions. These traders then obscure the true source of the stones before re-exporting them to the West (Human Rights Watch).

Though rubies, jade, and other precious stones have garnered the most international attention, Myanmar also mines copper, gold, tin, and tungsten for export. The extraction of these valuable minerals has also had a drastic impact on the country's environment, albeit one which has been less widely publicized. Burma's largest mine, the Monywa Copper Project, a 50-50 joint venture between the state-owned Number One Mining Enterprise and Ivanhoe Mines, a large international firm based in Singapore, serves as one of the best examples of the environmental destruction wrought by Myanmar's mineral mines.

Myanmar Ivanhoe Copper Company Limited (MICCL), the firm responsible for the mine's day-to-day operations, uses a process known as the solvent extraction-electro winning (SX-EW) method (Smith 228). This approach to copper extraction involves soaking mined ore in a sulphuric acid solution, dissolving the copper into a rich solution which is then treated with organic solvents and electrical current. The result is sheets of pure copper and a large amount of

toxic, highly acidic slurry known as tailings (Ayers 28). This toxic byproduct regularly finds its way into soil, rivers, and groundwater. In addition, Monywa is an open-pit mine, resulting in widespread damage and irreversible change to the local landscape. Environmental NGO Earthjustice describes the process as “digging a vast crater in the earth, thereby stripping it of vital forests and ecosystems.”

In addition to deforestation and mining, the recent initiation of large-scale hydroelectric projects has had severe repercussions for Myanmar’s environment. One such ongoing project, the result of an agreement between the SPDC and Thai government, involves the construction of two massive hydropower plants on Myanmar’s Salween River. The undertaking, currently scheduled for completion in 2010, poses a serious threat to the river’s ecosystem. Ko Shwe, a representative of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, explained: “According to our research, we found about 394 different species ... If the dam is completed, these species will be totally vanished” (Naing). The WWF concurs, concluding that the Salween dam project will destroy a “globally exceptional” ecosystem (“New dam threatens environment”).

Similar projects are underway along Myanmar’s other rivers. A joint SPDC-Chinese venture is in the process of constructing a series of hydroelectric dams along the Irrawaddy, the country’s longest river, to produce electricity for export to China (“Myanmar signs deal with Chinese”). The Kachin Development Networking Group warns that the Irrawaddy dams will “destroy ecosystem integrity [and] fragment riverine ecosystems, isolating populations of species” (39). In addition to negatively impacting wildlife, the dams will also pose a significant health threat to area residents. The project, scientists warn, “will reduce water flows [and] ...

dangerously raise pollution levels from mercury and other poisons leaking from crude gold mining practices upstream” (Boot).

Rivers are not the only energy sources within Myanmar which are being exploited at the environment’s peril: exploration of Myanmar’s extensive natural gas reserves has also had a strongly negative impact. The Yadana pipeline, used for exporting energy to Thailand, serves as one of the best examples of the type of environmental destruction wrought by these projects. Developed and managed by a consortium including American oil giants Unocal and Chevron, France’s Total, state-run Thai firm PTT Exploration, and the junta-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the Yadana venture has served as the single largest foreign investment in Myanmar and the SPDC’s most important source of revenue (EarthRights, “Chevron and the Yadana”).

The Yadana pipeline bisects an area which was previously the largest continuous rainforest ecosystem in Southeast Asia (Olson and Dinerstein), causing “devastating effects on the numerous endangered species in the region, including elephants, tigers, and Asian rhinoceroses” (Giannini 15). In addition, the increased military presence which has accompanied the project has compounded the threats to the environment created by the Yadana project. EarthRights International, a US-based NGO focusing on the intersection between human rights and environmental issues, explains: “Military units brought in for pipeline security have engaged in illegal logging ... along the pipeline route; one villager witnessed soldiers shoot and kill a rhinoceros, and another local resident noted that ... [the soldiers] had been trying to capture rare white elephants” (Giannini 15).

The Yadana venture, however, is soon to be eclipsed by a massive new enterprise involving a coalition of Indian, South Korean, and Chinese energy firms. In cooperation with the MOGE, the companies plan to exploit the Shwe gas fields, recently discovered off Myanmar's western coast and widely believed to be the largest in the region (Shwe Gas Movement). The Harvard Law School Human Rights Program notes that "an alarming number of similarities exist between the Yadana Pipeline and the proposed Shwe Pipeline," threatening to further imperil the area's already fragile environment.

Myanmar is also a hot spot in the illegal trade in endangered and protected species. The vast majority of this illicit activity is coordinated by extensive, heavily-armed gangs believed to have political connections to Myanmar's military ("Wildlife pays for Chinese demand"). TRAFFIC, a joint venture between the WWF and IUCN which monitors the global wildlife trade, has in recent months issued reports highlighting Myanmar's involvement in the elephant and ivory trade as well as in the wild cat trade. Surveys conducted by the group between 1991 and 2006 found evidence of "a total of 1320 wild cat parts, representing an absolute minimum of 1158 individual animals" (Shepherd and Nijman, "Wild cat trade" iv). The group's investigations into the elephant and ivory trade revealed similarly disturbing figures: during a single survey of 17 markets in 2006, TRAFFIC researchers uncovered "some 9000 pieces of ivory ... representing the ivory of an estimated 116 bulls" (Shepherd and Nijman, "Elephants" iii). Environmentalists believe that the country's rhino population has already been pushed to the point of extinction by illicit trade (Casey). The SPDC's tacit approval of this illegal wildlife trafficking suggests "a serious lack of law enforcement and a blatant disregard for international conventions and national laws" (Shepherd and Nijman, "Elephants" iii).

Formally, though, the SPDC expresses broad goals for environmental protection. In 1990, its National Commission for Environmental Affairs (NCEA) released the country's National Environmental Policy (NEP). The NEP advocates for sustainable development and environmental protection: "It is the responsibility of the State and every citizen to preserve its natural resources in the interests of present and future generations. Environmental protection should always be the primary objective in seeking development" (Tan). In practice, however, this document serves as little more than a source of quotes for government press releases. It proposes no actual environmental regulations or policy, no punishments for environmental offenders, and no concrete goals.

What limited attempts the SPDC has appeared to make to actually address the country's environmental issues have typically been swiftly revealed as simple public relations stunts. In one particularly egregious instance, after soliciting funding from the Wildlife Conservation Society, a US-based NGO, the government formed what was to be the world's largest tiger reserve (Casey). However, according to the Kachin Development Networking Group's Naw La, it soon after began to allow widespread gold mining in the area, only compounding the threat faced by the tigers supposedly being protected (Casey). Furthermore, though the government is a signatory to an array of international environmental treaties, in reality, this is "merely lip service" and the agreements are routinely ignored to allow the government and its partners to maximize profits (Myint 205).

NGOs have done little to fill in the gaps in the SPDC's handling of environmental issues. According to Alan Tan, a Myanmar expert at the National University of Singapore's Asia-Pacific Center for Environmental Law, "the environmental NGO movement is not as active or

vociferous [in Myanmar] as in other regional countries.” This is due in large part to harsh restrictions instituted by the country’s ruling junta. Myanmar has repeatedly shown its reluctance to allow international NGOs (INGOs) to operate within the country, even when their presence would pose no obvious threat to SPDC rule or profiteering. In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, the junta repeatedly blocked attempted aid shipments from the UN World Food Programme, the International Red Cross, and countless other INGOs (Mydans). This brazen refusal to allow even completely apolitical aid efforts in the aftermath of a decimating natural disaster is just one element of a larger pattern of strong restrictions on INGO activities. The UNDP, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UNICEF, and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) are essentially the only INGOs working with government approval to directly address environmental issues in Myanmar (Tan). The vast majority of INGO activity is limited to generating awareness of the Myanmar’s environmental issues within the broader international community.

Domestic NGO activity is also extremely limited. While a number of localized volunteer groups concerned with environmental issues are present, they generally operate without being granted official governmental approval (Tan). As a result, they are unable to work in conjunction with the NCEA and other SPDC agencies, significantly limiting their ability to effect substantive change within the government-affiliated enterprises that are responsible for the majority of the country’s environmental problems. Furthermore, the members of organizations operating without official government sanction are in constant danger of becoming victims of the junta’s notorious human rights violations should they fight too strongly against the environmental destruction

being perpetrated by the SPDC or its politically-connected partners (“Dashing hopes in Myanmar”).

Despite the risks and their limited impact, however, a handful of domestic environmental NGOs have been formed. One of the most prominent is the Forest Resources Environment and Development Association (FREDA), a group engaged in small-scale forestry conservation projects which currently claims over 400 members (FREDA). Founded by retired Ministry of Forestry employees, it has thus far managed to escape government censure (Tan). In fact, it has been permitted to receive limited financial assistance from various UN agencies, the South East Asia Civil Society Environmental Alliance (SEACSEA), the Japan Overseas Forestry Consultants Association (JOFCA), and other INGOs (FREDA). Most recently, using funding from a Japanese INGO, FREDA began a broad mangrove reforestation program (JICA). Due to Myanmar’s political climate, however, the group’s activities have been largely limited to these types of reforestation projects and to educational efforts as opposed to direct action against those engaged in environmental destruction (FREDA). A limited number of similar domestic NGOs concerned with wetland conservation, wildlife protection, and other environmental issues also exist (Tan).

As environmental activists and NGOs struggle against oppressive government restrictions on their activities and a dangerous political climate, General Shwe’s SPDC and its foreign partners continue to profit immensely from the unchecked destruction of the country’s fragile and irreplaceable ecosystems. Meanwhile, the governments of Western nations sit mostly idle, issuing the occasional strongly-worded but ineffectual condemnation of the junta’s human rights abuses while failing to address or even acknowledge one of the primary sources of the regime’s

power. Our apparent inability to recognize this reality perhaps makes us more akin to Myanmar than we would like to admit: just as the SPDC ignores international treaties and its own environmental regulations to increase profit for itself and its political allies, perhaps the West ignores Myanmar's environment for the sake of powerful, politically-connected corporations like Chevron, Unocal, and Total.

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