



**Research
Institute**

THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN PUTAO, MYANMAR

MI AIE MON
POLICY BRIEF SERIES (2025/05)



Executive Summary

The political situation has a lot of impact on wildlife conservation effort globally. Myanmar has been in prolonged long civil war for more than 70 years and, the instability increases after the military coup happened in February 2021. There are several environmental consequences due to the political instability in Myanmar, key among them that wildlife conservation is largely overlooked. The study of “the impact of Political Instability in Wildlife Conservation Efforts in Putao, Myanmar” highlights the impact of human resources loss due to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the impact of economic crisis on the local people’s livelihoods and consequently, huge reliance on forest resources along with the market demands. Additionally, the mistrust between the local communities and the conservation authorities due to the historical grievances such as forced displacement for national park demarcations and concerns for mining are hindering the conservation efforts. Finally, the conservation efforts in Putao have been weakened by these interrelated issues, putting its ecosystems and species at greater risk of degradation and extinction. The paper shows that the conservation efforts should not be considered as isolated

from political conditions particularly in conflict-affected regions like Myanmar as it has significant impact on it.

Introduction

Humans and nature are connected in a loop and therefore, biodiversity loss has a reverse effect on humankind. In today's globalized world, the utilization of resources is influenced by political landscapes, and it usually harms the ecosystems of poorer countries, especially those already in crisis. A study by Amano T et al. (n.d.) made clear that sociopolitical instability can cause biodiversity loss and reduce the effectiveness of ongoing conservation efforts. In addition, that political instability makes laws more difficult to enforce, which encourages unjustified, frequently illegal killing of wild animals even in protected zones globally. Moreover, the changes in political process also effect the wildlife conservation effort as a study evidenced that ornithological works has declined after Myanmar independence in 1948 (Thwin, H. K. M. M., 2011). Likewise, in the northern part of Myanmar forest, with the escalation of conflict, wildlife conservation efforts are significantly declining. Consequently, the greater exploitation and unsustainable use of natural resources which result from the

political instability in Myanmar deepened socioeconomic problems in the area and put biodiversity at even greater risk.

Why the conservation efforts in Putao matters?

Myanmar contains some of the largest intact natural ecosystems in Southeast Asia (Murray, 2020). Millions of people in Myanmar rely on its natural ecosystems for fundamental ecosystem services like food, water treatment, and other basic needs, and many of these ecosystems have significant cultural and religious importance (Murray, 2020). However, the rapid escalation of land usage and overexploitation are threatening Myanmar's remaining ecosystems (Murray, 2020). Kachin States has one of the largest remaining contiguous patches of natural ecosystem and particularly high species diversity and endemism are found in the Eastern Himalayas (Murray, 2020). In addition, Putao District is significant for conservation as it has Hkhabarazi National Park (942080 acres), Hponkanrazi Wildlife Sanctuary (668160 acres), and Bumprabum Sanctuary (460160 acres) (Government, 2020). The local communities in Putao have traditionally relied on hunting and gathering minor forest produce to sustain their livelihood.

The geographical positioning of Kachin State, bordering with China in the north and east, with India in the west, combined with the natural resource demands such as fish, timber, and wildlife (Aung U. M., 2007). The indirect effect of political instability such as the rapid increase in commodity prices has had a significant impact on the local population, causing considerable hardship for their livelihood. Certainly, the rise in commodity prices does not occur in isolation; it carries significant impacts. It leaves the local people with no choice but to increasingly depend on wildlife resources which can easily transport to China. As a result, this reliance has led to overconsumption, subsequent environmental degradation and hinders the conservation efforts, threatening the region's biodiversity and ecosystem. The conservation efforts in Putao is an urgent need as many species are close to extinction under the terrible political system.

Historical Failure of Conservation efforts in Putao

In Myanmar, long-term resource exploitation in ethnic minority regions resulting from the structural violence by the central government has been presented as the root cause of Myanmar's prolonged civil

war in ethnic regions. Regarding wildlife and forest in the northern part of Myanmar, the obvious examples are forced displacement for the demarcation of the National park. After designating Hkakaborazi as a national park under Forest Department management by the central government in 1998, the community suffered from the grievances which includes a sense of neglect, loss of livelihood and breakdown of customary practices accompanied by environmental destruction (Fishbein, Communities Clash with Conservation Efforts in Northern Myanmar's Hkakaborazi Region, April, 2020). The case in Northern Myanmar's Hkakaborazi Region has proved that the lack of trust between the government (supported by NGOs) and the local community, due to top-down land-use practices, hinders the possibility of achieving positive peace and structural harmony in conservation efforts.

Regarding the rule of law, in Putao, in the case of wildlife conservation, there are deficiencies in the Protection of Wildlife and Protected Areas Law (1994). According to that law, nature conservation areas were designated and there were weaknesses in addressing the ancestral land rights of indigenous populations. In 2018, the new law “The Protection of Wildlife and

Conservation of Natural Area Law (2018)” granted more freedom to manage local communities and utilize natural resources. For example, the community forest (CF) is a phenomenon that is rare in a country like Burma: legally recognized, grassroots resistance to land dispossession (Woods, 2020). Nevertheless, the procedures for granting a CF certificate are complex. It can be assumed that the process and criteria lack transparency, and obtaining the certificate depends on the capacity, experience level, and disposition of the township forest officer (Alert, 2017). Regarding these experiences by the residents, the long-lasting lack of trust by local communities in the central government system continues to impact conservation. Indeed, understanding the cause of untrusty by the community requires an understanding of the historical context and cultural nuances of the local indigenous groups.

Following the escalation of political instability after the coup

Paul Robin states that the condition of forest and the fate of wild animals crafted by the political forces and human industry. In Myanmar, the degradation of wildlife is caused by a number of political issues and its relational aspect to the local and global

market, especially in the northern region of Myanmar, which has one of the largest remaining contiguous intact forest areas in the country (Marcela Suarez Rubio, 2020). Due to the crisis in politics, the process to carry out conservation activities is getting more complicated and difficult. Moreover, the political instability has an effect on Putao's efforts to conserve its species, as foreign support for these efforts has been discontinued, leaving Putao's fauna in a state of disarray. Not only does Putao lack international aid, but also the human and technical resources have become more limited after the coup. Another significant circumstance that hit hard for wildlife conservation efforts in Putao is the civil disobedience movement (CDM) from the government departments. Following the coup, civil servants from various government departments participated in the strike, including the Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment and Conservation (MONREC), the Forestry Department, and Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) (Doherty, 2021) and hence, the Forestry Department has lost the majority of the qualified servants for the conservation in Putao. Another silent consequence of the military coup is the economic collapse. Commodity prices, especially for petrol and

rice, have risen, and the rapid inflation has impacted the livelihoods of local people. As a result, without any alternatives, the people from Putao rely more on the forest resources for both food and income which leads to more forest degradation.

Furthermore, the presence of rare earth mining close to Putao cause the concern for the conservationists in this period of instability. According to the Global Witness (2024), China controls 90% of the global rare earth processing capacity with most of the resources coming from Kachin State, located on the border with China. The rare earth extraction is controlled by militias aligned with Myanmar's brutal military rulers (Global Witness, 2024). The activity appears to be expanding to the other areas as the number of testing sites is increasing. According to a respondent, rare earth testing by militias has already been conducted in the Kaunglanhpu, Chiang Khawng/Shingkawng regions and also in Tahaundam region which is located just half a mile from Hkaborazi National Park. The conservationists worried that the presence of rare earth mining close to Putao cause the concern in this period of instability.

Policy Recommendations

Studying the case in Putao, the following recommendations are proposed for effective conservation.

1. Support Livelihood of the community

Instead of the usage of forest resource to be monetarized and marketized, the sustainable community-based practices should be promoted and alternative income-generating opportunities should be developed to reduce overreliance on the forest by the communities.

2. Promote Community led conservation or participation conservation approach

To build trust between the authorities and the communities, there should be participation of community members within the conservation activities led by NGOs or government. In addition, community-based initiatives for conservation should be promoted.

3. Develop Appropriate Regional law and policy

The consideration of local context, inclusion, and local perspectives are important in creating laws and regulations, and in the case of Putao, a specific regional law is needed to enhance the effectiveness of conservation strategies. Taking a broader

perspective, it's essential to consider the local context not only in creating conservation laws but also in designing education and development strategies in Putao, a place with a very high floristic diversity.

4. Restrict the mining that harmful to the environment

The authorities should consider and include the community and promote community participation in decision making process. The environmental impact assessment should be conducted prior to any mining activities.

References

- Amano, T., Székely, T., Sandel, B., Nagy, S., Mundkur, T., Langendoen, T., ... & Sutherland, W. J. (2018). Successful conservation of global waterbird populations depends on effective governance. *Nature*, 553(7687), 199-202.
- Aung, H. M. (2024). Post-coup environmental degradation threatens Myanmar's stability. *East Asia Forum*.
- Fishbein, E. (2020). Communities Clash with Conservation Efforts in Northern Myanmar's Hkakaborazi Region. *Rain Forest Journalism*.

Global Witness. (2024, May 23). Retrieved from Global Witness:
<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/natural-resource-governance/fuelling-the-future-poisoning-the-present-myanmars-rare-earth-boom/>

Li, J. (2021). CSOs after the coup: Operations squeezed, funding crunched. *Frontier Myanmar*.

Lusan, E. F. (2022). 'Afraid of the gun': Military coup fuels Myanmar resource grab. *ALJAZEERA*.

Marcela Suarez Rubio, G. C. (2020). Hkakabo Razi landscape as one of the last examples of large contiguous forests. *Nature Research*.

Robin, P. (2012). *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK: A John Wiley & Son, Ltd.

Thwin, H. K. M. M., Lwin, K. S., Renner, S. C., & Dumbacher, J. P. (2011). Ornithology of northern Myanmar. *Ornithological Monographs*, 70(1), 109-141

Author Biography

Mi Aie Mon, *Researcher*

She graduated with a Master of Art with a Specialization in Environment, Development, and Peace (EDP) from the University for Peace in Costa Rica and a Master's in Transdisciplinary Social Development from Ateneo De Manila University in the Philippines. She also holds a Graduate Research Diploma in Peace Leadership, a Diploma in Community Leadership and Social Studies from Thabyay Education Foundation. She is deeply interested in political and social issues related to the environment, particularly those concerning forest communities. Currently, she is working as a researcher as well as teaching at the ethnic based education institution in Myanmar.

Cited as:

M. Mon. (2025). *The impact of Political Instability in Wildlife Conservation Efforts in Putao, Myanmar* (Policy Brief Series - 2025/05). YCU-RI.