

Myanmar's Socio-Ecological Challenges

August 2014

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Introduction

In February 2013 the current Director and Regional Technical Advisor for China, Singapore and Myanmar, Dr. Madhu Rao of the Wildlife Conservation Society said, that "for many years, Myanmar's isolation has served to protect the social ecological and biodiversity which has disappeared from many other regions in Southeast Asia".¹ However now, emerging from years of political and economic isolation, its shift towards democracy means that Myanmar is opening up to the rest of the world. At the same time, Myanmar is involving with many countries and feeling the (inter)dependences of a globalized world concerning trade and investment. All in order to rebuild its country and to gain mutual profits from partnered nations. Therefore, Myanmar becomes a treasure island for its wealth of natural resources in the eyes of the developed countries on this world. Myanmar forms part of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, and some of the largest tracts of intact habitat can be found in Myanmar. However, the illegal trade of teak has grown in recent years. In other words, Myanmar's regime has to enact some crucial laws that will protect the forests from overwhelming destruction when the government intensifies its relationship with other countries.. Myanmar is still embraced by inadequate laws and poor governance, which it has to improve in order to defend itself from devastation. Perspective view of the challenges for a social ecological transformation of Myanmar will be revealed in this article amongst many trials that Myanmar's population is facing at the moment.

Recent challenges

First and foremost, President U Thein Sein's decision in September 2011 to suspend construction on the Myitsone Dam at the headwaters of the river in Myanmar's northern Kachin State signalled the rise of a significant environmental movement in the country. Over the past year, social movements and environmental groups have challenged a number of other development projects, including the Dawei Special Economic Zone, Dawei, Tantharyi Division and the Letpadaung Copper Mine near Monywa, Sagaing Division. Protection of the country's rich biodiversity and relatively clean environment has rapidly emerged as a key national interest in the face of a potential surge in economic investment and development following the recent economic and political reforms. The huge forest areas of Myanmar suffer from unsustainable levels of commercial logging, illegal logging, conversion of forests for agriculture and extraction of fuel wood, representing more than 80% of primary energy. As regards land degradation, key causes include growing population pressure in upland areas, and tenure insecurity. The cronies (extremely rich persons who have intimacy with Myanmar's government) are trading teak illegally to China and terminating its existence. That can bring social-ecological problems in the coming years. The worst example, which transpired in Yangon during the very last weeks (11 June, 2014), is floods. That blocks workers including staffs member of an organization, company and governmental sector as well as vendors from

¹ Myanmar faces new conservation challenges as its open up to the world; by Claire Salisbury, October 04 2013.

their needed mobility. Floods and other climate related problems were increasing over the past years due to severe environmental changes. Moreover, on June 16, 2014 “The mirror news”, owned by the government, stated that it was worried about the scarcity of rain fall at Letpadaung region this year. The seasonal crops become more infertile because of the climate change that causes lack of rain and dry soil. This has impacts on the living conditions of farmers.

Another natural challenge can be briefly mentioned here. On May 2, 2008, tropical cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar and particularly affected the Delta through direct impact and the generation of storm surges. Fatalities were reported to be approximately 138,000 while close to 2.5 million people were affected by the catastrophe. Local livelihoods in the affected regions were heavily reliant on natural resources that were severely impacted by the cyclone (in particular the agricultural sector which destroyed 38,000 ha of mangroves, submerged 63% of paddy fields and damaged 43% of freshwater ponds).² Salinization of agricultural land and soil erosion due to the cyclone, had significantly affected the agricultural productivity and in order to secure their subsistence, many people in the region turned to fishery. This is an example for a fundamental shift in livelihood strategies and is causing new and different problems for the ecosystem. As for the 2004 tsunami, one of the main priorities was to provide fresh drinking water to affected populations. Indeed, before the impact, the main source for freshwater supplies were rainwater, harvested from roofs, communal rainwater ponds, open and tube wells and rivers. The former two were severely impacted by the cyclone and the cyclone-induced storm surge affected coastal aquifers thus limiting the availability of freshwater for human consumption. According to the PONJA report, 63% of people that were surveyed after the event considered their access to clean water then to be inadequate, with approximately 1.8 million severely affected people in need of improved water supply.³

The author of this article originally come from the Northern Chin State whose people traditionally depend on its environment by farming, extraction of natural resources and agricultural system. According to the Chin’s customary land tenure, it was generally assumed that all land belonged to the community chief. If he claimed that “This is my land or my territory”, this does not mean that land was the sole property of the chief. He may be the keeper of the land rather than the sole landlord. The community under the stewardship of the chief had the right to use or share the natural resources which signified the mutual respect and interaction between the spirits, nature and people. This traditional concept of land gave birth to community ownership of land. Such community tradition and culture attempted to harmonize with the ecosystems of our land and bind together the households, land and shifting cultivation field. However now, the overuse of land and overexploitation of natural resources have led to high rate of deforestation and severe environmental degradation and climatic changes. As a direct consequence, the food production has considerably decreased and households suffer from a food gap varying. This dilemma happens because of the lack of governmental protection laws on environment. Resource management should be democratized. There should be village-based forest management in partnership with relevant authorities (government). It is important that the government legally recognizes “the customary user rights” of Chin Hill people based on our good traditions. Village rights and duties to customary use of lands and forest resources should be prescribed by the government. There should be village production forest, village protection forest, village conservation forest and national conservation forest. It is important to build up the capacity of the communities to use and adequately manage natural resources, biodiversity assuring equitable environmental security.

² Understanding multiple thresholds of coupled social–ecological systems exposed to natural hazards as external shocks by Fabrice G. Renaud, Jörn Birkmann, Marion Damm, Gilberto C. Gallopi’n. Received: 20 May 2008 / Accepted: 19 January 2010, Page 8.

³ Ibid, Pages 5 to 10.

A positive outlook

With the gradual development of a free press and expanded access to information, the country's population has become increasingly aware of its unique biodiversity and valuable natural resources. The desire to protect these assets has become a sentiment dear to virtually all sectors of the population and the environmental issues start to be reflected in the policies and laws being considered by both the executive and legislative branches of the government. The new foreign investment law, for example, requires environmental impact assessments for all major development projects. The future will prove if the law enforcement meets this requirement. Supplementary, the parliament recently proposed the establishment of a River Commission to ensure the changing social-ecological conservation of the "country's main water artery, whose sub-basins house a large percentage of the country's biodiversity hot spots."⁴ Moreover, the government agreed recently, contrary to earlier positions, to cooperate for example with Wildlife Conservation Society in Myanmar and other international institutions. The Blue Moon Fund has recently sponsored a scoping mission to develop a strategic plan for taking an integrated water resources management approach to the Irrawaddy River. Blue Moon Fund has also supported work by the Vermont Law School and Beijing's Global Environmental Institute on social-ecological and environmental standards for investment and sustainable development in Myanmar. Those developments may contribute partially to the social ecological conservation not only in the Southeast Asia region, also globally.

Conclusion

To recap this article, as Science Magazine reports, U Thein Sein's government has taken a number of environmentally favourable steps, including halting the construction of a large Chinese-sponsored dam on the Irrawaddy River, as well as cancelling a major Thai project to build a coal-fired power plant on Burma's southern coast. In addition, a Ministry of Mines (State level) decree issued in March 2012 banned mining within 100 meters of Burma's four largest rivers. Earlier this year, Myanmar passed its first Environmental Conservation Law; widely criticized for being too weak, the law is currently undergoing revision and was expected to be ready by the end of 2013.⁵ With changes afoot, conservationists are looking to Myanmar as the best hope for protecting the intervened aspects of social and ecological life in the region. The people from every state in Myanmar and every people need to participate in planning the use of resources in each of the local area with the responsible persons of the government. Both the government's and the people's participation/cooperation will create a sustainable transformation and democratization in Myanmar.

⁴ Ibid, Pages 16 to 20; Myanmar Matters (Vol 3: August – September 2013).

⁵ The author did not manage to find information on the approved law.

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