

Water and Fish Conservation by Karen Communities

An Indigenous Relational Approach

Andrew Paul, Saw Sha Bwe Moo, and Robin Roth

In this article we ask: how do Indigenous Peoples' relations with more-than-human beings, including spirits, shape Indigenous forms of environmental governance and conservation, and what are the implications for building more just and effective collaborations with external conservationists?

This question motivates ongoing community-based research in the Salween Peace Park, a 5485-square-kilometre Indigenous Karen conservation initiative along the border between Thailand and Burma (Myanmar). This forested and mountainous region, which has been a war zone since the 1950s, is under the *de facto* administration of the Karen National Union (KNU), a political organization that has fought for greater autonomy against a series of military regimes in Burma. Most people here practice a subsistence economy. In addition to cultivating both irrigated rice paddies and upland swidden-fallow fields, Karen hunt, gather, and fish in the forests and streams. Most lands and resources, including water and fish, are managed communally. Karen communities are working to revitalize and articulate their systems of communal land governance following decades of conflict-induced disruption. Our research grew out of community collaborations to support this effort. The first and second author (who is an Indigenous Karen) collaborated closely with community members to conduct the research, while the third author served as an academic advisor.

Being Karen in a relational world

In the Karen world, humans are not the ultimate owners of the land and water. Rather, the land, water, sun, moon, mountains, and rivers all have spirit owners known in the Sgaw Karen language as *K'Sah* (ကစံး).⁴ Humans acquire the ability to inhabit and use the land through negotiating with the *Htee K'Sah Kaw K'Sah* (ထံကစံးကီၵ်ကစံး) (“owners of the water and land”), offering sacrifices and praying for these beings' protection and blessing over their lands and communities. Each Karen

community territory, or *Kaw* (ကွၵ်), maintains a unique hereditary relationship with these *Htee K'Sah Kaw K'Sah*. This relationship includes so-called founders' rituals that structure the ceremonial practices of many Indigenous Peoples across the Southeast Asian highlands.⁵

Every *Kaw* community performs these annual founders' rituals to protect the water. Details differ from one *Kaw* to another, although the purpose remains the same: to ensure proper rains and to prevent water-related disasters such as floods or droughts. In small *Kaw* territories without major streams, rituals may be performed at the head of irrigation canals that feed the rice paddies. However, in *Kaw Thay Ghu*, where we work, the *Klaw Klaw Lo Klo* is a major stream that feeds multiple canals and irrigated rice paddies. At the mouth of this stream, a major ceremony is held annually called *Lu Htee Hta* (လှိုထံထံ) (“offering for the mouth of the stream”). Although people from outside the community are not allowed to directly observe the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony, community members and ritual leaders explained the process.

Lu Htee Hta is performed at the beginning of the annual monsoon rains. A hereditary ceremonial leader – the *Htee Hko* (ထံခိၵ်) or “head of the water” – leads the ceremony, and the entire village participates. After building a bamboo platform [Fig. 1], the *Htee Hko* and his assistants sacrifice a pig. They then place offerings of rice alcohol, areca nut, betel leaves, tobacco, pork, and rice on the bamboo platform, while placing a pitcher of water on the ground at the foot of the structure. Once they have presented these offerings to the spirit owners of the water, the *Htee Koh* and his assistants pray to the spirits for blessing, sufficient water, and protection from floods and droughts. Recognizing the intimate relationship between fish and water quality, local villagers do not fish for three days following the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony. The *Lu Htee Hta* site where the *Klaw Klaw Lo Klo* stream flows into *Bwe Lo Klo* River is also a sanctuary where fishing is prohibited. Community leaders explained that if the fish decline, the stream might dry up, in turn affecting villagers' farms and the efficacy of the *Lu Htee Hta* ritual itself.

Scientists and conservation practitioners increasingly recognize the importance of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews that treat nonhuman nature as living relations rather than inert resources. There is growing realization that these relational values are essential not only to inform conservation efforts but to facilitate transformative societal shifts toward more harmonious ways of being with the Earth.¹ This is good, and indeed long overdue. However, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) cautions, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and specific practices “cannot be decoupled from their communal worldviews, practice and traditions.”² For many Indigenous Peoples, the goal of “conservation” or “resource management” is not to control land and “natural resources,” but rather to maintain respectful and life-giving human relations with more-than-human social others.³

Besides the *Htee K'Sah Kaw K'Sah*, a host of other unseen spirit beings inhabit the Karen world. These include *Nah Htee* (evil water spirits), which are capricious beings that inhabit many streams and water features. For example, *Htee Meh K'Lah* (ထံမိၵ်ကလာ) (“mirror water”) is a spring-fed pool with no outflow and is traditionally protected as a place inhabited by *Nah Htee*. Violating these spirits' territories may cause harm such as temporary blindness, injury, or illness. For example, throwing trash into the water is said to harm the eyes of the *Nah Htee*, and thus one who dirties the water in this way may in turn suffer eye problems or blindness. On one occasion, we witnessed our research assistant perform an offering to the water spirits for his older brother, who had suffered a hurt leg for about three months. Divination had indicated that the man had violated the *Nah Htee* (နါထံ), and that an offering was required to make things right and heal his leg.

Thus, spirit beings play an active role in shaping water governance in Karen communities. As long as humans respect places inhabited by spirits such as *Nah Htee* and uphold ceremonial obligations to the *Htee K'Sah Kaw K'Sah*, they will prosper and avoid harm. These beings maintain a network of protected land and water features while compelling humans to maintain a general ethic of respect toward the water and all beings. Although the lands and waters may

not be directly policed by humans, they are inhabited by more-than-human social beings that demand humans' deference and respect.

An elaborate system of traditional prohibitions, or taboos, also govern humans' relations with the more-than-human species that inhabit a *Karen Kaw* territory. For example, the meat of aquatic and terrestrial species should never be cooked together; if people do, disaster may befall the *Kaw*. Several aquatic species (e.g., certain frogs, *Nya Lee* (ညာလီ) fish [*Channa* spp.], crabs, and shrimp) cannot be consumed in the forest; if people do, they may lose their way and become hopelessly lost. Our community colleague *Saw Nya Ki Htoo* summed it up this way: “The Elders knew how to make it difficult for us to overhunt [or overfish], so they made these rules and protocols that we need to follow.” Thus, relations on the spiritual plane guide *Karen* water governance and relations with both aquatic and terrestrial species, all in the absence of centralized human authority or formal regulations.

Karen fish conservation: two examples

Spiritual protocols also inform *Karen* fish conservation practices. *Karen* communities' creation of no-take fish reserves has been documented in the Salween River basin on both sides of the Thai-Burma border. Such reserves serve as fish nurseries, where total fish biomass may be more than twenty times that in surrounding waters where fishing is practiced.⁷

In the Salween Peace Park, fish sanctuaries have been established by many communities, and new ones continue to be created. Community members draw up formal rules and penalties that are often backed up by the local KNU government authorities. However, *Karen* animists also conduct prayer ceremonies to the *Htee K'Sah Kaw K'Sah* spirits to consecrate the fish sanctuary, protect the fish, and harm anyone who would dare to steal the fish [Fig. 2]. A village leader during such a ceremony told us that “this is how we take



Fig. 1 (left): Artist's rendering of *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony. (Drawing by Saw Poe Ngae, used with permission).

Fig. 2 (above): Animist consecration ceremony for fish conservation area. (Photo by Andrew Paul, 2017)



Fig. 3: Christian prayer service for fish conservation area Salween. (Photo by Andrew Paul, 2018)

care [of the fish].” Karen communities’ establishment of formal rules and punishments does not displace the role of the *Htee K’Sah Kaw K’Sah* in fish conservation; rather, human laws and spiritual laws work in tandem to protect these places and ensure effective fish conservation.

Another example of Indigenous Karen fish conservation involves a species the Karen call *Nya Nah* (ညှိန်နီ) (*Garra* spp.). *Nya Nah* is endemic to the Bwe Lo Klo River that flows through the heart of the Salween Peace Park. Humans maintain a very special relationship with this fish. Not only is *Nya Nah* a preferred species for human consumption, but it is also used for traditional feasts and rituals such as the post-harvest ceremony to release the rice spirit, embodied in the Asian Fairy Bluebird (*Irena puella*). Since *Nya Nah* spawn over pebbles in shallow water, they are vulnerable to fluctuating water levels. Karen stewards use small rock dams to maintain ideal spawning channels for the fish, even placing tree branches over the channels to deter predators. Our research colleague Saw Ray Kay Moo, who maintains these spawning channels, told us that *Nya Nah* fish depend on humans like an infant depends on its mother: “We need to take care of them, or they will die.” This embodies the ethic of reciprocity at the heart of Karen conservation, called *Aw K’Taw* (အိန်တော့): “If you consume, you must also take care of [the fish].”

Before the adult *Nya Nah* fish arrive at the spawning grounds, the entire community gathers in ceremony to pray to the *Htee K’Sah Kaw K’Sah* to protect the fish. Community members also observe numerous taboos related to *Nya Nah*. Violating these taboos, our community colleagues contended, would cause *Nya Nah* to abandon their area and spawn elsewhere. For example, only local community members are allowed to see the fish spawning – if visitors come, the fish will be scared away. It is forbidden to swear, point at the fish, throw rocks, or carry a gun near the *Nya Nah* spawning grounds. The largest fish are always spared to “bring back their children next year,” although some smaller adults may be taken after they have laid their eggs. These spawning fish can only be consumed in the local village; they cannot be given or traded to other villages.

For those who do not understand Karen relationships with more-than-human beings such as spirits or *Nya Nah*, it may be tempting to isolate practices such as the maintenance of spawning channels as examples of ‘practical’ Karen resource management and conservation. However, as our research colleagues explained, it is essential to understand the ceremonies and reciprocal relations within which humans, *Nya Nah*, and the *Htee K’Sah Kaw K’Sah* spirits are embedded. Disregarding spiritual practices while focusing on physical management practices misrepresents and does violence to these relationships, hindering just and effective community-based fish conservation.

Upholding relations in times of change

Most contemporary Kaw communities in the Salween Peace Park include Christian and/or Buddhist households as well as traditional animists, including various syncretic traditions. Since Karen conservation practice is intimately connected with a relational worldview, religious and cultural change presents a challenge for Kaw governance. However, our research findings indicate strong continuity in Karen conservation practice despite religious change. For example, syncretic forms of Buddhism known in Karen as *Bah Paw* (ဘာပေါ) (“flower worship”) maintain many of the traditional forms and practices of Karen animism.

Although Christianity may represent a stronger break from animist worldviews, even here continuity exists. Most Christians still believe in the spirits and can provide numerous stories as evidence. Fish conservation also illustrates this continuity in practice. For example, mixed animist and Christian communities may hold joint consecration ceremonies for a fish conservation area. One such event that we witnessed began with a community meeting among the villages involved in protecting the fish sanctuary. Following the meeting, the animists conducted a consecration ceremony, while the Christians held a similar prayer service nearby [Fig. 3]. The consecration concluded with a joint community feast.

In some Karen communities, nearly all households have converted to Christianity or other religions. In these communities, hereditary ceremonial leaders may no longer exist. However, even here one can find examples of continuity in Karen relational conservation practice. The substantive relations may be different, but many patterns persist. For example, many Christian Karen communities maintain their own fish sanctuaries, consecrating them in a manner similar to the animists – but instead of the *Htee K’Sah Kaw K’Sah*, they pray to the Christian God to protect the fish and harm anyone who would dare to steal the fish. Some Karen communities have held multifaith, multicultural prayer services to consecrate fish sanctuaries.⁹ In the mountains of Salween Peace Park, community research colleagues shared stories demonstrating the effectiveness of Christian consecration rites. In one case, a local animist disregarded a Christian fish conservation area and fished there anyway; immediately thereafter, several of his buffalo and cattle mysteriously died.

Karen communities are also revitalizing and adapting their environmental governance systems. As Karen fish conservation illustrates, protocols rooted in Karen relations with the more-than-human world are now being supplemented with formal codes. These rules ensure that everyone, regardless of religion, is required to protect and conserve community lands, waters, and resources. Formalized fish sanctuaries do not replace relations between humans, fish, and the spirit world – rather, these designations uphold relations and strengthen community conservation in the context of religious and

cultural change. The KNU administration of the Karen National Union has officially recognized Indigenous Kaw territories, which embody the relational worldview and practices of Karen communities. In April 2022, KNU officials awarded the first Kaw title certificates.

Officially launched in 2018, the Salween Peace Park is an umbrella initiative that consolidates and upholds Karen communities’ relational governance systems.⁹ The peace park comprises more than 250 Kaw territories, which in turn host a mix of community forests, agricultural lands, villages, sacred sites – and fish sanctuaries. It represents a “modern formulation of the Indigenous Karen environmental ethic.”¹⁰ Indigenous Karen traditions of the Kaw form the foundation for governance in the Salween Peace Park – including traditional protocols protecting the water and fish. Each Kaw community is explicitly empowered to establish and implement their own community codes and regulations to protect and manage the community territory and its resources.

The Salween Peace Park also seeks to defend Indigenous Karen relations with their ancestral territories by adopting an anti-militaristic and anti-capitalist position. The Salween Peace Park rejects the dams that have been planned by successive central regimes on the free-flowing Salween River. Not only would these dams spell disaster for many of the Salween’s estimated 100 species of fish, but they would also severely undermine Karen communities’ sacred relationships with the river and all of its beings. In contrast, Salween Peace Park offers a vision that upholds human responsibilities and relationships with the lands, forests, waters, and more-than-human social beings of the Salween River Basin.¹¹

Conclusions

Water and fish governance among Indigenous communities such as the Karen obviously includes physical management practices, formal rules, and policies. However, these practices and policies cannot be properly understood apart from the social relations within which they are embedded. Humans’ obligations to maintain proper relations with more-than-human beings, including spirits, are the most important driver of what we might call conservation in a Karen Kaw. In this context, the goal of conservation is to uphold humans’ relations with more-than-human beings rather than to manage land, water, and species as material objects. This is about more than beliefs and practices – it is a way of being in and with the world.

Documenting and enforcing community rules, although important, is not enough. It is essential to continue nurturing the web of relationships within which Indigenous Peoples live, and to foster the conditions for these relations to continue to thrive. The IPBES notes that the fundamental systems change necessary to avert catastrophic biodiversity loss can be facilitated through actions such as “mobilizing values of stewardship through tenure reforms that reconnect Indigenous Peoples and local communities to their territories.”¹²

In other words, a relational approach to management and conservation is needed: rather than manipulating and controlling the natural world, the goal is to maintain lifegiving reciprocal relations. The ongoing inclusive and bottom-up process to formalize traditional community rules and protocols across the diversity of religion and culture in the Salween Peace Park is testament to the possibilities that exist when we take Indigenous relational worlds seriously. Honoring these relations will make conservation collaborations not only more just but also more effective by aligning conservation action with the worldviews and lived experiences of local and Indigenous communities.

Andrew Paul has worked with the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network on the Thai-Burma border since 2014. This article draws on community-based research for his master’s thesis (York University, 2018). Andrew is currently pursuing PhD studies at the University of Georgia, USA. Email: apaul8@uga.edu

Saw Sha Bwe Moo is an Indigenous Karen Person born in a traditional Animist Karen Community in the Salween Peace Park in Karen State, Burma. With a lifetime of experience in biodiversity research and local community-based conservation in his native homeland, Saw Moo recently graduated with a Master of Science in Geography from the University of Guelph. Email: dawdaweh@yahoo.com

Robin Roth is a Professor of Geography at the University of Guelph in Canada. Her scholarship interrogates colonial conservation models and their impact on Indigenous communities and seeks to support Indigenous-led conservation as a means of advancing the twin goals of social justice and biodiversity conservation. She co-leads the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership. Email: roth01@uoguelph.ca

Notes

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