

Save the Mangrove and Mudflats in the Myeik Archipelago

The Mangroves in the Myeik Archipelago are the last remaining old-stand mangroves in Myanmar, are rich in biological diversity, and are a vital source of income for local communities. But they are in imminent danger of vanishing, conservationists warn.

Myeik, 2 December 2016. An expedition organised by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) just landed in Myeik town after 12 days surveying the bird fauna of the mangroves and mudflats between Kawthoung and Myeik in southern Tanintharyi. The team comprised of international and national experts, and completed surveys that began further north in 2015. Their initial findings confirm the global importance of this national treasure, but also raise concerns about its future. The team reported some very healthy mangroves, especially in the Bokepyin area, but logging and other human pressures are building up and some mangrove areas are in a very threatened state. *“The level and speed of degradation and deforestation especially in the northern “shocked the team”,* said Dr Christoph Zöckler, the principal FFI ornithologist of the expedition. To address these threats and conserve these unique coastal ecosystems for future generations requires urgent and concerted action, the team reports.

Several notable bird observations were made, including many of birds migrating from Arctic Russia and China and either wintering in southern Myanmar or stopping over on their way further south. For example, a Terek Sandpiper that was previously marked in Australia was seen on its way back to the continent. Overall, a total of 18 globally threatened birds were observed. Foremost was a new wintering site near Bokepyin for the globally Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper, a coastal bird that feeds in mudflats using its distinctive flat beak. A record 23 globally endangered Nordmann’s Greenshank was recorded in the same area. Other threatened birds included resident Lesser Adjutant Storks, of which seven different individuals were recorded. Together with 44 individuals previously recorded in Aukland and Whale Bays near Myeik, this makes the area the most important for the species in Myanmar and perhaps even the world, since the global population is only estimated to be around 5,000 individuals. The stork is highly dependent on mangroves, where it nests and adjacent mudflats where it feeds on crabs and mud skimmers. High densities of globally near-threatened Mangrove Pittas and Brown-winged Kingfisher, were also recorded, and overall the team made records of over 180 bird species.

“The large number of globally threatened and near threatened bird species gives hope that this region can recover. However, it is shocking to see the speed of mangrove destruction. Urgent action is required if we want to save this unique mangrove and mudflat system” reflected Dr Zöckler.

“I was very surprised to see many mudflats and healthy mangrove in the Bokpyin area. We are responsible to conserve it and to not degrade them again” said U Soe Naing, lecturer of zoology, Myeik University, who was also in the team.

The scientists noticed that almost all the mangroves in the region have already been degraded to some extent, and in some cases only sapling trees are left, meaning the original character of the mangroves has been all but lost. At 16 locations (80%) where the team stopped they observed chain sawing in progress, in one case even at night.

The increased cuttings can no longer be explained by domestic demand for fire wood only. According to many local sources the tree cutting activities have accelerated in the past five years due to cheap imports of chain saws from China and a demand for char coal locally, in Yangon and in Thailand. In some cases near Myeik the mangroves are cut rapidly for the fish factories to produce fish crackers for export to Thailand, Malaysia and other countries. Expansion of shrimp ponds represents a small but growing threat.

If urgent action to stop the mangrove destruction is not put in place soon, the entire mangrove ecosystem will be irrevocably destroyed within five years, the experts warn.

FFI is supporting local stakeholders to work together to sustainably manage this productive environment, which supports productive shrimp, crab, fish and clam-shell fisheries, as well as providing fuel and construction materials to many thousands of people. To date, a mixture of education and awareness, efficient cook stoves, and community forestry certification are being rolled out. This needs to be greatly expanded, and supplemented with the establishment of restricted areas that include pristine mangroves and mudflats, and perhaps sustainable commercial forestry and charcoal production models. Such mixed use could also conserve vital ecosystem services such as water purification and the buffering of storm surges, among others.

“Most of the local communities in the region we spoke to support the idea of a large, restricted use area” reports Shane Thu Lwin, expedition member from Dawei Research Association (DRA), adding that communities need to be central to the management model. FFI is already working with local partners like DRA and Green Network to help local communities improve and demonstrate their community-based management models. Some communities have already demonstrated that they can implement strong protection of the local mangroves.

The level of threat and the speed of the mangrove destruction require a broad platform of activists to join in the conservation, and FFI is inviting all stakeholders, including local communities, local and national authorities, and the private sector, to join in these efforts.

The southern Tanintharyi coast is one of the last continuous and near-pristine mangrove areas in Myanmar, possibly all of Southeast Asia. Myanmar has a responsibility to conserve this unique mangrove and mudflat system as a heritage to the world.

The expedition was part of a wide ranging conservation programme funded by the EU, the Helmsley and the Manfred-Hermsen Foundation.