

# Biodiversity could be casualty of Myanmar openness

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This March 20, 2007 photo provided by Ian Fulton shows the Gurney's Pitta bird foraging in the leaf litter at the Khao Nor Chuchi wildlife preserve in southern Thailand. In neighboring Myanmar, as many as 40,000 gorgeously plumed birds thrive in the lowland rainforests. The bird's status is among many reasons Myanmar is regarded as one of Asia's last bastions of biodiversity, and why environmentalists view the country's steps toward opening its doors with some fear. (AP Photo/Ian Fulton)

(AP) -- As many as 40,000 gorgeously plumed birds known as the Gurney's pitta thrive in the lowland rainforests of economically backward Myanmar. Across the border, Thailand's last five pairs are guarded around the clock against snakes and human predators.

The bird's status is among many reasons Myanmar is regarded as one of

Asia's last bastions of biodiversity, and why environmentalists view the country's steps toward opening its doors with some fear.

Myanmar has avoided the rapid, often rampant development seen in Thailand and other parts of Asia because of decades of isolation brought on by harsh military rule. But as [foreign investors](#) begin pouring in, activists in what was once known as Burma say endemic corruption, virtually nonexistent environmental laws and a long-repressed civil society make it "ripe for environmental rape."

They hope that it will at least prove a race: pro-democracy reformers and [conservationists](#) are urging the government to put more safeguards in place against the unscrupulous eager to take advantage of their absence.

The rush is already on. Airplanes bound for Yangon, the nation's largest city, are booked up with businessmen looking for deals, along with throngs of tourists. Singapore dispatched a delegation with 74 company representatives in March while the Malaysians sent a high-level investment mission focused on property development, tourism, rubber and oil palm plantations. U.S. and European countries are not as involved because sanctions against Myanmar prevent them from starting new businesses there.

"The 'development invasion' will speed up [environmental destruction](#) and is also likely to lead to more human rights abuses," says Pianporn Deetes of the U.S.-based International Rivers Network. "Industries will move very fast, while civil society is just beginning to learn about the impacts."

Under President Thein Sein, the government last year began to loosen the military's grip on power, instituting some reforms and even allowing democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi to run, and win, a seat in Parliament. Reasons for the changes remain murky, but years as an

international pariah have left Myanmar poor and in need of foreign investment.

Environmentally, Myanmar is certainly no longer pristine, but it has been spared some of the wholesale ravages seen in the economically booming, more open societies across Asia.

Positioned at the core of one of the world's richest biodiversity hotspots, it's endowed with plant and animal life of the flanking Himalayas, Malay peninsula, Indian subcontinent and mainland Southeast Asia.

Only three countries in the world have more extensive tropical forests: Brazil, India and the Congo. Myanmar is home to 1,099 of Southeast Asia's 1,324 bird species, and to extensive coral reefs. Unexploited rivers, on- and offshore oil deposits and minerals abound.

"The scale is just massive. It just dwarfs everything else in surrounding countries," says Robert J. Tizard, who heads the office of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society in Myanmar. "It could be a curse that they have so many resources."

Environmentalists say Myanmar's government, which remains dominated by the military, has an abysmal record of protecting its resources, which are often exploited by enterprises linked to generals and their cronies.

One such enterprise, the Yuzana Company, operates in the Hukaung Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, which the government established with considerable fanfare as the world's largest tiger reserve in 2001. Yuzana has razed forests in the area to plant sugar cane, and gold mining is rife.

According to spokesman Ah Nah of the Kachin Development Networking Group, which has been monitoring the valley since 2007, virtually all the concessions are within the reserve boundaries. WCS,

which pushed the regime to set up the sanctuary, says only 25 percent of Yuzana's plantations are in the park.

The Myanmar company's owner, tycoon Htay Myint, enjoys close links to the military. The country's largest money-spinning industries - energy, mining and electricity - and those related to the environment are all led by retired generals.

Jonathan Eames of BirdLife International, which has been tracking the status of the Gurney's pitta, says efforts to create a park to protect bird's habitat failed because of the military's push to replace forests with oil palm plantations in the Tenasserim Range. Similar clearing occurred earlier across the bird's territory in Thailand.

Myanmar operators proved less than competent so deforestation has slowed, but Eames expects it to accelerate again as Malaysians, Indonesians and Thais, experts at plantation management, move in.

Foreign enterprises already have taken advantage elsewhere. Thai companies, particularly in the 1990s, decimated teak forests in eastern Myanmar and are poised to become major players at Dawei, a deep sea port and vast industrial estate being built by Thailand's largest construction enterprise, Italian-Thai Development. It has recently drawn protests by locals fearing pollution of what is now an unsullied region.

Pianporn says a number of Thai companies, faced with increasingly tougher environmental laws at home, are planning to relocate their "dirty industries," including petrochemical and coal-fired plants, next door.

A surge in hydroelectric projects is also expected, with China, the No. 1 investor in Myanmar, leading the charge. In face of strong domestic protests, the regime last September suspended construction of the Myitsone dam on the Irrawaddy River although environmental groups

recently report that work by the China Power Investment company quietly continues around the dam site.

Chinese loggers have stripped large areas of northern Kachin state and others threaten southern regions.

Activists stress that environmentally harmful projects often go hand-in-hand with human rights abuses such as forced labor and mass relocations.

Myanmar officials say they are not blind to the dangers.

Ko Ko Hlaing, an adviser to the president, said bids by foreign investors will be scrutinized to ensure they adhere to a policy of sustainable development.

"We Myanmar citizens are quite aware of the consequences. We cannot allow our cherished motherland to be destroyed by greedy foreign investors," he said in a statement to The Associated Press.

In his inaugural address, Thein Sein pledged "serious attention" to protecting forests and wildlife, reducing air and water pollution and controlling dumping of industrial waste.

But the good intentions could be dashed given Myanmar's vulnerabilities.

The country ranked 180 out of 183 countries on Global Transparency's 2011 corruption index and is only now debating an environmental law in Parliament. Only sketchy guidelines for sustainable development exist.

None of the some 50 major hydro projects completed, under construction or on the drawing boards are known to have any environmental impact statements that would meet international

standards, according to International Rivers Network and other environmental watchdogs.

The Ministry of Environment Conservation and Forestry was formed only last year and is still without a conservation division. Tizard, who works closely with the ministry, says it has some officials who are dedicated to their work, but he and other environmentalists note that their efforts can be easily subverted.

"Under-the-table deals are likely to continue because the military is so entrenched. They or their cronies control most of the businesses while civil society is still very weak. It needs a lot of education," says Wong Aung, of the Burma Environmental Working Group, a network of 10 grass-roots organizations.

"It's a double-edged sword. There will be economic development and you are going to have trade-offs with the environment," says Robert Mather, head of the IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, in Southeast Asia.

There are, he says, some grounds for optimism.

Myanmar has a conservation tradition, including sound forestry practices that are lacking in many surrounding countries, and it appears eager to seek outside assistance. A number of international environmental organizations are already planning to set up there, some in partnership with the growing number of local groups. The Wildlife Conservation Society is currently the only major one with a permanent presence.

Mather says Myanmar, as "the last frontier," could play hard to get - picking only those investors with a history of transparency and environmental sensitivity.

The selection would expand greatly if economic sanctions by Western nations were lifted. The European Union announced last month it will suspend most sanctions for a year while it assesses the country's progress toward democracy, while the United States is taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"You are going back to Thailand in the 1950s with a conservation practices of the 21st century, so there is a lot of opportunity to do it right," Tizard says. "If they follow some of the best practices they could do incredibly well."

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