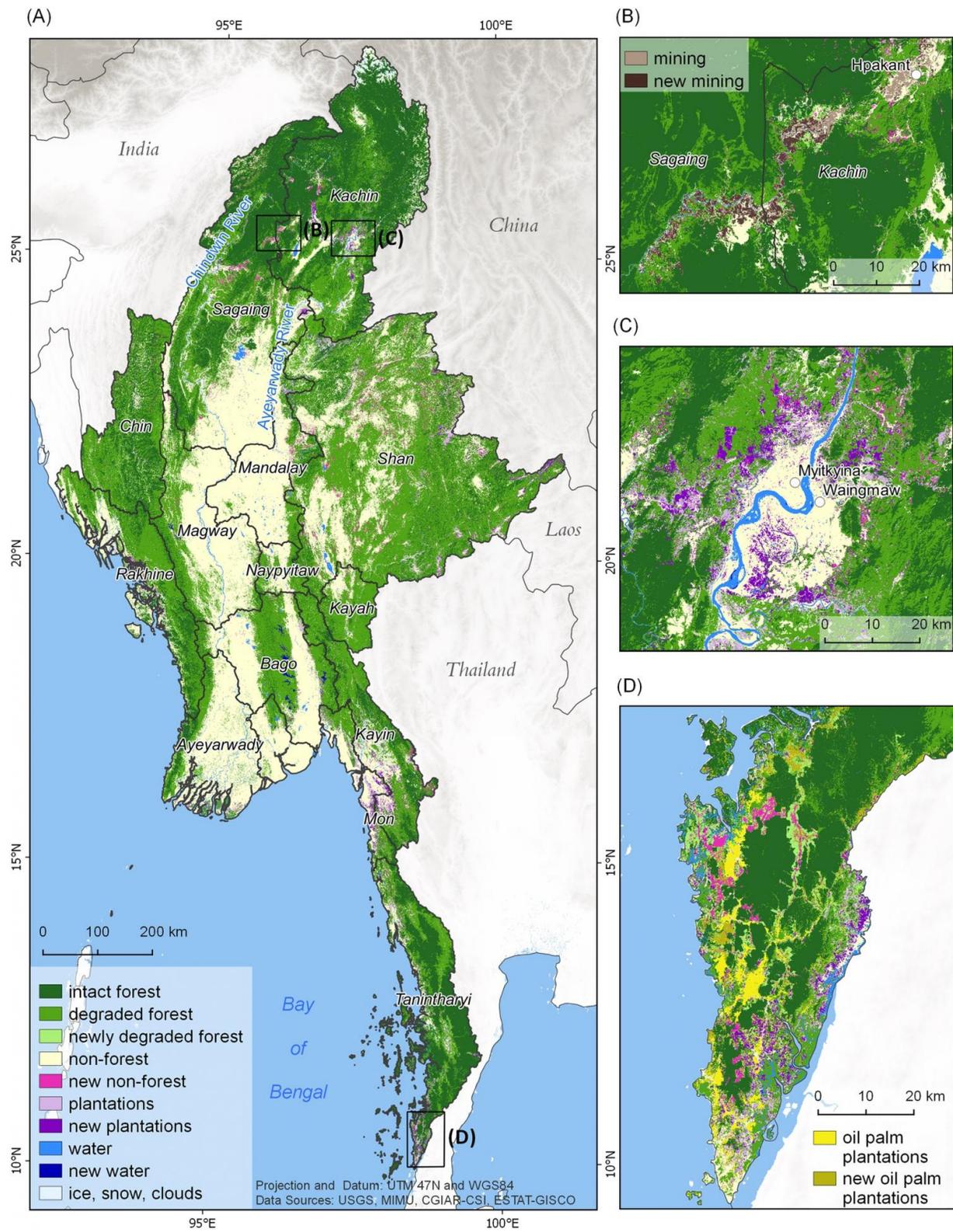


# Myanmar's extensive forests are declining rapidly due to political and economic change

May 17 2017

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The distribution of forest cover and forest cover change across Myanmar. Credit:

Bhagwat et al., 2017

The loss of intact forest cover in Myanmar has accelerated over the last decade, according to a study published May 17, 2017 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Peter Leimgruber from Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, United States of America; Ned Horning from American Museum of Natural History, United States of America; and colleagues.

Due to its long political and economic isolation, Myanmar has retained much of its original forest cover but much of the intact forest is unprotected and is increasingly subject to pressures from rapid political and economic changes in the country. Areas that were inaccessible due to armed conflicts between the government and ethnic groups, for example, are starting to open up for timber production and commercial plantations. To investigate changes to forest cover, Leimgruber, Horning and colleagues used Landsat satellite images to map forest cover in Myanmar between 2002 and 2014.

The researchers found that in 2014 63% of Myanmar was covered by forest (more than 42 million hectares), making it one of the region's most forested countries. However, in terms of conservation efforts and protection of endangered species, intact (un-fragmented) forests are the most valuable. In Myanmar, 38% of forest cover is intact forest and during the study period the authors found that this intact forest declined by 11% (more than 2 million hectares) with an annual loss of 0.94%. Through their analyses the authors also identified 9 township hotspots of deforestation of intact forests and a large area 6.1 million hectares of intact forest in Northern Myanmar.



Credit: Grant Connette

The authors suggest that protection of intact forests should take priority but other ways of improving forest management could include encouraging forest restoration, and reclaiming degraded forestlands for plantations and sustainable agriculture.

Co-author Dr. Qiongyu Huang states: "We found that forests cover 42,365,729 ha or 63% of Myanmar, making it one of the most forested countries in the region. However, severe logging, expanding plantations, and degradation pose increasing threats. Only 38% of the country's

forests can be considered intact with canopy cover >80%. Between 2002 and 2014, intact forests declined at a rate of 0.94% annually, totaling more than 2 million ha [forest](#) loss."

**More information:** Bhagwat T, Hess A, Horning N, Khaing T, Thein ZM, Aung KM, et al. (2017) Losing a jewel—Rapid declines in Myanmar's intact forests from 2002-2014. *PLoS ONE* 12(5): e0176364. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176364](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176364)

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