

Myanmar's Strategic Roadmap for Protected Areas Expansion and Biodiversity Conservation

BACKGROUND

Myanmar is committed to a national mandate for environmental sustainability, actively working toward a target of designating 10% of its total land area as Protected Areas (PAs).

This objective is a core component of the country's 30-year National Forestry Master Plan (2001–2031).

Under the direction of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC), this policy is designed to achieve both national goals and international commitments, such as the Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and Ramsar Convention through the systematic protection of ecosystems and biodiversity.

The establishment of protected areas serves several critical functions:

- Preserving In-situ biodiversity for rare and endangered species.
- Maintaining essential ecosystem services, including watershed protection, carbon sequestration, and disaster mitigation.
- Safeguarding genetic resources for future medicinal and agricultural use.

Myanmar is making determined progress toward its 10% mandate through a combination of land expansion, active habitat restoration, and the emerging and potential recognition of Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs).

As of February 2026, the country has successfully designated 62 Protected Areas, covering 4,454,533 hectares, which equates to 6.58% of the national territory. To bridge the remaining gap, the government has outlined a clear and strategic trajectory.

Key Messages

1. Myanmar is on track to meet its 10% protected area target by 2029, with 6.58% already designated and a clear roadmap to close the remaining gap through pending sites and strategic land identification.
2. OECMs offer a complementary, community-inclusive pathway for expanding conservation beyond formal protected areas, supported by legal provisions and a rich pipeline of Key Biodiversity Areas and Important Bird Areas.
3. Securing community consent through Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is essential to avoid social friction, and the OECMs framework provides a viable model for building trust and ensuring local participation.
4. Active habitat restoration and international recognition including ASEAN Heritage Parks, Ramsar Sites, and UNESCO designations are reinforcing conservation outcomes and unlocking technical and financial support.



Figure 1: Nampon Protected Public Forest, Shan State
Source: Forest Department, Myanmar

COUNTRY TREND HIGHLIGHT

Expansion Trends and Targets

The strategy for new protected areas prioritizes land with high ecological and cultural value, guided by the following criteria:

- Biodiversity Importance: Selection focuses on Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), and internationally recognized conservation areas.
- Land Types: The government aims to convert Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin lands (VFLV) that possess significant forest cover or unique natural characteristics into protected areas.
- Community and Culture: Areas with traditional conservation practices, unique cultural heritage, or potential for nature-based tourism are also targeted for inclusion.

Commitment to the 10% Protected Area Mandate

Myanmar’s conservation policy is driven by a 30-year national forestry master plan requiring 10% of its land as Protected Areas. Currently at 6.58%, the government has a clear path to raise this to 8.75% via 35 pending sites (17 with intent notifications, 18 in proposal). The remaining 1.25% gap (to reach 10%) must be identified and notified by March 2029, with the Forest Department responsible for selecting new areas.

Restoration Program

There is a strategic shift from passive protection to active management through the Re-establishing Natural Habitat (RNH) Program (2019–2029).

Currently 56.61% complete across 19 sites, this program implements 57 distinct conservation activities. A notable success is the recording of tigers in surveys conducted between 2022 and 2025, demonstrating that active habitat restoration yields measurable biodiversity gains. The program focuses on:

- Restoring degraded habitats specifically for flagship species like tigers.
- Implementing a range of activities, including species monitoring, boundary patrols, and public education.



Figure 2: Mount Popa National Geopark
Source: Forest Department, Myanmar



Figure 3: Indawgyi Wetland, internationally recognized areas, Kachin State
Source: Forest Department, Myanmar



Figure 4: Crab Island mangrove protected public forest, Mon State
Source: Forest Department, Myanmar

Myanmar's Natural Heritage Conservation and International Recognition

The core conservation objectives of the Forest Department focus on protecting ecosystems and biodiversity to maintain essential services for local people. These efforts are designed to mitigate climate change and fulfill international commitments through the systematic establishment and management of protected areas, in collaboration with partner organizations.

Myanmar is increasingly integrating its protected areas into international networks to enhance prestige and management standards.

The country currently maintains eight ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHP), seven Ramsar Sites, two UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, and eight East Asian-Australasian Flyway Sites (EAAF). In the realm of Geopark development, Myanmar is working to establish UNESCO Global Geoparks to manage unique geological sites through conservation and education. Mount Popa was designated as a National Geopark on March 20, 2024, and efforts are ongoing to upgrade it to a UNESCO Global Geopark.

OECMs: A Strategic Pathway for Expanding Conservation Coverage

OECMs is a geographically defined space outside of a formal protected area that is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive, long-term outcomes for biodiversity and natural ecosystem services. Unlike traditional protected areas, OECMs can be managed by a diverse range of actors, including Indigenous people, local communities, government agencies, or private organizations.

The Global Context and Myanmar's Engagement

The recognition of OECMs has gained significant momentum under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, particularly through Target 3 (the "30x30" target), which calls for 30% of Earth's land and seas to be legally protected by 2030. OECMs are a crucial mechanism for countries to achieve this target by recognizing biodiversity conservation taking place outside formal protected area systems. Myanmar has been an active participant in advancing the OECMs agenda. In 2018, the country played a leadership role within ASEAN by formally recognizing the importance of OECMs in sustaining protected areas and achieving Aichi Biodiversity Target 11. The government officials of MONREC stated that identifying OECMs in the ASEAN region is timely, as quantifying areas covered by OECMs will help Member States close the conservation gap.

Myanmar's OECMs Potential

Myanmar is making significant strides toward achieving OECMs recognition through several key developments: The 2018 Conservation of Biodiversity and Protected Areas Law enables co-management and community-managed mechanisms, with Community Protected Areas (CPAs) seen as having "high potential for OECMs". A multi-stakeholder process has identified 132 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), and 57 important bird and biodiversity areas (IBAs) offering a rich pool of potential OECMs sites. (<https://www.banca-env.org/kbas-and-ibas/>)

Community-led action: Local groups are already demonstrating effective conservation outside formal protected areas, such as a 7,000-acre site in the Ayeyarwady Delta protecting the Sarus Crane, which aspires to OECMs status. The Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI) also identifies regional OECMs opportunities.

Balancing National Policy Targets with Social Dynamics

Despite clear progress, several significant hurdles remain on the path to the 2029 target.

While Myanmar has made notable progress toward its 2029 protected area targets, several critical challenges remain:

Land acquisition: The Forest Department must identify an additional 1.25% (over 843,400 hectares) of land beyond current proposals to meet the 10% goal. This involves surveying vast tracts of vacant, fallow, and virgin lands that hold high ecological or cultural value, even where dense forest cover is absent. Recognizing OECMs offers a complementary pathway to expand effective conservation beyond formal protected areas.

Community relations: Obtaining community support and consent remains a major challenge for formal designations of conservation areas. Myanmar has not yet established a formal national OECMs framework, policy, guidelines or a comprehensive national OECMs structure. While some forest and marine management areas have the potential to be designated as OECMs, they have not been officially recognized or reported. Current conservation is mostly based on protected areas, community forestry, and sectoral management systems, rather than an operational OECMs framework. The OECMs framework, with its mandated FPIC requirement and emphasis on equitable governance, presents a potential paradigm for fostering trust and assuring local participation.

Administrative coordination: Finalizing protected areas and recognizing OECMs requires complex coordination across multiple government bodies, including those handling security, peace, and land management. Integrating OECMs into the national protected area database will demand active communication and collaboration between relevant departments.

Balancing the state's 10% mandate with the traditional cultural heritage and livelihoods of local communities is essential to avoid further social friction. Doing this will help make sure that international titles, such as Ramsar Sites or UNESCO sites, are achieved and sustainable.



Figure 5: Karasuri Mangrove Protected Public Forest
Source: Forest Department, Myanmar

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The implementation of Myanmar's 30-year National Forestry Master Plan involves navigating complex social and administrative hurdles while leveraging international recognition and ecosystem benefits. The table below summarizes the key challenges and opportunities.

Challenges	Opportunities
Bridging the 3.42% gap to reach the 10% target by March 2029. Identifying suitable land from Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin (VfV) land.	Strategic conversion of VfV lands with high biodiversity, cultural heritage, or unique ecological value. Recognition and reporting of OECMs to complement formal protected areas.
Local objections and social friction.	Transition to Community Conserved Protected Areas (CCPA) and OECMs with mandatory Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Community-led models, such as in the Ayeyarwady Delta, show viable pathways.
Complex coordination with multiple bodies, including Security, Peace and Land Management. Establishing national database and Updating these databases to include OECMs.	Leveraging the 2018 Biodiversity and Conservation of Protected Areas Law, which enables seven protection categories, including community-managed mechanisms.
Restoring degraded habitats for flagship species; the Re-establishing Natural Habitat (RNH) program covers 19 sites and only 56.61% complete.	Potential for ecotourism to generate income and jobs while protecting watersheds and protecting from natural disasters. OECMs recognition can support wetlands like the Gulf of Mottama Ramsar Site (Wetland of International Importance).

CONCLUSION

Myanmar's commitment to expanding its protected area network to 10% of the national land area is a cornerstone of its 30-year National Forestry Master Plan (2001–2031). While significant progress has been made reaching 6.58% coverage with 62 established sites as of early 2026, the final push toward the 10% target requires a strategic and multi-dimensional approach. The success of this conservation strategy rests on several critical pillars, including a rigorous 3-year action plan (2026–2029). By finalizing the status of the 35 pending sites, identifying new areas of high biodiversity significance, and actively pursuing OECMs recognition for community-managed conservation areas, Myanmar aims to ensure its natural heritage provides sustainable ecosystem services and ecotourism opportunities for the local population.

Ultimately, this expansion is more than a land-use mandate; it is a vital investment in the country's biological and cultural identity for the future generations. The integration of OECMs into Myanmar's conservation framework represents a forward-looking strategy that respects community rights, leverages international partnerships, and recognizes the vital role of local governance in achieving long-term biodiversity outcomes.

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Asian Forest Cooperation Organization

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