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UNDER THE GUN

Western conservation biologists working in Myanmar have been accused of colluding with a brutal military regime — charges they deny. **Duncan Graham-Rowe** reports from this pariah state.

In March 1997, Chris Wemmer, a biologist with the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington DC, received an alarming fax. It was an article from the British *Observer* newspaper accusing him of colluding with the Burmese junta in committing human rights abuses in the country now known as Myanmar.

The article, headlined “Save the rhino, kill the people”, implicated Wemmer’s organization in the murder and forced removal of ethnic Karen people to make way for a huge wildlife park, called the Myinmoletkhat Reserve. It criticized the Smithsonian Institution for being one of the first Western organizations to work with the regime “since it massacred 3,000 demonstrators in 1988”.

Wemmer still fumes about the article, which he claims misrepresented the Smithsonian’s involvement in this secretive southeast Asian nation. That the institution’s project, in a wildlife park called Chatthin, headed by a

Karen warden, was based 1,200 kilometres north of the site of the atrocities described in the piece didn’t seem to matter, he complains: “We were guilty by association.”

The next day, Wemmer was summoned to Capitol Hill, to answer congressional staffers’ questions about his involvement with the Burmese regime, then called the State Law and Order Restoration Council. They wanted to know why a federally funded institution was operating in a country against which the United States enforced sanctions. They eventually accepted Wemmer’s arguments that his work was benign. But the biologist left the meeting knowing that he was on thin ice. “We were working in a highly charged political arena, and stood accused of hurting Myanmar’s democratic movement,” Wemmer says.

Similar accusations still swirl around Wemmer and other Western conservation biologists who work in Myanmar. The researchers are convinced that their work is justified, given

the country’s rich yet threatened biodiversity — and the enthusiasm of local conservationists for partnerships with Western scientists. But critics worry that their presence helps to legitimize the military regime, and seems to prioritize the needs of wildlife above those of a brutally repressed population.

Innocents abroad?

When he first visited Myanmar in April 1988, Wemmer did not know what he was getting into. “I didn’t do a great deal of soul searching before going out there,” he admits. His first impressions were simply of a very poor and isolated country. “That was about all I knew,” says Wemmer. “I think most field biologists are not particularly well informed about the countries in which they work.”

But four months later, Myanmar erupted into the headlines when a mass demonstration in the capital, Yangon (formerly Rangoon), ended with a massacre often called ‘Burma’s

Tiananmen Square'. Since then, Myanmar's military rulers, who now call themselves the State Peace and Development Council, have been heaped with opprobrium. They are at war with the Karens and other ethnic minorities, and rule the Burmese with a rod of iron. The London-based group Burma Campaign, which is pressing for democracy in the country, maintains that adults and children are routinely coerced into working on government projects; more than a million people have been relocated to make way for military installations, business ventures and the wildlife park highlighted in the *Observer* article. And according to Amnesty International, "torture has become an institution". Meanwhile, Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is under house arrest, 17 years after she was elected to lead the country.

Asset stripping

Wemmer and his colleagues agree the regime is unsavoury. But they reject the accusation of collusion in human-rights abuse. "If I thought what I was doing out there was aiding the regime in abusing the people, my conscience wouldn't allow me to stay. I would get the hell out," says Wemmer. "But by talking to a lot of poor people in the country and getting a really intimate understanding of how they feel, I came to the conclusion that what we are doing is basically a positive thing. Not being there wouldn't help the cause in any way."

For conservationists, the main motivation is the opportunity to protect one of Asia's last wildernesses. "Myanmar has the largest area of standing forest in the whole of the Asian-Pacific region," says Alan Rabinowitz, director of science and exploration for the Wildlife Conservation Society, based at the Bronx Zoo in New York, who has worked in the country for many years. The forests are a biodiversity hotspot and a stronghold for endangered tigers and Asian elephants.

But maybe not for much longer: logging is rife, with much of the profits believed to go to Myanmar's military rulers. According to the London-based pressure group Global Witness, which works to highlight the links between the pillage of natural resources and abuses of human rights, Myanmar exported more than 1.72 million cubic metres of timber between 1999 and 2000.

If this trend continues, the country will fast go the way of neighbouring Thailand, which has lost more than half of its



forests over the past 30 years. For Jonathan Eames, who works for the Indochina arm of BirdLife International, the threat to Myanmar's biodiversity demands immediate action. "If we wait five or ten years in the hope that there's going to be a transition to a democratic, freer Myanmar, it will be too late," says Eames, who is now working on a US\$1-million project to set up a reserve at Natmataung in the south of the country.

But are biologists such as Eames, Rabinowitz and Wemmer letting their passion for conservation override concerns about legitimizing a brutal regime? To assess the situation, I travelled in May to Hukaung, in the

northern state of Kachin, where the Wildlife Conservation Society is involved in a project to establish the world's largest tiger reserve, covering some 22,000 square kilometres. The park has around 100 tigers, and the potential to support ten times that number.

Under surveillance

Arriving in Myanmar, the first impression is of its friendly, hospitable people. But political reality soon creeps in. Soldiers scan your documents at regular checkpoints, while locals glance anxiously over their shoulders before starting a conversation. Propaganda posters express the "People's Desire" to crush troublemakers and oppose interfering foreigners. And in Tenai, an ugly mining town that hosts the Hukaung tiger reserve's headquarters, a man from military intelligence asked my guide daily questions about my movements.

But in the park, there's little official interference, and few reminders that you're in a country reviled for its human-rights record. During my visit I accompanied three rangers on a trek into the

jungle to set camera 'traps' used to count tigers. There are 20 rangers, mainly young men who spend 21 days each month in the field, unarmed and charged with protecting an area the size of Vermont against poachers, illegal gold miners and potentially hostile nomadic hunters. Part of their job is to teach local people about the benefits of conservation and discourage them from hunting.

It is tough work. On our way to the field sites, we were plagued by leeches, slashed by razor-sharp, face-high grasses, and had to force our way through bamboo thickets so dense that we could barely swing our bush knives. Convincing the impoverished people

of this region that it is better to conserve tigers than to hunt them for the lucrative Chinese medicine market is very difficult.

It is clear that the park rangers, and Burmese conservationists, appreciate the presence of Western biologists. Myanmar needs foreign expertise, money and equipment, says U Gar, a retired forestry official who helped set up the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association, the country's first environmental group. "We can't wait, because our natural resources are depleting at an alarming rate," he argues. "Doing something is better than doing nothing."

Western involvement may also help keep the authorities honest, when it comes to

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Timber land: Myanmar's huge forests are being logged rapidly for export.

conservation. Too often, protected reserves are merely 'paper parks'. One of the most egregious examples is the Pedaung Wildlife Reserve, a small park near Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin, which I passed through on my way to Hukaung. It is Myanmar's oldest reserve, but arguably the most degraded.

The warden, Khin Maung Hla, told me that since the park was established in 1918 it has suffered nearly 40% deforestation in its lowlands. The rhino, elephants and tigers that once roamed the forests are long gone. Even after the government gave Pedaung a new charter for wildlife protection in 1992, the degradation accelerated: three army compounds, a railway and a computing college have been built in the park.

Efforts at reforestation by the warden and local people consist of plantations of mangoes, lychees and other fruit trees. Far from restoring the area's natural biodiversity, these are monocultures planted to feed soldiers and make money.

Uneasy alliance

Rabinowitz vows that this won't be repeated at the Hukaung tiger reserve. "But it is a huge challenge," he says. I counted seven government-backed gold mines on a map of the park; no one knows how many illegal miners are in the area, eroding riverbanks and polluting the water with mercury. But the illicit miners, mostly migrants from China, aren't making huge profits. So Rabinowitz is confident that — with the Wildlife Conservation Society's continued involvement — they will eventually be moved on, allowing the park to concentrate on protecting tigers and other wildlife.

There is plenty to protect: during my trek we saw tracks of wild Asian elephants, the endangered fishing cat and a variety of endemic deer. I even learned of a recent unconfirmed sighting of the critically endangered pink-headed duck — on a hunter's skewer.

The Hukaung reserve also represents an uneasy collaboration between the Burmese government and one of its ethnic opponents, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). As part of a ceasefire deal, 80% of the park is under KIA control. Rabinowitz has found it uncomfortable wrestling with Myanmar's ethnic tensions, but he is happy with the end result. "I have been playing the middle man, which is incredibly difficult," he says. "I'm being manipulated by both sides, but unless it's to do some evil I don't care because I am manipulating them into saving tigers."

Rabinowitz also argues that Myanmar's record on human rights may not be as despicable as is generally believed — at least when judged against the standards of other countries in the region. "The displaced people from



Middle man: Alan Rabinowitz (centre) has had to work with both government and guerrillas.

Burma are a very intelligent, educated group who have maintained a hugely strong lobby," he says. "I'm not arrogant enough to say I have seen everything there is to see. But having worked in the country for ten years, travelling to the most remote areas, I think it's been blown out of proportion."

Eames also questions whether the abuses in Myanmar are of a fundamentally different magnitude to those in neighbouring countries, asking: "Where do you draw the line?" Do you stop working in countries such as China, which has countless political prisoners and has annexed Tibet? What about Indonesia,

where militias linked to the government slaughtered one fifth of the population of East Timor before it eventually gained independence in 2002? Even tourist-friendly Thailand last year cracked down on Muslim dissidents, Eames notes.

Activists agree that human rights are being trampled across much of Asia, but argue that Myanmar gives cause for concern. "It is a

military dictatorship where human rights are severely denied," says Sarah Green of Amnesty International, pointing to the country's 1,400 political prisoners. Another issue, highlighted by Human Rights Watch, is the recruitment of child soldiers — some 70,000 members of the Burmese army are believed to be less than 16 years old. And according to the International Labour Organization, forced labour is widespread. The authorities claim this is part of Buddhist tradition in which people donate their labour for the good of the community. But it's difficult to reconcile a practice traditionally associated with the maintenance of temples with the use of 'volunteer' labour to build military barracks, or to clear minefields with scant regard for safety.

Wemmer admits to being troubled by the issue of forced labour, but says that it is hard to pin down exactly what's going on. "You see people working on the roads and highways, mainly women and kids, but there's no chain gang," he says. My experience was similar: there were no obvious signs of oppression and the main struggle, affecting civilians and soldiers alike, seemed to be with rural poverty.

Eames takes a pragmatic view. "I have issues with any country that has political prisoners," he says. "I would prefer it if Myanmar were a liberal democracy, but it isn't."

Game plan

John Jackson, director of the Burma Campaign, doesn't condemn Westerners for working in the country, "provided you can go in and do the work you feel is necessary without buttressing the regime". The problem is that it's impossible to work on conservation projects in Myanmar without engaging on some level with senior officials. Top-down micro-management is so pervasive that it's difficult to get anything done without ministers or generals being involved. And then there is the uncomfortable question of whether the regime is courting Western conservationists to gain international credibility. "I don't think they would do anything without there being a game plan," says Jackson.

This means that conservation biologists working in the country can expect to face continued scrutiny from suspicious politicians. "One has to use a certain amount of charm and guile to persuade these people that what we are doing is not against US interests or aiding and abetting the government of Myanmar," says Wemmer.

When working in an undemocratic country like Myanmar, Wemmer adds, it's important to keep questioning your motives. But in the end, he takes his lead from his Burmese collaborators: "When local conservationists ask for our international support, I don't think it's reasonable to say 'No, we're not going to help you because we don't support your government'."

Duncan Graham-Rowe is a freelance journalist based in Brighton, UK.

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