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Marine Mammal Research in the Gulf of Mottama



Source © IUCN website—<https://www.iucn.org/news/myanmar/202001/young-myanmar-researchers-receive-award-marine-mammal-research-gulf-mottama>

A little over one year ago, we confirmed - with our own eyes - the presence of Indo-Pacific Finless porpoises (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*, Vulnerable) and Irrawaddy dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*, Endangered) in the coastal waters of the Gulf of Mottama. We jumped up and down in the boat, ecstatic to finally have these sightings after months of exploratory “detective work” interviewing fishermen and waiting for boat-friendly dry season to return. Some months later, we added Indo-Pacific Humpback dolphins (*Sousa chinensis*, Vulnerable) to the list when they swam by the survey boat for the first time.

Of course, local fishers had long known about these animals. In fact, they were the ones who first told us about them. Based on the information they shared, our team became the first to do research on marine mammals in the Gulf of Mottama, and this is the only active marine mammal project along Myanmar’s long coastline.

This team is made up of young researchers from the Myanmar Coastal Conservation Lab (MCCL) at Point B Design + Training, a research and education NGO based in Mawlamyine. Point B MCCL conducts research and research training for SDC’s Gulf of Mottama Project, which supports coastal natural resource management in the gulf, an area of extraordinary biological productivity. The project’s biodiversity component initially focused on migratory shorebirds, but has now broadened after we confirmed the presence of these three small cetacean species.

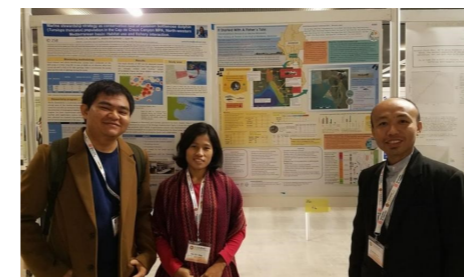
Because there has been so little research done on its marine mammals, Myanmar has not been well represented at international conferences on marine mammal research and conservation. In December 2019, with project support, MCCL’s Yin Yin Htay, Aung Naing Soe, and Wint Hte participated in the World Marine Mammal Conference

(WMMC) in Barcelona. WMMC is the largest and most important gathering of marine mammal researchers in the world and this was a valuable opportunity for young Myanmar researchers to meet global experts and regional colleagues, strengthen their knowledge of marine mammals, identify future collaborations, and raise the profile of the Gulf of Mottama Project.

On top of all of the inspiration they gained from the conference, the team received the J. Stephen Leatherwood Award for most outstanding presentation on marine mammal research and conservation in South and Southeast Asia. This award reflects not only their stellar poster presentation, but also the award committee’s enthusiasm for representation from Myanmar, particularly with so many young Myanmar researchers included as authors on the poster (20 in total).

The long author list reflects how this research was a valuable, and in many cases first, opportunity for young Myanmar researchers to learn about the importance of working with communities to collect local ecological knowledge and organize boats-based surveys. It was also a chance to learn about coastal conservation and fisheries more broadly.

The conference experience and the award have added to the team’s motivation to expand their work on marine mammal conservation. They are now better equipped to do so, with greater knowledge and experience. Many thanks to the Gulf of Mottama Project for supporting this research and the opportunity to attend this career-changing conference!



The Gulf of Mottama Project is an initiative of SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, implemented by a consortium led by HELVETAS, together with NAG and IUCN. The project started in 2015 and is currently in its second phase. ■

Message from the Chief Technical Advisor (CTA)

This is the third edition of the English version of the Gulf of Mottama Project (GoMP). It comes during a time of high uncertainty with the ongoing Corona Virus Disease (COVID 19) crisis. The project is delivering emergency assistance in the many quarantine camps set-up for the returning migrants in the Gulf of Mottama area and is preparing for further assistance for the most affected communities.

This newsletter opens with a research conducted by Point B Training + Research on the porpoises (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*) and Irrawaddy dolphins in the Gulf of Mottama. We learned from our fishermen in the GoM that these porpoises and dolphins do live here and the project identified three different species. This is an important finding because as a project we are concerned with the conservation of vulnerable species in our area and therefore it is important to identify the most endangered species. The results were presented at a World Conference on Marine Mammals in Barcelona, Spain. Here the Point B Team received the J. Stephen Leatherwood Award for most outstanding presentation on marine mammal research and conservation in South and Southeast Asia. Congratulations; well done!

The next article is on an experience we had in Aung Khan Thar, Thaton district with Co-Management in the area. Together with the Fisheries Development Association and the GoMP team, the villagers identified an area of 10,000 acres where the villagers themselves managed mangroves, which was also very suitable for mud-crabs fattening. The Chief Minister signed a decree to authorize the villagers to manage the area. However, the ownership wasn’t very clear and one year later, different government departments and private sector players wanted to convert the area to make it suitable for rice farming. After a meeting between Government, Private sector, villagers and GoMP staff, it was decided to convert 1,000 acres for rice production and the remaining 9,000 acres was used for mangrove and other conservation efforts. This experience showed that dialogue between different users of the coastal mudflats is essential in further developing the Gulf of Mottama Co-management zones.

The next two pages show the result of a study conducted by students from the Marine Science Department on Mawlamyine University in three villages in Mon State. These students collected data on Fisheries management and analyzed these with the help of the Environment Development Fund (EDF). The results were presented back to the three communities where the data were collected. This step is very important in order for communities and Government departments to make an informed decision on aspects related to fisheries management in the GoM. In the coming years, we want to ensure that research data collected by students and staff from both Mawlamyine and Bago Universities are reported back to the communities and government departments to ensure that wise-use and management of natural resources is based on scientific data collected in the GoM.

The last page of the newsletter, updates the reader on the skills for employment (S4E) activities of the GoMP. This activity focuses on specific skills development, in order to find meaningful employment (either self-employed or employed in another company) opportunities with a special focus on youth. The trainings are based on an in-depth analysis of the interests and opportunities for this group. It works with private sector players in the field of fashion design, beauty salons and small automotive, who become the trainers for this program. Students are not only learning in training centers but also practically learning in companies and learn how it is in real life to have a business. So far 491 trainees have graduated and we are conducting a tracer study to find out where these graduates find employment. The result of the study will be available in the middle of 2020.

I do hope you enjoy reading this volume of the newsletter. The next newsletter will have a special focus on the COVID 19 crisis. Stay healthy everybody!

Jos van der Zanden
Chief Technical Advisor GoMP.



Photo © Min Nyan Seik/KMCO

Mangrove Protection Creates Unity and Improves Future Resource Management

By: Than Htike Aung



Mangrove Research trip by Bago University at Aung Kan Hlaing Village, Kaw Township. Photo—© Bago University

This story started at the beginning of 2017 when villages started to plant some mangroves in one small area near the coast of Thaton township in a small fishery village called Aung Khan Thar. During that event two ministers, local elected parliament members, state and district level department heads actively participated. It was the start of a change in communication between local community and the local government in that area.

One critical thinking person in Aung Khan Thar, U Myint Oo, strongly believed in the protection of natural resources and mangroves since he knew from experiences that these habitats are critical in the support for livelihoods of small fishermen and landless families. U Myint Oo was really concerned about his surrounding community, in which many villagers had a daily battle to survive because of lost fishing grounds and land near the coastal area of Thaton township.

They identified an area of newly formed land near the coast where they went fishing daily. They also observed that this new land grows fast and supports food for the mud crab which could become a source of daily income for the people who do not own boats. In order to protect these resources for a sustainable improvement of their livelihoods, they proposed to identify an area as co-management zone for both



Photo © Myint Oo

the fisheries and forest sector. They requested the Mon state government to authorize to use the land as a co-management zone for the local community. The government gave the authorization and community declared the Aung Khan Thar Co-management zone on 16th Oct 2017. The people from the local community were very proud of this achievement and in their view created a brighter future for themselves and their children. Their dream became true.

However, conflicts started one year later, when new livelihood opportunities were identified by multiple government depart-

ments and local business people from surrounding areas. It wasn't clear to whom the land was allocated and several government departments were in charge of this allocation. During the early stages, the local community were not able to influence the land allocation in their favor and the local business people and administrator wanted to convert the whole area into new paddy land.

The local community and the Village Development Committee (VDC) consulted with the GoMP team to discuss how to overcome this issue using a conflict sensitive approach between the local busi-

ness people, village administration structure and other related departments. The GoMP suggested to communicate with different stakeholders who were involved in the case. The GoMP facilitated community members to gather the right information and communicate the people-needs to the respective government administration bodies in order to reach a fair decision on the wise-use of natural resources on this newly formed land.

The GoMP facilitated technical support to measure the real needs of this newly formed land along the coast and developed appropriate maps to enable in-



Photo © Myint Oo



The villagers were carrying the concrete piles for installation to mark as a crab protective area near Aung Kan Thar Village, Thaton Township, Photo—© FDA

Photo © Myint Oo

formed decisions on the allocation of these resources in a sustainable manner.

After this information gathering, the GoMP facilitated a public meeting in Aung Khan Thar where other people from surrounding villages were invited. During this meeting they presented and discussed the plans for an environmentally wise use of the area and a joint action plan was drafted for all the users of the area including the technical recommendation of the Forest Department and Department of Fisheries. This action plan was presented to the General Administration Department.

The leaders and villagers never gave up on their dream to protect their resources, which they value for their future use. Three village leaders worked together and agreed on the allocation of this newly formed land and they found a productive way to communicate this to the administrative body in order to stop the allocation of new land without public consultation.

Because of these efforts, the govern-

ment responded with the following actions:

1. To take a detailed measurement of this newly formed land by the District Land Utilization Committee.
2. The measurement took into consideration the conservation purpose of the land and the Environmental Conservation Department took part in this measurement.
3. The technical team submitted a report to the Mon State Cabinet for decision making.

After studying the report, the cabinet organized a public consultation during which it invited all the community members including farmers, fishers and landless people. The following agreement was made:

1. To keep 9,000 acres as a mud crab protection area and mangrove plantation along the coast.
2. 800 -1,000 acres of farmland, far from the coast, will be allocated to landless people who want to grow rice and other crops. This has still to be approved by the District Land Utilization Committee.

3. To develop detailed maps for the protected areas and boundary stones to clearly identify the protected areas.

After the decision by the State Government, the local villagers made the demarcation stones and carried them to identify the boundaries of the mangrove plantation and mud-crab protection area for everybody to identify these areas.

This is the first community-lead land allocation exercise in the area. It became possible through a careful and evidence-based advocacy approach, which formed the basis for the collaboration between stakeholders in a positive manner. The Government had a good learning experience on how to collaborate among different departments and start the formation of a Working Group at township level of the Coastal Resource Management Committee. This incident showed all involved the importance of integrated management of natural resources and how collaboration reduces the risk of conflicts in the daily work. ■



Mangrove Research trip by Bago University at Aung Kan Hlaing Village, Kaw Township. Photo—© Bago University



Skill Training for New Jobs

By: Min Nyan Seik - KMCO

During the second phase of implementation, the GoMP started “Skills Development for Employment” (S4E) Activities with the aim to improve diversification of livelihoods in the coastal area. The project targets 1,000 youth in the next four years (2018—2021) to receive vocational skills in multiple sectors. These S4E activities will be implemented hand in hand with the private sector through partnership agreements.

The main objectives of the S4E activities are to empower local youth in vocational skills, improve knowledge on business planning and financial management in order to increase family income. This activity is designed to work as practical approach by applying method of competency-based skills training. In the preparation stage the Gulf of Mottama Project staff, in collaboration with private sector players, assessed the skill requirements and interest among youth, focusing on urban areas. Based on these requirements and interest, the project invited employers to come together for developing a curriculum and course design in their respective profession.

So far, the project trained about 490 youth on different skill sets such as sew-

ing & fashion design, beauty salon and automotive repair together with 32 employer trainers. According to Gulf of Mottama Project's Skills Development Officer, Mi Khaing Khaing Oo, currently 125 out of 490 youth were able to set up their own businesses and some are working in the garment factories. The remaining were not yet working as they graduated their course recently. The project is conducting a tracer study to follow up on the careers of the graduates of this program.

GoMP's working approaches are to empower the local youth to enable them to set up their business or find meaningful employment through skills they have acquired from skill trainings. In addition, the GoMP approaches allow employer trainers to improve their ways of teaching to be more systematic and monitored which benefits their businesses in the long run.

Ma Thiri Shwe, the owner of Hla Aka Ri Beauty Salon said, she had been working for 13 years in this business, but she did not have a regular customer like she has in now. Before this S4E trainings, she only trained 15 trainees. In early 2018, she signed a contract with the Gulf of Mottama Project as an employer trainer

and she agreed to train 30 trainees with the support from the project. During the training period, she got many customers visiting her shop and was able to strengthen her networks.

Likewise, Ma Aye Mi Kyaw, Fashion & Design School owner, set-up her business 10 years ago, but she did not have a training curriculum as course instruction and based the training on her experiences to instruct the trainees. She said, she had trained 30 young women on basic skills of tailoring but some of them could not complete the course due to several reasons. Since she cooperated with the GoMP, some changes occurred as she was able now to teach more systematically as she received technical support from GoMP on developing curriculum and teaching lesson plans. Working with GoMP improved her knowledge and confidence on facilitating and teaching. She believes and hopes that her fashion and design school will become well known and successful in the future.

The Gulf of Mottama Project is working in eight townships in Mon State and Bago Region. It focuses on conservation and sustainable development in sectors such as fisheries, agriculture, water sanitation and hygiene, governance, skill development and research. ■

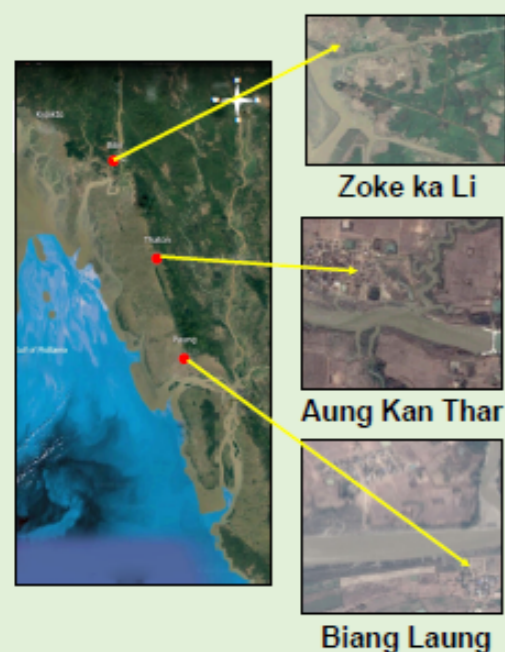
Protecting and Managing Our Marine Resources for Our Livelihoods and the Future

What is a healthy fishery?

A healthy fishery provides income and food for many generations.

When a fishery is being overfished, it will be harder to earn a livelihood fishing. This puts people and the environment in danger.

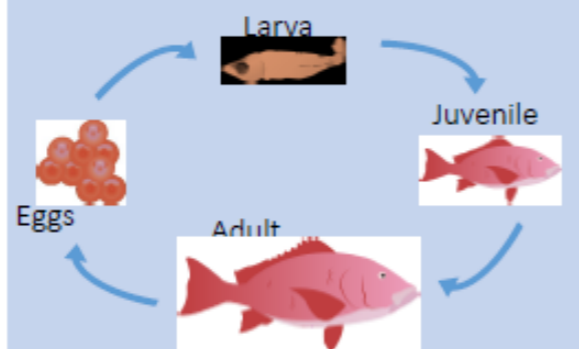
Communities members have an important role in management and keeping fisheries healthy.



Research project

To learn about the health of fisheries and provide more information to resource users in the Gulf of Mottama, Mawlamyine University researchers May Thaw Khin, Ye Mon Aung, and Aye Nyein Soe collected information in the communities of Biang Laung, Aung Kan Thar, and Zoke Ka Li. The communities were visited twice per month from December 2018 to September 2019. This project was a joint project with the organizations EDF and GoMP.

The life cycle of a fish



I am a fish. I start out very small as an egg and turn into a larva. Eventually, I grow to be a juvenile. If I grow big enough and survive to become an adult, I can lay eggs that will help increase the number of fish.

Please don't catch me when I have eggs so I can give birth to more fish and keep the fishery healthy.

Croaker Catch by Size Category



Fish weight

During this project, we measured the length and weight of over 500 croakers. The purpose was to understand where fish are in their life cycle when they are caught.

We learned that the most frequently caught fish are small fish (size category 2). This is a concern because small fish may not have had a chance to reproduce.

Fish reproduction

As I grow bigger and bigger, I am able to produce more and more eggs.



Fish eggs

We learned that some croaker can be found with eggs throughout the year but a higher proportion of fish have eggs in June and July.

This could mean the spawning season for croaker is in June and July but we need more research to improve certainty.

Important commercial species

We found that five important commercial species in these communities were:

Croaker



Sea bass



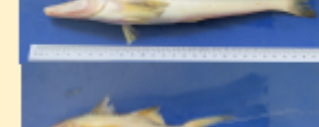
Flathead Mullet



Lizard fish



Paradise Threadfin



Next steps

We should manage our fishery to ensure fish populations are healthy. If we don't it may be harder to catch fish and earn income, which is important for education and health.

What YOU can do

Communities members have an important role in management and keeping fisheries healthy.

Do not use illegal fishing gear. Illegal fishing gear catches small fish that need to grow to reproduce.

Do not fish during the closed season. Croaker may be reproducing then.

Research is important because it can be used to improve management and improve livelihoods. When communities and researchers work together, we can better understand the marine environment and protect the health of the fishery.

Working together, we can manage our fisheries for our livelihoods and the future.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank community members from Biang Laung, Aung Kan Thar, and Zoke Ka Li for their support during this research.

The Gulf of Mottama Project (GoMP)

