

SALWEEN YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

TECHNICAL REPORT

Human Connections to the Salween River



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Research Team

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INTRODUCTION

The Salween River (Thanlwin) is one of Southeast Asia's longest free-flowing rivers. Originating on the Tibetan Plateau, it flows through China and Myanmar, forms part of the Myanmar–Thailand border, and finally enters the Andaman Sea (Gulf of Martaban) at Mawlamyine in Mon State. Numerous people in Kayin and Mon States live along the Salween River Basin and depend on it for various purposes: fishing, farming, transportation, and water resources.

However, beyond social and ecological benefits, the Salween also carries deep cultural and spiritual significance, as many traditions, cultural practices and festivals are closely connected to it. These are less well known, and for that reason we studied the relationship between the Salween river and traditional beliefs, cultures, and festivals. The locations where our research took place, Kayin State and Mon State, are located within the lower part of the Salween River Basin in southeastern Myanmar. The study took place during the second half of 2025, and was conducted by three young community members who themselves are rooted in the lower part of the Salween River in Myanmar, Kayin and Mon States, with the support from IUCN's BRIDGE program.

The rationale behind this study is the need for more meaningful river conservation – conservation efforts that connect the river with the traditions, cultural practices, beliefs, and festivals of the local people. This study aims to fill important nature conservation gaps in two ways. Firstly, by describing the local perceptions held by people living in the southern part of the Salween basin and how passionate they are about the sustainability of the Salween River. Secondly by describing how the local beliefs about traditional cultures, beliefs, and festivals play a role in the sustainability of the River.

The purpose of the study is to show the connections between the Salween and human beliefs, and how cultural values can support conservation. Specifically, the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To explore the diverse experiences, behaviors, and impacts of people from varying age groups and social roles along the Salween River.
2. To explore how cultural faith, belief systems, and local perspectives could enhance conservation efforts for the Salween River.

The Salween River is very important for the people who live alongside this River. There are different purposes of conserving the Salween River for local people. Some want to maintain the river because it can bring opportunities for their economy, but others value the Salween because of their faiths, beliefs, and cultural practices. While the River is important for people in different ways, the River herself is also given different names by people. In Kayin language, the Salween is called “Thamowshue Khlo”, Thamowshue means the Salween and Khlo means river. They gave that name “Thamowshue Khlo” for Salween River in Kayin language because they value the river and also they have a number of memories with the Salween. The people interviewed in this study also said that in Kayin State, when it comes to the river, it must be Thanlwin. In Mon State, they call the Salween River “Thanlwin”. According to interview data from this study, participants in Mon State reported that there is no known story behind the name “Thanlwin.”

METHODS

This study used a qualitative, community-based approach to understand the cultural relationship between people and the Salween River. Data was collected through field visits, 15 semi-structured interviews, and 5 focus group discussion. The research was conducted by two women (Age - 18, 20) and one man (Age-25) as part of the Salween Youth Program. The study was conducted in selected places along Salween River focusing on the following areas: Mawlamyine, Kaung Say Island, Bilu Island (Mon State); Hpa-An, Hpa Kat Village (Kayin State).

Before the real fieldwork, pilot visits were conducted to test interview questions and understand the community. One pilot visit was conducted in both Mon State and Kayin State, involving 10 participants in Mon State and 5 participants in Kayin State. Feedback and lessons from the pilot visits were used to improve the research and fieldwork approach. Participants of this study included community members, elders, youths, and religious practitioners who have lived near and interacted with the Salween river in Mon- and Kayin State. Interviews focused on perspectives on the Salween, cultural practices, beliefs, festivals and personal experiences connected to the Salween. Informal conversations were also used to create a comfortable environment and encourage open sharing.

Notes were recorded manually during and after field visits. The collected data were reviewed, organized, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to cultural practices,

beliefs, and festivals. Ethical considerations were followed. Including voluntary participation, avoid sensitive questions and respect for local customs and beliefs.

RESULTS

Cultural Practices

During our research, we identified 5 cultural practices with relevance to the Salween. These concerned Fish Releasing Tradition; Kaung Ohn Nat beliefs; Driftwood collection; wedding practices by the local Tamil Hindu community; and funeral practices by the local Tamil Hindu community.

Fish Releasing

This is a Buddhist practice. People believe it brings good health, good luck, and long life. Many people do this during important religious days, especially during Thingyan (lunar new year). In the Salween River, people release local fish. This helps protect fish and care for the river. We observed these practices in Kayin State - near Phar Kat Village and around Hpa-An.

The Kaung Ohn Nat

This means Pillow Spirit in Burmese language and is a spirit linked to drowning cases. People believe the spirit can help find drowned bodies. During the ritual, people offer coconuts and bananas. They also roll a pillow on a Burmese traditional mat (Pya-ꠘꠗ) while calling the spirit.

Box 1 - Gaung Say Island means Shampoo Island in Burmese language. It is a small green island in the Salween River, located near the northern area of Mawlamyine.

In the history of Gaung Say island (Box 1), a drowned person malater appear in a prayer position facing the Thitsar Mandail Pagoda (Pagoda in Island). This belief guides how people respond to drowning events. We observed this belief in Bilu Island, Gaung Say Island, Mawlamyine, and Khalaungnot Village.

Driftwood Collection

This happens during the rainy season, when driftwood floats downstream from upstream. Villagers near Phar Kat Village collect the wood, dry it and store it for cooking, construction, and donations (it is reused as firewood in food charity events). People also collect this wood for use in daily life. In Kayin villages' this practice is often held as an event. Boatmen and villagers work together, enjoying the process of gathering the wood. Making it both a practical

and communal activity. Occasionally, unusual white woods which are believed to come from outside Myanmar, are also collected. Local people believe that this practice also helps maintain the river's cleanliness and supports the local ecosystem. Although the practice is not directly tied to religion or a formal cultural ceremony. It has been carried out for many years and has become a tradition. In Kayin State, the activity has grown into a community event due to the large volume of driftwood that arrives during the high-water season. In Mon State, it remains a practical, family-based activity, just enough for fuel for cooking. We found people referring to this practice in Phar Kat Village and surrounding villages; Gaung Say Island and Bilu Island.

Tamil Hindus' Wedding Practices

An interesting relationship to the Salween can be seen in the way the local Tamil Hindu community practices a common marriage custom among Tamil Hindus in Myanmar. When a husband marries, he gives his wife a wedding bead (box 2), which is said to be intended to ensure a long-lasting marriage. The bead is only allowed to be permanently removed when the husband dies, while it is exchanged for a new one in the presence of a Punnarr (Brahmin) once a year beside the Salween River. The old bead is floated in the Salween River and a new bead is put on at once. It is believed that by floating the old bead in the Salween River, the nats (spirits) in the river take the old bead and take it to a better place, according to a temple official.

Box 2 – The wedding bead is a simple string, sometimes with a small locket attached.

Funeral Practices by Tamil Hindus

An interesting relationship to the Salween can be seen in the way the local Tamil Hindu community practices a funeral related custom practiced by Tamil Hindus in Myanmar. When a person dies, the eldest son of the family enters a monastery as a monk for a few days and gives a hair sacrifice (hair-shaving). It is said that after shaving hair and floating it in the Salween River, they immediately take a dip in the water and wash their heads. By giving hair and washing their heads, they are acquiring merit for the deceased to have a good life. If there are no sons in the family, their relatives who are boys can also do the same.

Festivals

During our research, we encountered three different festivals with a relation to the Salween River: the Swan Oo Myaw Festival, the Water Festival of Nat, and the Fire March Festival.

The “Swan Oo Myaw” Festival

It is a traditional festival that has been passed down from generation to generation. The people start by offering alms, water, snacks, candles, and incense to the holy Shin Oo Pagok (Box 3). After the elders prepare the alms bowls and prepare the boats, on the morning of the full moon, they carry the alms bowls brought by people from all over the city to the middle of the river and float them. The people believe that their wishes will be fulfilled and their wealth will increase, so they celebrate this tradition every year. This is a common practice among fishermen, who offer alms to Shin Oo Pagok before setting out on their boat.

Box 3 – Shin Oo Pagok is believed to be an Arahant (a fully enlightened being), who lives in the Southern Ocean in a bronze temple. He is practicing to teach the Dhamma to mankind until he becomes a Buddha in the future. He is believed to protect worshipers from floods and storms.

The “Water Festival of Nat”

As the name suggests, this is held to entertain the spirits. On the day of the Festival, the spirits invite the participants to play in pools filled with water, which is collected from the Salween River. Here they play and play with humans, and give out lottery numbers. At the end of the festival, the spirits, along with the statue of Shin Oo Pagok, are floated down the Salween River to the sea by rafts and boats. Most people in Bilu Island believe in 37 Nats. In addition, there are many other spirit beings related to the island or water, such as the Shwe Nat Taung Bo Bo Gyi (the Nat of Shwe Nat Taung Mountain), Ye Nang Paing U Shin Gyi (the Nat of the sea), Pwar Yaewt Hla (the Nat of an island near Kyaik Kha Mi). We learned from the person who leads the festival that the festival is held once a year, has been passed down from generation to generation, and is usually held as a fun event.

The Fire March Festival

It is an annual festival held by the Tamil Hindu community. The reason for the fire marching is to bring prosperity to one’s economy, society, education, and health. Not only Hindus but also other religions are allowed to march. Before the fire marching festival, a period of fasting (nearly 50 days) is observed. During the fasting period, meat is not allowed to eat and the five precepts are observed, according to a Hindu monk at the temple. Before the fire marching, local Hindu community members who march will bathe in the Salween River. They bathe because they believe that the Salween River is home to nats and holy spirits and can purify their bodies.

Religious and Traditional Beliefs

During the research, we learned about different religious concepts that relate to the Salween River. Some faiths are directly connected to the Thanlwin River, while others have indirect connections. Our research findings within Mawlamyine city, Mon State, found quite a number of religious beliefs that have a direct link to the River - the Talaku faith, U Shin Gyi Nat beliefs, and the sacredness of the Gaung Say Kyun island.

The Talaku Faith

According to the Indigenous Karen Talaku faith (box 4), water, earth, wind, and fire are worshipped. Followers must observe religious precepts (ဥပုသ်စောင့်). The Talaku religion highly

Box 4 – The **Talaku Religion** is a faith with fewer than 1,000 adherents, primarily found in Kayin State, with most followers residing along the Thailand-Myanmar border. It is a branch derived from the religious organizations of the Karen ethnic groups. **Oopout** day is Sabbath day for the Talaku Religion.

values the natural environment. They are grateful for everything they receive from nature. They do not pick leaves on precepts, which is a way of showing respect for nature. Moreover, they must always perform homage ceremonies. They believe that if they do not do this, they will be punished. The Salween River is regarded as a sacred place in the Talaku religion because it provides food and is used for transportation. They believe that whenever they use the Salween River for transportation or for catching fish, it is only possible due to the power of the Salween River. Therefore, every time they obtain or use anything from the Salween River, they should consciously pay homage to it. This can be said to be a tradition of the Talaku religion that can have a positive effect for nature conservation.

According to the people of the Talaku religion, in ancient times, there was only one ethnic group. A white thread was tied on the hand of each person, following traditional custom. At least once a year, all the clans would gather together according to tradition to perform the hand-tying ceremony. Later on, during every traditional ceremony, a thousand white threads went missing, meaning that a thousand people were also lost. In this way, the Salween River caused the separation into seven ethnic groups.

U Shin Gyi Nat

In a revealing insight into the relational value of the Salween for local fishers, it is said that fishermen rely on U Shin Gyi Nat (Box 5) to keep them safe while fishing. They believe that if they go out fishing after putting the U Shin Gyi offering onto their boat, they will be safe from danger. There are different styles of attaching this depending on the villages. Fishermen said that they put it in the river before going to catch fish. The ingredients to be added are different based on various villages.

Box 5 – U Shin Gyi Nat was originally a harpist. He and his fellow woodcutters came to Mainmahla island in search of food. The sound of his harp captivated nats on this island, who refused to let their boat sail. Eventually, they sacrificed his life to allow the boat to sail. He became a nat after his death.

Sacred Gaung Say Kyun Island

Gaung Say Kyun (Box 6) is an island with a sacred origin, located in the middle of the Salween. This island does not flood even though water levels rise annually. The island is also known as Kyun Palawoh. Located at the confluence of freshwater and seawater, a distinctive feature of the island is its drinking water source—a freshwater well known as Nat-Sin-Wyun (or Nat Kyin Well), which is highly valued not only by the islanders but also by followers of other faiths.

Box 6 – Gaung Say Kyun’s history: During the life of the Buddha, 9,000 Hinthas, accompanied by a group of monks, set out from the Himalayas in search of food. One day, while crossing the Salween, a heavy rain fell. Seeing that the birds were about to fall into the water, Kinh Hintha took an oath that kept them safe from danger. Because of the oath, Thagyarmin (King Indra) threw the ruby into the water and created an island. The dragon King helped dry wings of the Hintha birds by emitting his own steam. There are still dragon springs on the island to this day.

Since the time of ancient monarchs, it has been a tradition for those about to go to war to visit the island before battle and perform the Gaung Say (head-washing) ritual. It is believed that performing this ritual leads to greater success in warfare.

As an island situated at the confluence of the Salween River and other rivers, it depends entirely on river transport for travel to and from Mawlamyine. To allow fish in the river to thrive freely,

fishing is prohibited within 500 yards of the island. Firewood washed ashore by the river is collected and used for cooking on the island. Authorities on the island are increasingly concerned about the damage to the Salween and other rivers caused by littering and waste disposal, and they urge more active measures for river conservation to prevent further degradation.

Similarities and Differences in Relational Beliefs, Festivals and Practices

We compared the practices from Mon and Karen and the similarities and differences are shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. The similarities and differences of relational beliefs, festivals and practices related to Salween River in study sites of Mon and Karen

Practices	Similarities	Differences
Festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Swan Oo Myaw” festival happens in both Mon and Karen in the same month of the year. • “Fire March festival” The Firewalking Festival is mainly celebrated by Tamil Hindus, and it is observed that festivals of other religions also participate. The purpose of holding this festival is to promote good fortune in employment, social relations, and economic matters. These objectives are similar to those of other religions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water Festival of Nat is only recorded in one particular village (village name) in Mon
Cultural Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The practice of "Fish Releasing" is a traditional custom primarily observed by Buddhists. It is a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Kaung Ohn Nat” is a spirit linked to drowning cases. People believe the spirit can help find

	<p>highly meritorious tradition celebrated during the month of Tagu (the first month of the Myanmar lunar calendar) not only by the Mon and Karen ethnic groups but also by other ethnicities across the entire nation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The tradition of “Driftwood Collection” is primarily practiced by the Mon and Karen ethnic communities living along the Salween River. They retrieve logs that have drifted naturally, using them to create wood carvings or repurposing them as kitchen firewood. From an environmental perspective, this practice of reusing logs inherently helps prevent blockages and the accumulation of debris along the riverbanks.• Tamil Hindus' religious traditions are exceptionally fascinating. Across Myanmar, the post-ritual customs and beliefs of Tamil Hindus, as well as those of the Mon and Karen people who live alongside them, bear remarkable similarities.	<p>drowned bodies. This belief guides how people respond to drowning events. We can see this practice especially on Mon State.</p>
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<p>Beliefs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Talaku religion”, If we consider the similarities, they observe the "Oopout Day” tradition like followers of other religions. Furthermore, the Salween River is regarded as a sacred place in the Talaku religion because it provides food and is used for transportation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Talaku religion” primarily worships water, wind, earth, and fire, and also celebrates the traditional White Cotton Festival, similarly to other Karen religious followers. • “U Shin Gyi Nat” is primarily found in villages that engage in fishing. Before going fishing, a festival is held to make offerings based on traditional beliefs. This practice is commonly observed in fishing villages within Mon State. • The sacred Gaung Say Kyun island in the Salween is an island steeped in unique religious traditions and valuable historical records. The head-washing ritual is a distinctive custom that is revered and practiced not only by Buddhists but also by followers of other religions.
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DISCUSSION

The research findings were interesting for us ourselves, as young people from the target communities. Among all these beliefs, festivals, and cultural practices relating to the Salween river, one of the strongest things we learned about is Swan Oo Myaw festival. We initially believed that the Swan Oo Myaw festival is only for Mon cultures and only held in Mon State. But, when we spoke with the local community in the Kayin States, we started to realize that the Swan Oo Myaw festival is not only for the Mon people, it is for people who believe in Shin Oo Pagok. The difference is that the festival is held as a big festival in Mon State but is not

seen as a major festival in Kayin State. Thus, the intensity and form of the festivals may differ between community and State, even though they may be broadly the same.

Overall, we found that holding big festivals like the Swan Oo Myaw festival can bring a number of advantages for the local community and conservation of the Salween River. However, on the other hand, the cons should not be ignored. As an advantage, a festival like this can bring a sense of collaboration and as a result they will have a mindset for river conservation when it comes to Shin Oo Pagok, as they trust because they always believe that Shin Oo Pagok . However, from the other perspectives, holding the festival every year beside the river can have a lot of disadvantages. For example, the ingredients such as alms, water, snacks, candles, and incense in alms bowls, can pollute the river when the people can not remove every bowl that is put in the river before they float away beyond reach. As there are more than 10,000 bowls released into the river every year this can cause significant river pollution if they contain plastic and other non-biodegradable materials.

CONCLUSION

Our research focused on understanding local people's beliefs and practices in relation to the Salween river, and how river conservation efforts could relate with cultural practices, traditional festivals, and beliefs. By doing this research, we as researchers had experienced the knowledge from the community about the relation of Salween and humans we did not know earlier.

Many local cultural practices, festivals, and religious beliefs relate in one form or another to the Salween river. In terms of culture, this especially concerns the Fish Releasing Tradition; Kaung Ohn Nat beliefs; Driftwood collection; wedding practices by the local Tamil hindu community; and funeral practices by the local Tamil hindu community. The Swan Oo Myaw Festival, the Water Festival of Nat, and the Fire March Festival meanwhile all contain a strong relationship to the Salween river. Locally practiced beliefs with the strongest relationship include the Talaku faith, beliefs in the U Shin Gyi Nat, and those related to the sacred Gaung Say Kyun island.

Importantly, the community during the interviews also noticed the importance of conservation and recognised that their beliefs and traditions are valued. We hope this research can make a contribution to the awareness of the people who are interested in the conservation of the Salween river. Better understanding the connection between nature and humans can help

improve the work and decisionmaking by future researchers, community leaders, and changemakers.

BUDGEDARY FRAMEWORK

No.	Description	Requested Budget	Expenditure	Balance
1.	Research materials	1,500,000	1,390,400	109,600
2.	Transportation	2,150,000	2,323,000	173,000
3.	Meals and allowances	3,120,000	2,837,400	282,600
4.	Communication	225,000	225,000	0
Total Budget		6,995,000	6,775,800	219,200

Notes:

For the data validation event, the original proposal planned full participation; however, due to political instability and localized conflict at the time of implementation, only 50% of participants could be invited. As a result, the event was reduced half of catering cost and planned activities were implemented in a new venue. Despite the reduced scope, additional costs were incurred because the venue had to be moved to a safer and more secure location, which required local transportation that was not included in the original budget. Consequently, actual expenses for the data validation event increased to **410,000 MMK** compared to the proposed **200,000 MMK**.

For field interviews in Mawlamyine and Kaung Say Island, both pilot and actual visits were conducted. The proposal budget was initially estimated at **250,000 MMK**, but only **150,000 MMK** was spent due to changes in the field plan and reduced travel needs. Although two days were planned for interviews in Kaung Say Island, all required data were collected within one day, and the remaining day was used for a Bilu island nearby village visit without significant additional transport costs.

For in-depth interviews in Hpa-An and Mawlamyine, the planned duration of four to five days was reduced to three to four days. This was possible because interviews required less time than expected and some data had already been collected earlier. As a result (DSA), covering meals and daily allowances, was reduced accordingly.

Overall expenditures remained within the approved 10% variance and below the total estimated budget of **6,995,000 MMK**. Total expenses amounted to **6,775,800 MMK**, mainly due to increased costs for the data validation event caused by a venue change. Additional local transportation for security reasons during the event. These increases were offset by savings from reduced pilot visits, shorter interview durations, and lower DSA expenses. All adjustments were made in response to political and security constraints to ensure participant safety and data quality. In the end resulting in a remaining balance of **219,200 MMK** without exceeding the approved budget.