

From Protected Areas to Contested Frontiers: Conflict Ecology, Governance Collapse, and Conservation Federalism in Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar's Protected Areas (PAs) have experienced accelerated degradation since 2020, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 2021 military coup. This study examines how political conflict and institutional collapse have reshaped conservation governance across Myanmar's PA network. Using an integrated approach combining land cover change analysis (2017–2023), Social Network Analysis, key informant interviews, and media review, the study links ecological outcomes to shifting political–economic dynamics. Results show a sharp rise in extractive encroachment following the collapse of centralized conservation institutions. Actor–threat networks reveal that both state and non-state armed actors now occupy central gatekeeping positions, indicating a systematic monetization of natural capital rather than incidental degradation. Environmental decline is closely tied to human security impacts through resource overextraction and livelihood loss in indigenous and rural communities where natural resource dependency is high. The study argues that restoring centralized “fortress conservation” is neither feasible nor resilient, and identifies conservation federalism as a viable pathway for biodiversity protection in conflict-affected states.