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## Viewpoint: Why Burma's forests must be preserved



An early morning boat journey from base camp in search of a herd of elephants in Taung Lay  
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For the first time in more than 50 years, a team of wildlife film-makers has been permitted to venture deep into Burma's barely penetrable jungles. The expedition's insect expert, Ross Piper, explains why the country's forests are special and, in his view, deserve protection.

Closed to outsiders for five decades, Burma, also known as Myanmar, is something of an unknown quantity, particularly in terms of its natural riches.

The country is right in the centre of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, one of the most biologically important regions of the planet. We know there are still large areas of good quality forest in Burma, which could be among the last real strongholds for a huge range of species.

Beyond simply supporting a dazzling variety of life, we have to remember that vast forests like these, often thousands of miles away, are crucial to every one of us, not least because they help to stabilise the climate and maintain the water cycle.



A wild Asian elephant herd was found resting in the shade of a valley in Burma

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## “Start Quote

Will Burma go the way of Cambodia, where 50% of the old-growth forests fell to the chainsaw within 10 years of free elections in 1993?”

I was lucky enough to be part of a BBC Natural History Unit/Smithsonian Institution expedition to document the wildlife of this long-isolated country and shed some light on the state of its forests.

This expedition couldn't have been more timely because as the country slowly opens up, its Asian neighbours and developed nations alike are scrambling to establish diplomatic relations, many of whom would ultimately like to take advantage of Burma's natural wealth.

With a range of means at our disposal, some high-tech, others not quite so cutting-edge - simple nets are still invaluable - we set about scouring the forests for animals and by the time the expedition was drawing to a close we had made some startling discoveries.



Ross Piper gets a little too close for comfort to a herd of elephants

In terms of the iconic animals, we documented breeding groups of Asian elephants and obtained solid evidence of tigers. Lots of other animals - threatened elsewhere in Southeast Asia - put in regular appearances at our numerous trail cameras.

We captured remarkable footage of the extremely elusive Asian golden cat, sun bears and their cubs, Malayan tapirs wallowing, clouded leopards prowling their territory and Asiatic wild dogs attempting to vandalise our remote cameras to mention just a few.



This jewel beetle was found in Tamanthi forest in northern Burma  
On top of this impressive haul of mammals the team documented 271 species of bird and my personal favourites - a stunning array of insects and spiders.

It is the north of the country, where the lands rise toward the Himalayas, that perhaps has the greatest potential as a vast, protected landscape. Much of this part of the country is essentially unexplored - at least by biologists - and it is here where there are undoubtedly lots of discoveries to be made.

In the short time we had in the north I discovered insects that had never been found in Burma before as well as other species that are very probably new to science.



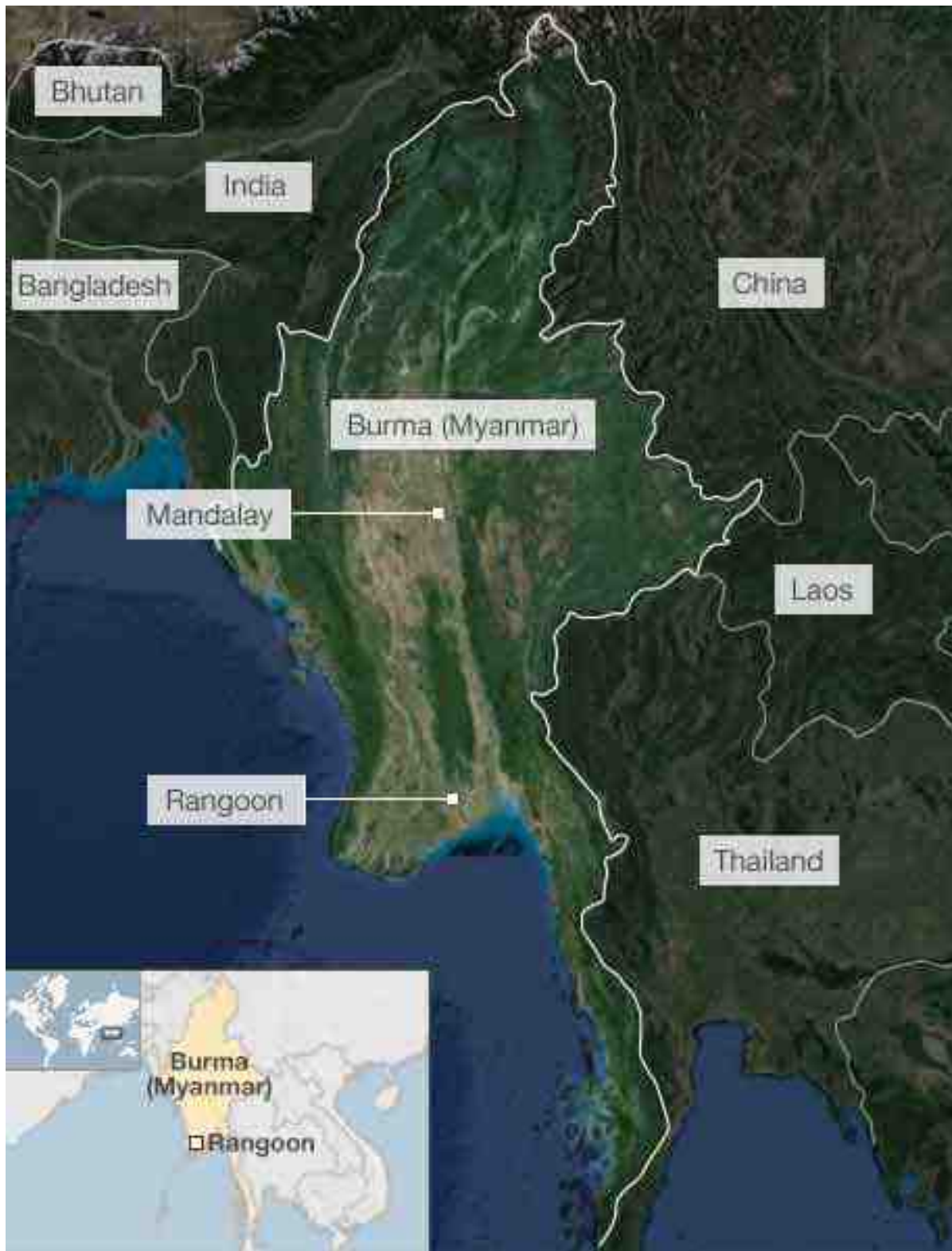
The blue-eared kingfisher is one of 271 species of birds spotted for the wildlife survey

There's a lot of forest in Burma and much of what we saw supports an impressive variety of animals.

However, this is not to say there is no cause for concern, far from it. Only a very small proportion of the country's forests have any formal protection, and even when they do, environmental safeguards are weak, and low investment in conservation renders them susceptible to the effects of rapid economic development.

Everywhere we went there was evidence of logging and poaching. Some of the hunting we saw evidence of, namely forest hunting camps and a variety of snares, is simply very poor people trying to feed themselves and their family, but the pervasive threat of the wildlife trade appears to extend into the most inaccessible corners.

## **Burma... things to know**



- Burma is the largest country in mainland South-East Asia and about 40% is forested - however, "forest" can include anything from a silent, severely degraded habitat that supports relatively few animals, to ancient, old-growth habitat teeming with life
- The country is known to support 233 globally threatened species, including 37 that are critically endangered and 65 endangered
- The habitats of Burma are extremely diverse, ranging from rich alpine floras and tropical pine forests in the north, to dry hardwood and mixed deciduous forest in the

- central dry zone, to tropical rainforests in the far south
- The forested hills and mountains of Burma conceal rich deposits of coal, copper, gold, zinc, tungsten, gems and other minerals
- The vast majority of high-quality rubies on the world market come from Burma - it is also a top producer of jadeite, the most expensive form of jade

At markets along the Burmese border, forest animals and pieces thereof are freely for sale. Poaching one tiger represents the equivalent of a lottery win in a country where the average person makes only \$2 (£1.23) a day.

Up until very recently the north eastern forests were being swallowed up by illegal logging.

According to the environmental advocacy group, Global Witness, 15 tonnes of illegal logs were being smuggled into China's Kunming province every seven minutes in 2005.



One hundred locals joined the expedition to help carry two tonnes of equipment to base camp. This completely unsustainable degree of logging has since been stymied, but as long as there is a demand for timber, wild animals and other forest products, the forests of Burma are incredibly vulnerable without complete and well-resourced protection.

From our time in Burma it is clear that its forests have great promise as long-term refuges for a huge variety of iconic animals - many of which are threatened by the alarming pace of deforestation elsewhere in South East Asia.

The country, on the cusp of democracy, is at an important crossroads. Will it succumb to the short-term gains offered by over-exploitation of its natural resources and go the way of Cambodia, where 50% of the old-growth forests fell to the chainsaw within 10 years of the free elections in 1993?

Or will it choose the road less well travelled, investing in long-term, sustainable development and the protection of its natural landscape for future generations?

Personally, I sincerely hope the Burmese government chooses the latter and makes the right

decision for the region and the planet.

[Wild Burma: Nature's Lost Kingdom](#) starts on Friday 29 November at 21:00 GMT on BBC Two. Or catch up later on [BBC iPlayer](#).