

The Green Buddha: An Analysis Of The Role Of Buddhist Civil Society In Environmental Conservation In Burma

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In Burma, Buddhism and Buddhist civil society dominate much of daily life. As the country experiences more environmental problems, Buddhist civil society is also beginning to play a role in environmental protection. Buddhist writers describe how Buddhist philosophy can lead to sustainable development. Monks encourage communities to protect the environment and even use their status to ensure protection for certain areas. Even Buddhist laypeople may play a role by performing environmentally friendly acts to gain merit. However, Buddhist civil society's involvement in environmental issues lags behind that of Thailand and Cambodia. This is because of Burma's restrictions on civil society, less developed economy, and more stable cultural and religious setting. While some of these obstacles may be overcome, Buddhist civil society's involvement in the environment will not likely grow without a major change in the country.

As Southeast Asia suffers drastic environmental problems, anthropologists have studied the role of Buddhism and Buddhist monks in protecting the region's environment. While much has been written on Thailand's ecology monks¹ and Cambodia's Buddhist environmental NGOs,² few scholars have written about or studied the interaction between Buddhist civil society and environmental conservation in Burma.³ While many people assume that because of Burma's political isolation, Buddhist civil society plays no significant role in conservation, Buddhist actors, from laypeople to academics to monks, work to spread environmentally friendly norms and attitudes, as well as help directly with conservation projects. However, in comparison to other Southeast Asian countries, the role of these segments of society remains relatively limited,

¹ Susan Darlington, "Buddhism and Development: The Ecology Monks of Thailand," in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish, and Damien Keown (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003) 96-109; and Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Just Being There," *Evolution* (2002), available from <http://suanmokkh.org/ds/bethere.htm>; Internet; accessed 21 August 2004.

² For more on this see Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, *Faith in Conservation* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003), 79.

³ The use of the word "Burma" should not be taken as a connotation of political sympathies, but rather in keeping with the generally accepted terminology of the environmental community.

in part due to political, economic development, and cultural differences between the countries. Understanding the exact role of these actors, and why they are less active in Burma than elsewhere, will help conservationists work more closely with religious institutions in the region and elsewhere.

Research and Methodology

There have been many articles and books written on the Thai and Cambodian Buddhist environmental actors, particularly monks. These sources help provide an understanding of how such actors can aid in environmental conservation efforts. However, because such little research has been conducted on Buddhist environmental actors in Burma, there are few resources actually discussing this subject. Some reports for environmental organizations and conservationists operating in the country mention cooperation with environmentalist monks, but most sources refer to them only in passing.

To gain a more complete understanding, I traveled to Burma in 2004 to interview Buddhist environmental actors and assess the situation there. I visited Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park (AKNP), and two small forest sanctuaries, one in Po Win Thaug, Sagaing Division, and the other in Peyindaung, near Inle Lake, Shan State, to actually see how environmental monks operated there. From my conversations with park staff, I found that the activities in these areas are not exceptional, but can be found elsewhere in Burma.

When researching this subject, I focused on activities that had a clear and direct conservation goal rather than simply activities that showed a love for nature. For example, many monks keep gardens, but I did not consider this as true environmental conservation activity unless there were specific efforts either to grow organic crops or harbor endangered species on temple grounds. Furthermore, I did not approach this subject as a cost-benefit analysis, comparing the negative impacts of Buddhist practice, such as the impact of temple construction, with the positive aspects. Rather, I treat Buddhist environmentalists as part of a nascent phenomenon.

Many of the names of people I interviewed, particularly monks, have been changed or removed for their security.

Burma's Recent Political History

After World War II, Burmese nationalists led by General Aung San sought independence from Britain. The country gained its independence in 1948, although political opponents assassinated Aung San in 1947. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities, such as the Karen, the Kachin, and the Wa, fought the new ethnic-majority Burman government for more autonomy. After the rebellion was suppressed, Prime Minister U Nu, a Burman, tried to gain popular support for his government by sponsoring Buddhist conferences and construction projects. Even though much of the country followed Theravada Buddhism, the military feared that the government's Buddhist chauvinism would push the minorities to reignite the conflict. In 1962, the military took over the country. The new government, led by General Ne Win, espoused the "Burmese Way to Socialism." Unlike his predecessor, Ne Win granted no official privileges to Buddhism. The military regime suppressed all political dissent and organizations,⁴ and its misplaced economic policies bankrupted much of the populace.

In 1988, massive pro-democracy protests drove Ne Win's regime out of power, only to be replaced by another military coup calling itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (renamed the "State Peace and Development Council" in 1997), which abandoned much of Ne Win's socialisim and isolationism. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter General Aung San, led the democratic opposition, which forced the SLORC to schedule parliamentary elections in 1990. However, when Suu Kyi's party won over 82% of the seats, the military reneged on its promise and continued to rule the country. In the meantime, the SLORC arrested Suu Kyi and other political activists.⁵ After a brief period of freedom, Suu Kyi was attacked by government-sponsored thugs and rearrested in May 2003. In response, the United States and other Western governments imposed strict sanctions on Burma.

In October 2004, Than Shwe, Burma's top general, purged more moderate generals including Khin Nyunt from power. The government has also decided to move the country's capital from the densely populated Rangoon to the remote Pyinmana. China, India, and Russia continue to support the country internationally, despite growing isolation from the West and the rest of ASEAN. Meanwhile, at least 1,100 political prisoners are still held in the country's jails,

⁴ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Burma," *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 395

⁵ Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPPB), *Burma: A Land Where Buddhist Monks are Disrobed and Detained in Dungeons* (Thailand: AAPPB, 2004), 6-7.

including many Buddhist monks,⁶ and the generals show no sign of heading toward a resolution to the political impasse.

Background on Burma's Environmental Crisis

Burma possesses ecological hotspots and forests unlike those found anywhere else on Earth. Western conservation organizations have proclaimed it a region of exceptionally high biodiversity. According to the Worldwide Fund for Nature, it has a relatively low ecological footprint.⁷ Unlike its neighbors, Burma still has 52.3% of its forest cover left, one of the highest percentages in Southeast Asia.⁸ These forests include over 60% of the world's remaining natural teak forests.⁹ However, increased logging from foreign and domestic firms threatens this biodiversity. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Burma loses an average of 1.4% of its forest cover each year. Since the country opened its doors to the outside world in 1988, Thailand and China, which have implemented logging bans in their own countries, eagerly turned to Burma's forests for timber, much of it illegally exported. Burma now supplies around 75% of the world's commercial teak products.¹⁰ In Central Burma, population growth near forest areas has led to an increase in shifting cultivation, forest conversion for fuel wood, and commercial palm plantations.¹¹

The pressures of poverty force many Burmese to hunt wildlife, as China's economic growth has increased the demand for traditional medicines that use wildlife products. Chinese middlemen employ Burmese villagers to poach rare species, paying them only a fraction of market value. In addition, hunting for subsistence reduces the availability of natural prey for

⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Burma: Human Rights Overview," (2006), available from <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/burma12268.htm>; Internet; accessed on 21 April 2006. For more on Buddhist monk political prisoners, see Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPPB), *Burma: A Land Where Buddhist Monks are Disrobed and Detained in Dungeons* (Thailand: AAPPB, 2004), 6-7.

⁷ Worldwide Fund for Nature, *Living Planet Report* (Washington, DC: 2004).

⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) [on-line], *State of the World's Forests*, 2003, available from <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/005/y7581e>; Internet; accessed 28 February 2004. There are some estimates that put forest cover higher, but these are not generally cited. For more on this see Peter Leimgruber, et al., *Forest Cover Change Patterns in Myanmar 1990-2000* [unpublished], Report to Conservation International and the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (8 December 2003).

⁹ Global Witness, "*Conflict of Interest: The Uncertain Future of Burma's Forests*," (London: Global Witness, 2003), 39.

¹⁰ Global Witness, 13.

¹¹ Leimgruber, 15.

nonhuman predators.¹² The past two decades have seen the disappearance of the Sumatran Rhinoceros and the reduction of Eld's deer and tiger populations to critically low rates.¹³ Currently, there are only around 10,000 Asian elephants left in Burma, over half of which work in captivity.¹⁴ Should hunting and habitat destruction continue unabated, they will critically imperil Burma's wild large animal populations.

Fortunately, Burma does not yet face the major pollution issues that Thailand does. Industrialization has only begun in earnest since the SPDC coup. Unfortunately, hotels, factories, and automobile use have all begun to take their toll on the environment. Litter mars much of the countryside, even in national parks. The environmental impact of Burma's growing economy will only worsen as the population grows and the country's poverty deepens.

Background on Green Buddhism Philosophy

Numerous prominent Buddhism scholars argue that Buddhism contains many environmentally friendly principles. According to classic Buddhist texts, the Buddha lays down specific rules regarding respect for life. In the *Cullavagga*, he explains that a priest who had been killed by a poisonous snake must have failed to cultivate *metta*, a form of universal benevolent compassion, toward the snake families.¹⁵ *Metta* also encompasses trees and plants. One Theravada Buddhist story castigates a monk who cut down a tree that held a tree spirit. After this incident, the Buddha laid down strict rules prohibiting monks from cutting or harvesting plants.¹⁶ Some scholars even claim that the original reason for the monsoon season retreat, during which monks must stay on monastic grounds, was to minimize the trampling of grasses and plants that flourish in the rain.¹⁷

¹² For more see Alan Rabinowitz, "World's Biggest Tiger Reserve," interview by National Public Radio (15 March 2004), available from <http://www.npr.org/programs/>; Internet, accessed 31 January 2004.

¹³ M. Rao, Alan Rabinowitz and U Saw Tun Khaing, "Threats to protected areas in Burma: An analysis of underlying causes and recommendations for conservation planning," *Conservation Biology*, 16 (2000): 365.

¹⁴ Khyne U Mar, "Elephants," Summaries of Talks at the Britain-Burma Society (England, 8 May 2003), available from <http://www.shwepla.net>; Internet; accessed 7 July 2004.

¹⁵ *Cullavagga*, 2:72-73 (Pali Text Society); quoted in Stephanie Kaza, and Kenneth Kraft, eds., *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 23.

¹⁶ Buddhaghosa, "A Tree-Spirit Joins the Assembly of Monks," *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, eds. Stephanie Kaza, and Kenneth Kraft (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 22.

¹⁷ Leslie E. Sponsel, and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, "A Theoretical Analysis of the Potential Contribution of the Monastic Community in Promoting a Green Society in Thailand," *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of*

Buddhism also strives to eliminate suffering, and many monks have interpreted this to include human suffering due to environmental degradation or the suffering of plants and animals. The renowned Thai “ecology monk” Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun recounts a story in which his father shot a female monkey, leaving its baby orphaned. He claims that witnessing the agony of the abandoned monkey inspired him to become a monk and to protect nature.¹⁸ Likewise, because Buddhists believe craving leads to suffering, the religion preaches against materialism. This decrease in consumption should in turn alleviate the demand for natural resources.¹⁹

Some of Buddhism’s environmentally friendly philosophical tenets, summarized above, have indeed inspired Burma’s Buddhists to become involved in environmental conservation. However, the extent to which their activity is inspired purely by religion as opposed to other practical concerns is debatable. Below, I look at the environmental conservation activities of Burma’s laypeople, academics, and monks, and analyze how these actors incorporate Buddhist philosophy or institutions into their conservation work.

Buddhist Environmental Actors 1: Buddhist Laypeople

While only a minority of Burmese Buddhist laypeople has a conscious concern for the environment, the principles of Buddhism may inherently lead them to live a more ecologically sustainable lifestyle. There is a long tradition of positive merit inducements for environmental protection. The Buddha himself proclaimed, “Planters of groves and fruitful trees... for ever doth the merit grow.”²⁰ As such, in 1084, King Kyanzittha ordered the reforestation of the Irrawaddy valley and created game preserves as part of a series of merit-based programs.²¹ Centuries later, the increased role of the Buddhist *sangha* in Burmese society led King Shembuan to issue a

Deed and Dharma, ed. Mary Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 48.

¹⁸ Darlington, “Buddhism and Development,” 105.

¹⁹ E.F. Schumacher, the most articulate spokesman of “middle path” economics, based his book *Small is Beautiful* on his experiences in Burma. He suggests that Buddhism has moderated materialism in Buddhist countries. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Harper Perennial, 1989).

²⁰ NGO Working Group for Non-Formal Monk Environmental Education Project, *Cry From the Forest* (Phnom Penh: MEEP, 1999), 44. This book is an educational guide for monks and other community leaders on providing environmental leadership using Buddhist methods.

²¹ Than Tun, *Essays on the History of Buddhism in Burma*, ed. Paul Strachan (Scotland: Kiscadale Publications, 1988), 10.

proclamation forbidding the killing of animals.²² In the 1800s, pious King Mindon took one of the first steps in conservation land management when he declared the area surrounding present-day Mandalay to be a wildlife sanctuary.²³ Less regal merit efforts include citizens planting trees and caring for gardens in Rangoon. All of these activities are seen as means to gain merit, but also serve to protect and repopulate forests.

There are also many examples of negative merit incentives against acts of environmental destruction. Environmentalists with the Smithsonian note that villagers in the massively deforested Central Dry Zone fear to cut down trees near Buddhist monasteries or *nat* shrines.²⁴ By living and meditating in some forests, forest monks have also increased the sanctity of forests as places not to be disturbed.²⁵ Steve Galaster of WildAid recounted that in the early 1990s, villagers near AKNP reported an increasing number of tigers sought refuge near monasteries, although unfortunately the tigers there have since been hunted to extinction.²⁶ Furthermore, the Buddhist belief in the cycle of rebirth crosses animal boundaries: even an insect could have existed as a human in a former life. Consequently, killing an animal for purposes other than subsistence is a sin.²⁷ Many Buddhists may also be inspired by the “middle path” theory and shun materialism, and hence consumption of natural resources.

While some of these negative incentives act as described, a trip to Burma quickly reveals that the reality falls far short of the ideal. Critics point out that Buddhism alone cannot limit environmental damage in a modernizing society. Geographer Taun Yi-fu correctly notes that, despite Western perceptions, Eastern religions and environmental attitudes often do not translate into better environmental practice.²⁸ In an analysis of Buddhist practice in Burma, Spiro claims

²² Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680 (Vol. 1)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 36.

²³ Uga, “Burma/Myanmar: Environmental History and Conservation Biology in a Sequestered Land,” presentation at the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) (Canada, 31 March – 1 April 2004).

²⁴ Uga, interview by author, written notes, Yangon, Burma, 3 June 2004.

²⁵ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 61-66.

²⁶ Steven R. Galster, *Tigers and Buddhist Land: The Dynamics of an Effective Wildlife Protection Program through Anti-Poaching, Education, and Religion* [confidential draft copy], (18 November 1996), 5.

²⁷ Kyi Kyi Hla, “Burma Theravada Buddhism – Towards an Ethic of Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Development” (Yangon: Yangon University, June 2004), 4.

²⁸ Tuan Yi-fu, “Discrepancies between Environmental attitude and behavior,” *Canadian Geographer* 12 (1968): 176.

that many laypeople pursue religious activities more to gain recognition as a good Buddhist than to perform a moral deed.²⁹ Furthermore, I found that relatively few people had even considered the possible relationship between Buddhist philosophy and environmentalism. Given all of this, even though the positive inducements such as tree planting seem to at the least produce an actualized benefit, it is uncertain how effective the negative inducements can actually be in reducing environmental stress.

Buddhist Environmental Actors 2: Buddhism Intelligentsia

Some laypeople, particularly Buddhist philosophers and environmentalists, do see Buddhist philosophy as a useful tool to actively promote environmental concerns. They employ a variety of media, including newspaper articles and academic research.³⁰ Much of their work simply seeks to explain that Buddhist philosophy has environmentally friendly tenets and how Burmese laypeople should follow them. For example, U Maung Maung Soe Tint, a retired ambassador, wrote a piece for *The New Light of Burma* calling upon people to extend their conception of *metta* to include compassion for more of the natural world.³¹ Some articles have practical conservation suggestions. In an editorial in *Burma Perspectives Magazine*, Daw San San Aye suggests, “The religious merit gained from planting a tree is equal to the merit gained from building a monastery or a rest house.”³² Such articles are a direct appeal to the public at large to take an interest in environmental issues because of their faith in Buddhism.

Another common theme is advocating the pursuit of a “middle path” or sustainable way to development. U Ohn, General Secretary for the Forest Resource and Environmental Development and Conservation Association (FREDA), a Burmese environmental NGO, wrote an article on how Buddhism inherently leads Burmese toward a more sustainable “middle-path” development.³³ Daw Kyi Kyi Hla, a professor of Buddhist Philosophy at Rangoon University,

²⁹ Melford E. Spiro, “Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma,” *American Anthropologist* 68 (1966): 1163-1173.

³⁰ Due to heavy censorship in Burma, anything that appears in a public newspaper or academic journal must have at least tacit approval from the government.

³¹ Maung Maung Soe Tint, “Man and Natural Environment,” *The New Light of Burma*, 9 April 2003, available from <http://www.Burma.gov.mm/>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2004.

³² San San Aye, “Burma and Environmental Conservation,” *Burma Perspectives Magazine*, May 2001 [newspaper on-line], available from <http://www.Burma.gov.mm/Perspective/>; Internet; accessed 22 February 2004.

³³ Ohn, “The Ethics of a Burmese Grandmother,” *Heaven and Earth, and I: Ethics of Nature Conservation in Asia*, eds. Vivek Menon and Masayuki Sakamoto (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

also wrote a paper on the ethics of sustainable development as seen through a Buddhist worldview.³⁴

I also met a monk in Rangoon who wrote environmental articles asking people to plant trees. Rather than piling sand on the temple grounds as recompense for misdeeds and impure thoughts, as tradition dictates, he writes, planting trees would give the planter merit because trees provide shade, stabilize the climate, and form watersheds against floods.³⁵ His writing has the added authority coming from a monk. However, as a monk writing for a widespread audience about environmental issues, he seems to be an exception.

The general focus on the role of Buddhism in influencing the individual, as opposed to the *sangha* (monkhood) or the government, is unique to Burmese writers on this subject. In fact, the lack of any analysis on the role of monks in environmental conservation in Burma is a glaring absence from their work. The authors I interviewed seemed to dismiss the importance of monks in environmental issues. It is also important to note that few of these intellectuals, with the exception mentioned above, are themselves monks, which may help explain the lack of emphasis on the *sangha* as a tool for environmentalism.

Buddhist Environmental Actors 3: Buddhist Ecology Monks

Certainly not all of Burma's monks have become active environmentalists, yet some have. In particular, monks near national parks play an important role as a bridge between conservationists and the community. They rely mostly on their ability to exert influence, or *awza*, over local villagers to change their consumption habits. For instance, when over 100,000 pilgrims come to the Kathapa shrine in Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park (AKNP), monks instruct them not to harm the wildlife and trees.³⁶ In nearby Kabaing Village, environmentalists help the head monk to show films on environmental health issues for local villagers.³⁷ The monasteries also have bulletin boards with photographs of wildlife to help educate villagers. Some monks around the national parks host environmental researchers from foreign NGOs such as the Smithsonian Institute and the Wildlife Conservation Society, particularly before many of

³⁴ Kyi Kyi Hla, interview by author, written notes, Yangon, Burma, 14 June 2004.

³⁵ Yawainwae, interview by author, written notes, Yangon, Burma, 25 June 2004.

³⁶ Sein Maung Wint, Unpublished Report from the Chairman of FREDa, *Preserving a National Heritage – A Success Story in Burma*, (Yangon: FREDa, 2004), 2.

³⁷ Wi Seitta, interview by author, written notes, Kabaing Village, Burma, 7 June 2004.

the parks had infrastructure. Monks may even sometimes patrol park grounds to stop illegal loggers.³⁸ According to Forest Department and FREDA staff, the Forest Department gives the Alaungdaw Kathapa monks donations in return for their help.³⁹ A former warden of AKNP, Chattin Reserve, and Htamanthi Reserve, claims that staff in other parks maintains a similar relationship with nearby monks.⁴⁰ Overall, the park staff and conservationists I spoke to saw the monks as very helpful partners in their work.⁴¹

Monks have also taken initiatives in areas outside from the National Parks. Several monks have established unofficial forest sanctuaries, relying on traditional Buddhist taboos against hunting or logging near monasteries. A senior monk at one Buddhist University recounted that, while on retreat in Shan State, he requested villagers not to log the area around his monastery, and the villagers by and large obeyed his request.⁴² U Mine Po, a revered monk, actually had the Forest Department officially protect an area near Tachilek he guarded from Thai loggers.⁴³ In 1959, the Trustee Committee of Sagaing Division took an unusual step and entrusted the monks of Po Win Thaug with managing that area's forests. The Forest Department must obtain permission from the monks before it can undertake any conservation activity.⁴⁴

Monks can also use rituals to establish protection for forests. According to one story I heard, a monk tied pieces of Buddhist robes around trees to indicate that people should not cut them down.⁴⁵ This practice bears an uncanny resemblance to tree ordination, a practice ecology monks in Cambodia and Thailand often use to endow certain trees and forests with a holy aura

³⁸ Paneihzah, interview by author, written notes, Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park, Burma, 8 June 2004.

³⁹ Khin Khan Kham, interview by author, written notes, Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park, Burma, 8 June 2004.

⁴⁰ Myint Aung, interview by author, written notes, Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park, Burma, 11 June 2004.

⁴¹ The Chairman of FREDA even claims that the support of the monks is "an essential part of [the conservation program's] success." Sein Maung Wint, 2.

⁴² "Senior monk," interview by author, written notes, Burma, 18 June 2004.

⁴³ General Chit Swe, the Director-General of the Forest Department at the time of the request recalls having granted it. General Chit Swe (ret.), interview by author, written notes, Yangon, Burma, 25 June 2004.

⁴⁴ U Thu Ma Na and U Kun Tin Nya, interview by author, written notes, Po Win Thaug, Burma, 11 June 2004.

⁴⁵ I received the story from a friend who said it was based on an actual monk. Unfortunately the government censored the story so it remains unpublished.

and protect them from loggers.⁴⁶ Previously, I had not seen this activity had not been reported in Burma. It remains uncertain whether this innovation was indigenous or acquired through contact with Thai or Cambodian ecology monks. However, as these examples show, monks in Burma can and do play an important role in environmental conservation in Burma.

Comparative Analysis and Explanatory Factors

Even though members of Buddhist civil society in Burma do play a role in using Buddhism for environmental conservation, it is far smaller role than their counterparts in Thailand and Cambodia. Even though only a minority of monks in Thailand and Cambodia are actively involved with environmental issues, they constitute a greater percentage of the *sangha* that ecology monks in Burma do.⁴⁷ Furthermore, unlike Burma's ecology monks, they have received international recognition and funding for their efforts and have joined the Asian Buddhist Network of the Alliance for Religions in Conservation (ARC).⁴⁸ In the next few sections, I assess the political, economic development, and cultural factors that have hindered the development of Buddhist environmentalism in Burma. Much of the analysis below focuses the monks, as this is where the largest differences between lie, although much of the analysis is applicable to all three actors.

Factor 1: Political Restrictions on Buddhist Civil Society

As one would expect given its history of military rule, Burma's Buddhist civil society faces many restrictions on its freedom to operate. The international NGO Freedom House has consistently given Burma its worst score for its lack of political and civil freedoms.⁴⁹ Since the Ne Win era, the *sangha* has officially been little more than a government-organized NGO. Nothing improved in 1988, when the SLORC/SPDC came into power; the new generals were

⁴⁶ Phrakhu Manas Natheepitak, abbot of Wat Bodharma in northern Thailand, made the practice popular in the late 1980s, and local people claim it has proven successful. For more on this, see Sue Darlington, "Tree Ordination in Thailand," *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, ed. Stephanie Kaza, and Kenneth Kraft (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 198-200.

⁴⁷ Susan Darlington, personal communication, 1 October 2004.

⁴⁸ For more information on the Alliance of Religions for Conservation's Asian Buddhist Network, see <http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=1>.

⁴⁹ Freedom House data are from Freedom House, "Freedom in the World Comparative Rankings: 1973-2005," available from <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15&year=2005>.

highly suspicious of the monks after their outspoken role in the pro-democracy protests and banned all independent *sangha* organizations.⁵⁰ It also arrested more than 200 monks, and charged many of them under Article 295 of the Penal Code, for “offenses relating to religion.”⁵¹ Even when monks are allowed to create an organization, such as environmental NGOs, the lack of freedom still causes many difficulties and requires them to seek powerful patrons to survive. Furthermore, the lack of information prevents monks from becoming effective environmental activists. The role the lack of freedom plays in suppressing ecology monks was demonstrated to me when one monk actually complained about political restrictions preventing him from forming an environmental NGO. By contrast, Thai and Cambodian ecology monks have a much more free society, although they still take some risks in challenging vested political interests. Monks have founded environmental NGOs in both countries and organize laypeople to protest environmental destruction. Until Burma achieves a similar level of freedom, it seems unlikely that its ecology monks can reach the level of their neighbors.

Political restrictions also dampen the ability of the writers and intelligentsia to write about Buddhism and the environment. According to Freedom House, Burma’s censorship of the media ranks among the most restrictive in the world.⁵² This makes accurate and realistic reporting on environmental issues nearly impossible. Furthermore, all academic work is censored and writers cannot discuss controversial environmental problems.⁵³ This has led much of the work on Buddhist environmentalism to focus on relatively innocuous subjects, such as Buddhist philosophy or environmental problems in the abstract, rather than applying it to particular instances or using Buddhism to address the root causes of environmental destruction. By contrast, in Thailand and, to a lesser degree, in Cambodia writers will attack government interests involved in environmental destruction. In fact, much of the Thai Buddhist ecology movement grew as a response and in opposition to the state’s own development plans. Without

⁵⁰ Zunetta Liddell, “No Room to Move: Legal Constraints on Civil Society in Burma,” *Strengthening Civil Society in Burma*, ed. Burma Center Netherlands (BCN) and Transnational Institute (TNI) (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1999), 66. For more interpretations on the legal restrictions on the *sangha* see Gutter, Peter, “Law and Religion in Burma,” *Legal Issues on Burma Journal* No. 8 (2001).

⁵¹ Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), 6-7.

⁵² Freedom House, Global Press Freedom Rankings Site, 2004, available from <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16&year=2005>; Internet; accessed 23 April 2006.

⁵³ For more on intellectual freedom in Burma, see Christina Fink, *Living Silence* (New York: Zed Books, 2001).

freedom of information, Burma's Buddhist environmentalists cannot challenge the state or raise the alarm over environmental damage.

Factor 2: Economic Development and Environmental Damage

Another factor limiting the amount of Buddhist environmentalism in Burma is the country's relatively low level of environmental destruction. The country has an ecological footprint of merely 0.9, relatively small compared to .1 for Cambodia and 1.6 for Thailand.⁵⁴ Burma's unstable political climate and corruption stifle foreign investment and economic growth to abysmal levels.⁵⁵ Even before the United States' latest sanctions, many Western countries refused to invest in, or even divested from, Burma in protest of its human rights abuses and poor market conditions. In 2005, Transparency International ranked Burma as having some of the highest levels of corruption in the world.⁵⁶ Although the post-1988 opening of Burma to foreign direct investment has increased environmental destruction, economic growth has not yet taken its full toll on the country's ecology. Relative to its neighbors, the extent of Burma's environmental destruction is limited.

This has the effect of deprioritizing the importance of environmental protection for most of its citizens. Countries tend to respond to environmental problems only when they have reached a certain level of seriousness.⁵⁷ With such low economic growth and so many other problems, the protecting the country's natural resources is simply not a priority for most people. Furthermore, Western sanctions and more dire environmental crises elsewhere mean that environmental NGOs are reluctant to operate in the country. Thailand, by contrast, faced rampant pollution and deforestation in the 1970s and 1980s, which prompted monks and other concerned citizens to respond. Even though Burma and Cambodia are both poor countries with similar GDP per capita, the latter suffers from a more rapid depletion of its resources and greater environmental health issues. Even within Burma, those who respond to environmental problems

⁵⁴ Asian Development Bank, *Asian Environment Outlook 2005* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2005), 3.

⁵⁵ Khin Oo, "Black Markets, Economic Growth and Freedom – Burma," *Burma's Modern Tragedy*, Ed. Daniel A. Metraux and Khin Oo (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 173.

⁵⁶ Transparency International, "Corruption Perception Index 2005," October 2005, available from http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2005; Internet; accessed 21 March 2005.

⁵⁷ Gene M. Grossman, and Alan B. Krueger, "Economic Growth and the Environment," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112 (1995): 353-378.

are either more educated or people directly affected by the problems. The ecology monks in Burma respond either to the challenges of living near a national park or to the health and resource problems affecting their communities. The writers and academics often are more knowledgeable about environmental problems and received education from foreign environmentalists as well. In short, the relative lack of gravity of Burma's environmental problems could be one reason for the relatively weak response on the part of Buddhist civil society.

Factor 3: Cultural Shock and Buddhism in Burma

Historically, Burmese Theravada Buddhism has been more conservative and less prone to promoting social activism than Thai or Cambodian Buddhism. Burmese see the role of the monks as exemplars in meditation, not in charitable service.⁵⁸ Much of this difference is rooted in Burmese Buddhism's *Samsara* philosophy and traditionalist Singhalese influence. I found this explanation particularly interesting because many commentators in Burma cited it as the primary reason why monks do not involve themselves in environmental affairs. However, while these cultural differences are very real, do not seem to reflect the actual activism of Burmese Buddhists.⁵⁹ There have usually been at least some Buddhists, either laypeople or monks, who have used Buddhism to promote social change. During the 1920s, the monks U Ottama and U Wisara led the resistance against British rule. In fact, Sir Herbert White, working in the office of the British Chief Commissioner, noted, "wherever there was an appearance of organised resistance, Buddhist monks were among the chiefs."⁶⁰ Although the Prime Minister Nu's Buddhist revival during the 1950s tended to emphasize Pali education, pagoda construction, and meditation over social activism,⁶¹ Buddhist civil society continues to be active in several social spheres. Monks took part in the pro-democracy protests of 1988 and in the *sangha's* 1990

⁵⁸ For example, at one Buddhist social activism conference, the Burmese delegation initially resisted the idea of monks becoming involved in social activities. Susan K. Walker, *Report on Burma-Cambodia-Thai Dialogue: Buddhist Sangha in Transition* 30 January – 21 March 2000, (Bangkok: Spirit in Education Movement, 2000), 50.

⁵⁹ Min Zin, "Chapter Six: Burmese Buddhism and its Impact on Social Change," *Burma's Modern Tragedy*, eds. Daniel A. Mettraux and Khin Oo (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 117.

⁶⁰ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 205.

⁶¹ Robert C. Lester, *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 128.

boycott on accepting alms from military personnel. Monastic primary school education for the poor still thrives in rural areas. Monks have even founded modern high schools and hospitals.

In light of this, it seems more appropriate to look at not only the cultural norms surrounding any social activity, but also why environmental protection is not generally considered within the sphere of Buddhist civil society. In Thailand and Cambodia, the environment was only incorporated into Buddhist civil society after they both underwent massive social crises. In Thailand, modernization destroyed many traditional communal and religious bonds. The *sangha* lost respect as senior monks became embroiled in political and sexual scandals. To a large degree, the *sangha* lost its role as community leader and teacher to the modern state. In Cambodia, Pol Pot's in the late 1970s killed or exiled many of the country's monks and intellectuals. In both countries, Buddhist civil society championed environmental protection in large part to reestablish Buddhism's relevance by addressing a new and important issue. Some monks, including the late Thai monk Buddhadasa, redefined the role of monks by addressing the environmental degradation and other social issues facing their communities.⁶² Santikaro Bhikkhu, a Thai monk, even notes, "At heart, Phra Sekhiyadhamma [a network of monks for social activism] is working for a revival of Thai Buddhism."⁶³

Unlike the Thai or Cambodian Buddhist civil societies, Burma's *sangha* has neither suffered systemic persecution nor been driven to the margins of society by development. Consequently, traditional Buddhism remains very strong in the country. Although the regime has arrested monks who protest for democracy, this threatens neither the *sangha*'s influence nor its religious authority. Furthermore, widespread suspicions that the military has littered monasteries with informants do not seem to have diminished widespread respect for monks. A massive political or industrial shock that displaces the role of Buddhist civil society in Burma may lead the monks and writers respond by addressing environmental issues, as they have done in Thailand. However, in order for Burma's Buddhist civil society to expand its self-image to include environmental issues, the country will probably also have to undergo more political relaxation and environmental change.

⁶² Jackson, Peter, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand* (ChiangMai: Silkworm Books, 2003).

⁶³ Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Dhamma Walk around Songkhla Lake," *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, eds. Stephanie Kaza, and Kenneth Kraft (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 215.

Conclusion

Buddhist civil society in Burma, including the laypeople, academics, and monks, has begun to respond to environmental change in the country. While the laypeople may behave in an environmentally friendly manner by attempting to follow Buddhist rules, writers and monks can help spread environmentally friendly norms through Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, monks can help by persuading villagers to refrain from environmental destruction and using their influence to set up protected areas.

The extent of the involvement of Buddhist civil society in the future will likely depend on changes in the political situation, development, and cultural norms. However, I do not believe that environmentalists cannot progress in Burma without a massive change in all of these categories. The Communist government in China permits environmental NGOs to work on non-sensitive environmental issues.⁶⁴ And if the country were to open up, foreign NGOs would undoubtedly want to work with Buddhist civil society to preserve the country's resources before it is too late.

In fact, the government could create greater room for more Buddhist environmentalism as a means to channel the current dissatisfaction with the regime since it would be far less threatening than an environmental movement based on the Western model of challenging the state. It could also require the Buddhist missionaries it sends to parts of Burma to have training in sustainable development to spread best practices throughout the country. While these advances are unlikely anytime soon, the country's Buddhist civil society already has taken important steps toward environmental protection and has enormous potential to do more.

⁶⁴ For more on this, see Elizabeth Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 131-8.