

WELCOME TO LAMPI MARINE NATIONAL PARK

You are in the Myeik Archipelago, which comprises over 800 islands distributed along 600 km of coastline in the Andaman Sea.

Lampi is the only Marine National Park in Myanmar. The park covers an area of 205 km², comprising Lampi Island, the biggest island, and about 20 smaller islands in its surroundings. It is an ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) Heritage Park, an Important Bird Area and a Key Biodiversity Area.



THE FOREST



Lampi is covered by tropical lowland wet evergreen forest. Along rivers and freshwater sources, you can admire the mangrove forest, in an excellent state of conservation, supporting a rich biodiversity.

MARINE HABITAT



The coral reefs, seaweeds and sea grass beds of the Park are important habitats for mollusks, crustaceans, echinoderms (star, urchins and sea-cucumber) and fish, and provide food for threatened species such as the Green Turtle and the Dugong, as well as for a variety of birds.

FAUNA



The Park has a rich fauna, including:

- over 250 species of birds, 19 of which threatened, including the Plain-pouched Hornbill and the Wallace's Hawk Eagle.
- 29 species of amphibians and reptiles.
- 19 species of mammals, 7 of which threatened, including the Sunda Pangolin and the Small-clawed Otter.
- 3 species of turtles: the Green Turtle, the Loggerhead Turtle and the Olive Ridley Turtle

THE LOCAL POPULATION



Lampi provides food, water and energy to about 3,000 people living in 5 settlements within the Park. The main village is the busy fishing village of Makyone Galet on Bo Cho Island. Around 2,000 (5,000 at their peak) Moken sea gypsies have been living in this protected area since the XVI century, attributing spiritual and cultural values to Lampi, their "Mother island".

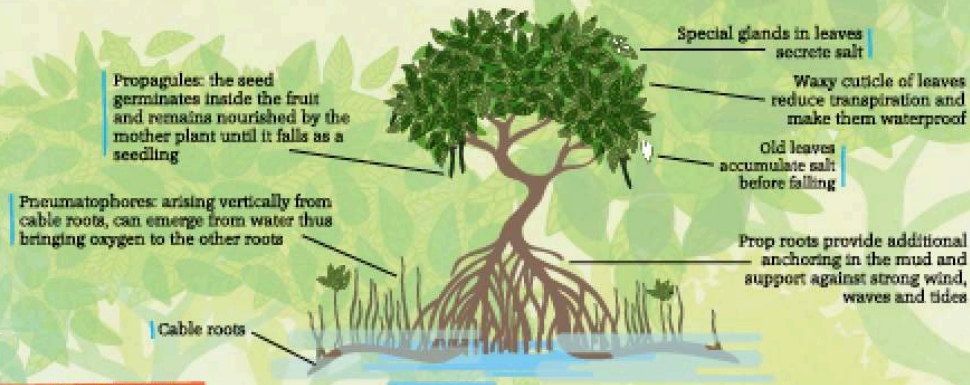
LAMPI MANGROVES

Lampi Marine National Park has one of the **highest diversities of mangrove species on the planet**, with 63 species of 'true' and 'associate' mangroves recorded in the Park.

The species present in Lampi can be divided into **two community types**: the *Rhizophora apiculata* community and the *Bruguiera cylindrica* community.

Dominant species are *Rhizophora apiculata* and *Rhizophora mucronata*.

Four of the mangrove species recorded in the park are listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the Red List of Threatened Species: *Sonneratia griffithii*, *Heritiera fomes*, *Aegialitis rotundifolia* and *Brownlowia tersa*.



THE TOURIST RIVER

One of Lampi's most unique places is a **mangrove river** known as the Tourist River.

Its extensive beaches and dune trees provide a continuous border to the mangrove and evergreen forests creating a unique panoramic beauty.

You can spot **many species of birds** such as the Pacific Reef egret (1) (*Egretta sacra*), the Beach Thick-knee (2) (*Esacus magirostris*), the Malaysian Plover (3) (*Charadrius peronii*) and the Brown-winged Kingfisher (4) (*Pelargopsis amauroptera*), that add bright colors to the magnificent natural picture.

If you are lucky, you might spot the Reticulated Python (8) (*Malayopython reticulatus*) hanging from a branch.

The mangrove river is also habitat for the **mudskipper fish** (5) (*Periophthalmus spp*), an amphibious fish that can use its pectoral fins to walk on land; for **many species of crabs**, among which the edible Giant Mud Crab (6) (*Scylla serrata*) and the Sand-bubbler Crab (7) (*Scopimera globosa*). The river also plays a crucial role as nursery for coral reef fish (9).

PRESERVING MANGROVES IS VERY IMPORTANT!

We need mangrove ecosystems because:



They conserve a high biological diversity, both in flora and fauna.



They minimise the effects of extreme natural events such as cyclones and tsunamis.



They provide protection against coastal erosion.



They offer water regulation service as they regulate the flow and purification of water.



They serve as a substantial store of belowground carbon, thus mitigating climate change.

WHAT IS A MANGROVE?

Mangroves are **trees or large shrubs** which normally grow in intertidal zones, such as river's delta and estuaries, coastal lagoons and open coastlines, where fresh waters mix with ocean water resulting in a unique ecosystem. These habitats are characterised by **harsh environmental conditions**: they are subject to regular flooding, variable salinity, droughts, powerful storms and heavy rains during the monsoon season.

To be able to survive in such a changing environment, mangroves have evolved **peculiar ecological adaptations**.

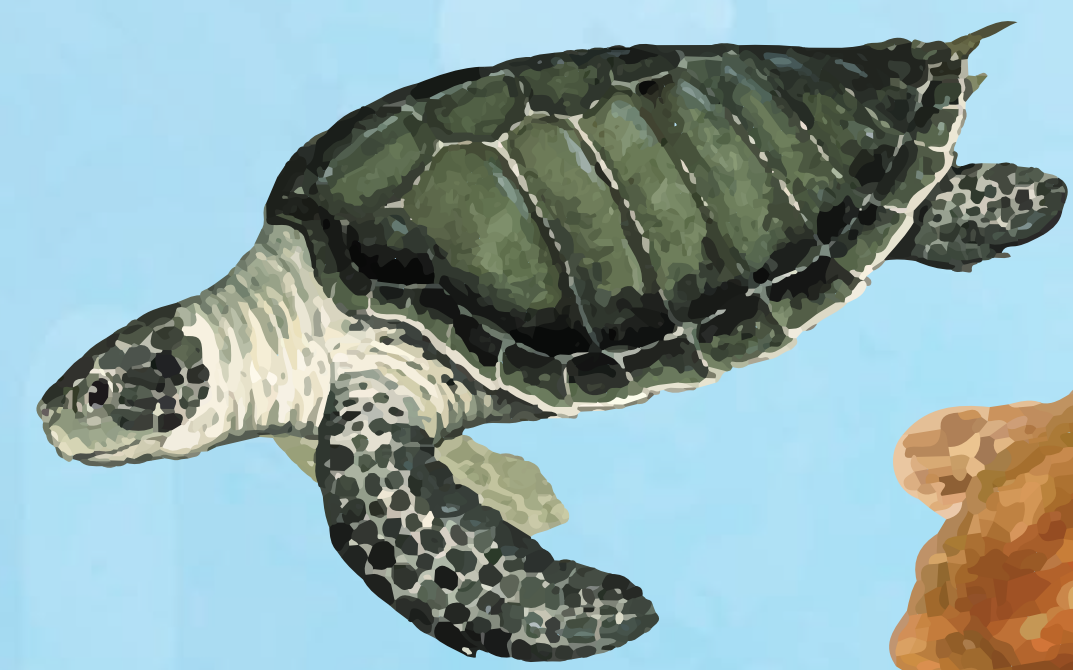
Some species can tolerate very **high salt concentrations**. Others block the salt by depositing it in the bark of stems and roots, dumping it in their senescent leaves or by actively secreting it as crystals from the leaves.

Many mangrove species have developed **aerial roots to transport oxygen** in the waterlogged and anaerobic environment they occupy.



SEA TURTLES

Among the seven living species of sea turtles in the world, 5 are known to live in Myanmar. Three of these sea turtle species could **nest in the Lampi Marine National Park**, based on beach characteristics:



Olive Ridley Turtle
(*Lepidochelys olivacea*)



Green Turtle
(*Chelonia mydas*)

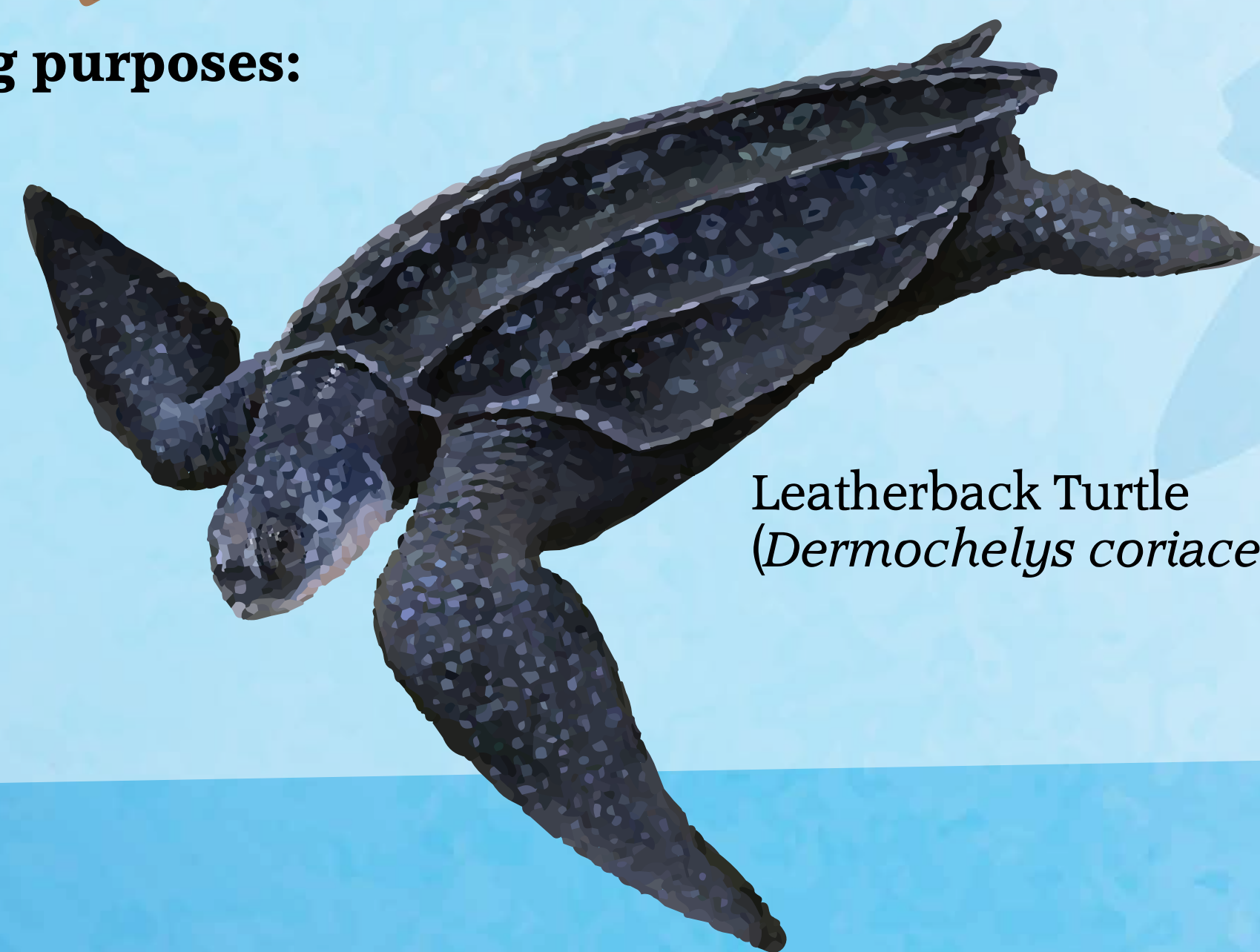


Hawksbill Turtle
(*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

Other sea turtles species **come to Lampi for feeding purposes:**



Loggerhead Turtle
(*Caretta caretta*)



Leatherback Turtle
(*Dermochelys coriacea*)

SEA TURTLES' ROLE IN OCEAN ECOSYSTEMS

- **They maintain sea grass beds.** When Green Turtles graze, they help to preserve the health of seagrass blades. Without constant grazing the seagrass would overgrow, shade the bottom of the sea bed and risk its decomposition. Sea grass beds are fundamental feeding and developmental grounds for many species of fish, shellfish and crustaceans.
- **They improve the diversity of the reef community.** Hawksbill Turtles forage for a variety of marine sponges. By removing sponges from reefs, Hawksbills allow other species, such as coral, to colonise and grow. Without turtles, sponges are likely to dominate reef communities, modifying the structure of coral reef ecosystems.
- **They provide nutrients to beach and dune ecosystems.** Sea turtles use beaches and the lower dunes to nest and lay their eggs. All the unhatched nests, eggs and trapped hatchlings are very good sources of nutrients for the dune vegetation.
- **They control the jellyfish population.** Leatherback Turtles get their nutritional needs from jellyfish. As significant consumers of jellyfish, they play a pivotal ecological role as a top jellyfish predator and controller.
- **They are an important part of the food web.** Sea turtles all produce large numbers of offspring which are a normal and important part of marine food webs with birds, crabs and all sorts of fish benefitting tremendously.

SEA TURTLES ARE AT RISK!

Death and injury from **commercial fishing, egg harvest, loss of suitable habitat, pollution and climate change** are the main human-caused threats pushing sea turtles towards **extinction worldwide**. In Lampi the main threats are the **direct removal of sea turtles from their habitats by fishermen and local community members for self-consumption** (people kill sea turtles and consume their eggs for food) and commercial income; **impact from fishing equipment** (nets and trawls) and **habitat destruction**.



MEET THE SEA TURTLE!

Sea turtles differ in size, shape, colour and diet:



The Olive Ridley Turtle usually weighs less than 100lbs, while the Leatherback Turtle's weight ranges from 650 to 1,300lbs.



The upper shell (**carapace**) of a sea turtle differs in length, colour, shape and arrangement of scales.



Sea turtles do not have teeth, but their jaws have modified "**beaks**" suited to their diet and variable within species: herbivore species (Green Turtle) eat mainly sea grass and algae; carnivore species (Olive Ridley Turtle, Loggerhead Turtle) have diets of lobster, crabs, tunicates, mollusks and fish. More specialist species like the Hawksbill Turtle, eat mostly sponges and invertebrates, and the Leatherback Turtle has a particular taste for jellyfish.



Their streamlined bodies and large **flippers** make them remarkably adapted to life at sea. Sea turtles are strong swimmers. The cruising speed for Green Turtles is about 0.9 to 1.4 mph. Leatherbacks have been recorded at speeds of 0.9 to 5.8 mph. Sea turtles are also excellent divers. Leatherbacks routinely dive more than 1,000 ft. They may reach depths of more than 3,900 ft, seeking jellyfish for prey.



Only females come ashore to **nest**; males rarely return to land after crawling into the sea as hatchlings. Genetic studies provide convincing evidence that the breeding adult sea turtles return to their region of birth after many years. Sea Turtles live very long lives: sexual maturity may range from as early as fifteen years in Hawksbills to 12-30 years in Loggerheads to 20-50 years in Green Sea Turtles. Most females nest at least twice during each mating/migration season; some may nest up to ten times in a season. Except for the Olive Ridley Turtle, females will rarely nest in consecutive years, typically skipping one or two years before returning.

BIRD COMMUNITIES

The variety of habitats in Lampi Marine National Park, from sea level to the upper hills, is home to a high diversity of birds: more than 250 species have been recorded.



SEA LEVEL: SANDY AND ROCKY BEACHES

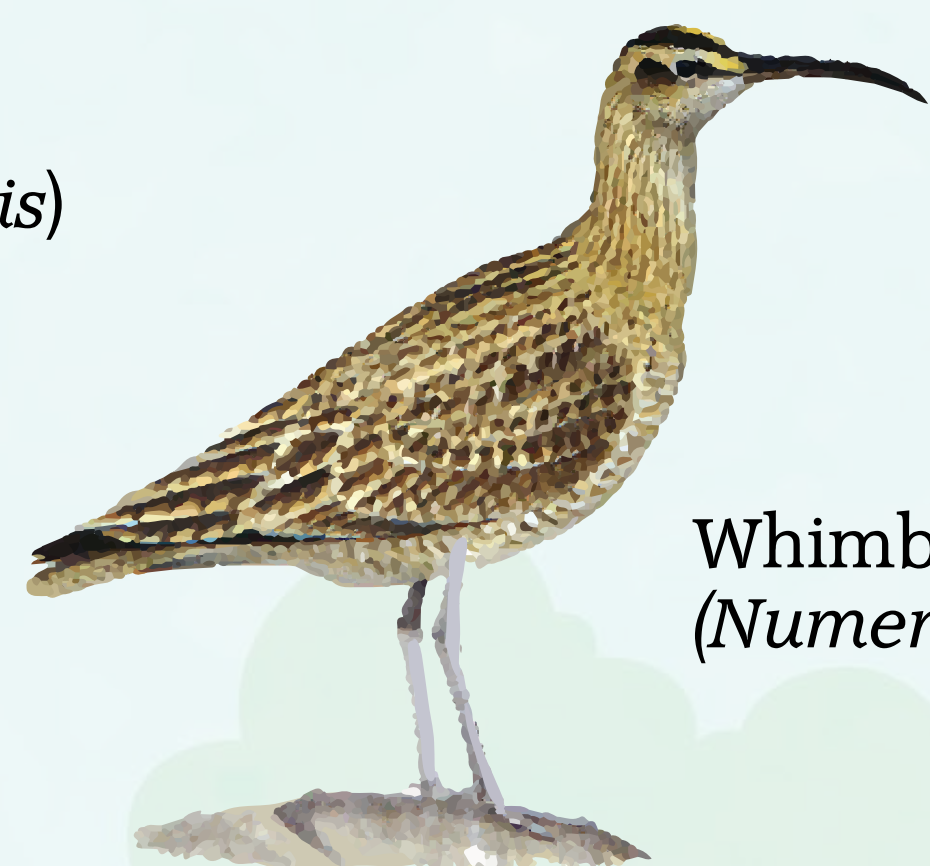
Many shorebirds (plovers, sandpipers) choose the seashore for feeding and roosting: the **Beach Thick-knee** (*Esacus magnirostris*), which feeds almost exclusively on crustaceans, especially crabs. The **Whimbrel** (*Numenius phaeopus*), with its curved bill to probe into the mud for worms and crustaceans, breeds in the temperate northern hemisphere and migrates here during the winter. **At low tide** also you can spot a variety of **herons** and **egrets** flocking to feed on the exposed mudflats: the **Pacific Reef-egret** (*Egretta sacra*), the Indian Pond-heron (*Ardeola grayii*), the **Little Heron** (*Butorides striata*).

Almost all shorebirds are migratory!

Terns (**Little Tern** *Sternula albifrons*, **Whiskered Tern** *Chlidonias hybrida*, **Lesser Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bengalensis*, **Greater Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bergii*) and some diurnal raptors (**Brahminy Kite** *Haliastur indus*, **White-bellied Sea Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, **Lesser Fish Eagle** *Ichthyophaga humilis*) can be spotted flying over the open sea, searching for fish as food.



Beach Thick-knee
(*Esacus magnirostris*)



Whimbrel
(*Numenius phaeopus*)



White-bellied Sea Eagle
(*Haliaeetus leucogaster*)

MANGROVE FORESTS

This is the preferred habitat for specialized birds, such as the **Mangrove Pitta** (*Pitta megarhyncha*), **Mangrove Whistler** (*Pachycephala grisola*) and **Ashy Tailorbird** (*Orthotomus ruficeps*). Tailorbirds build their nest by sewing large leaves together with spider silk.

Kingfishers also live in the mangroves. The **Collared Kingfisher** (*Todiramphus chloris*) catches crustaceans, insects, worms, frogs and even small snakes in the mud or sand. It nests in tree cavities or burrows into lobster mounds.

Many shorebirds roost in the mangrove canopy which provides them a safe place to rest.



Tailorbirds
nest



Collared Kingfisher
(*Todiramphus chloris*)

LOWLAND WET EVERGREEN FORESTS

Most of the Lampi birds live in this habitat and are sedentary resident species. However, not all species live together in the forest: it's possible to find **different bird species in different vertical strata of the forest**. A lowland tropical forest is formed by the following **vertical tiers**:

- **EMERGENT TREES** (35-50 m high), that poke through the canopy top. Typical birds are **hornbills** (see dedicated panel) and **woodpeckers**, characterised by strong bills for drilling and drumming on trees and long sticky tongues for extracting insects. They nest in cavities, excavating their own nests.
- **MID TIER PLANTS** (up to 25-30 m) consist of intermediate height trees. Birds living here can navigate among considerable leaf densities: leafbirds, bulbuls, drongos, flowerpeckers. **Drongos** are mostly black or dark grey, short-legged passerine birds, usually found in open forests. They have elaborately decorated forked tails. They feed on insects which they catch in flight.
- **FOREST FLOOR**, where there is little sunlight, you can find **babblers, doves, pigeons** and **pheasants**.

Doves and pigeons are stout-bodied birds with short necks, and short, slender bills with fleshy ceres. Many species feed on the ground, picking up seeds, fruit and berries.

EMERGENT TREES

Lesser Racket
Tailed Drongo
(*Dicrurus remifer*)

FOREST FLOOR



Scarlet Backed
Woodpecker
(*Veniliornis
callonotus*)

MID TIER PLANTS

Grey Capped
Emerald Dove
(*Chalcophaps indica*)

WHEN TO BIRDWATCH IN LAMPI MNP?

The beginning of the year is a good time to visit the Park. At this time the dry weather and many migrant birds augment the local avifauna. Towards the end of winter into early spring the resident birds become more active. During the breeding season, males tend to mark their territory with calls and often the birds are somewhat bolder and easier to spot.

MEET THE HORNBILL!

Hornbills (order: Bucerotiformes, family: Bucerotidae) range from Africa to Asia. 54 species are recognised. Four species are recorded in the Lampi Marine National Park: **Great Hornbill** (*Buceros bicornis*), **Oriental Pied Hornbill** (*Anthracoceros albirostris*), **Bushy-crested Hornbill** (*Anorrhinus galeritus*) and **Plain-pouched Hornbill** (*Rhyticeros subruficollis*).



Great Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*)



Plain-pouched Hornbill (*Rhyticeros subruficollis*)



Bushy-crested Hornbill (*Anorrhinus galeritus*)



Oriental Pied Hornbill (*Anthracoceros albirostris*)

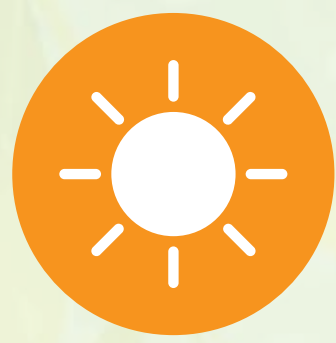
THE CASQUE

Hornbills are easily recognised by their oversized **beaks adorned with large casques**. The casque functions as a **resonating chamber**, responsible for their typical **loud nasal calls**. The **red, orange or yellow casque** and bill of Hornbills are **coloured** not by a pigment, but by **cosmetic application** of coloured oils from the preen gland situated on the upper side of the base of the tail.



HABITS

Hornbills are **diurnal** birds. At the end of the day, mostly during the non-breeding season, they gather at a communal **night roost** (traditional sites used as a resting site by large numbers of birds).



SEED DISPERSERS

Hornbills are largely **frugivorous**, wandering long distances in search of fruiting trees. Their distribution and abundance is thus strongly influenced by fruit production. Fruit seeds are frequently regurgitated or expelled by defecation, dispersing them over a wide area. Hornbills are thus important **seed dispersers** for the forest, acting as agents of **forest regeneration**, ensuring the continuation of **forest health and variety of species**.



REPRODUCTION

The **breeding** biology is one of the most fascinating characteristics of these birds. They invest a lot of time in courtship, incubation, and chick rearing.

All species of hornbill are **monogamous** and nest in **natural holes**. The **female** of most species **seals herself into a nest cavity** and leaves only a narrow slit through which the male passes her food. The basis of the curious nesting behaviour of hornbills probably lies in the **anti-predator advantage**. This habit involves a complete dependence of the female on the male. Some large species live **up to 30-40 years**.

CONSERVATION

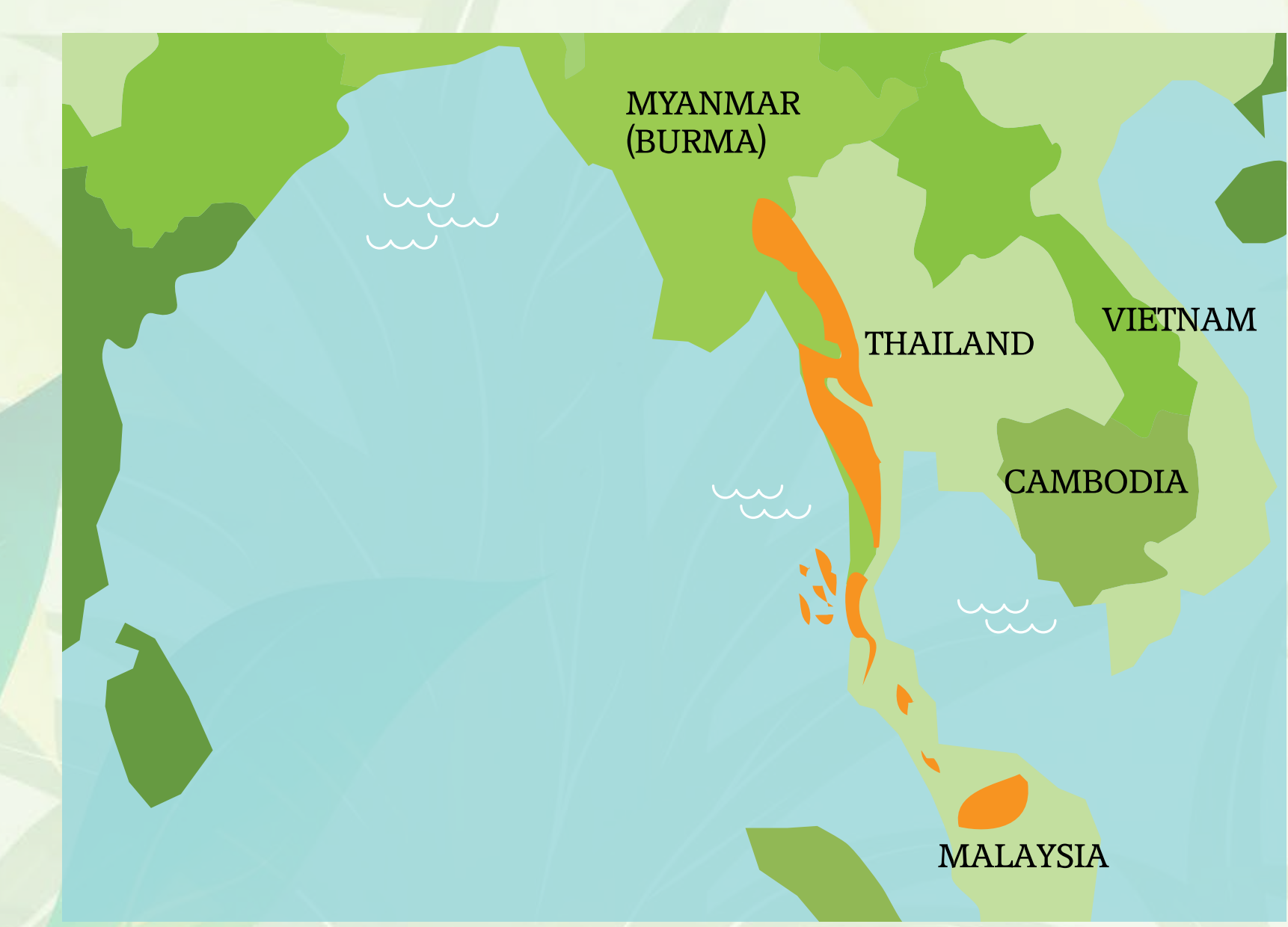
Many species of Asian hornbills are close to extinction due to **alteration and loss of habitat** caused by:

- **Deforestation**; as large trees with natural cavities are targeted by logging operations
- **Hunting**; as they are hunted for food and traditional medicines.

The effects of these problems on populations are very serious because Hornbills are long lived birds with a **slow reproductive rate**.

Another factor that increases the susceptibility of Asian hornbills to extinction is the **small total range** of some species.

PLAIN-POUCHED HORNBILL DISTRIBUTION



Extant (resident)

Many species have a very limited global distribution range. For example, the Myanmar-Thailand border and northern peninsular of Malaysia is the only area in the world where the Plain-pouched hornbill is present. This means that if any problem occurs to the species in this area, it threatens the existence of the entire living population, and potential extinction of the species.

Basic data is essential for managing the conservation of hornbills and their habitats and to allow us to understand their present status, but the species has yet to be well-researched.

THE MOKEN

The Moken (2,000 individuals, 3,000 at their peak) are part of a larger population of Austronesian Sea People stretching along the Andaman coast of the Malay Peninsula. They found refuge **in the Myeik Archipelago at least 5 centuries ago**.

From there on they developed nomadic lifestyles: as **sea-nomads**, Moken eat rice but do not grow it; they are sea-hunters and gatherers, but they do not fish. The rationale for such choices is the **ideology of non-accumulation of goods and wealth**, symbolized by the traditional Moken boat, **the kabang**, whose “mouth eats” the sea while its “back defecates” it perpetually. Accumulation brings disparity and envy. On the contrary, Moken form **a deeply egalitarian society**. They refused schooling for a long-time, though nowadays, greater interaction with Burmese fishermen has led to the construction of several schools on the islands. However, Moken attendance remains low.

“Moken script” is believed to be inscribed on the shells of turtles (their mythical sisters) lost during the primeval floods. By harpooning and sacrificing them during ritual ceremonies, the nomads forbid themselves assimilation to dominant societies through the apprenticeship of writing. **The nomad’s world is one of oral tradition**. Their close relationship to nature is reflected in kinship, myth and folklore and they have a deep and holistic knowledge of each and every part of the archipelago. This combination of knowledge and folklore has had a major influence on their lives. As an example, their legend of chaos (*lebun*) meant they were the only people to predict and avoid the tsunami that hit the Andaman sea in 2004.

THE TRADITION

Traditionally, Moken live on their *kabang* during the dry-season, **roaming the islands in search of valuable produce** (pearls, bird-nests, sea cucumbers) to be exchanged for rice, iron, fuel, etc. Despite Moken “economy” relying on valuable tradable goods, as much as possible they avoid contact with surrounding dominant societies (Malay, Thais, Burmese).

To articulate this paradox, Moken **interact with an intermediary** – formerly Chinese and nowadays Burmese – the *tokè*. The *tokè* not only supplies the Moken with goods, but also protects and takes care of them, notably while they are stranded on their mother island during the monsoon.



Moken people are as **skilled in the forest as they are at sea**.

Hunting is the reserve of men, and is one of their preferred activities. At sea they hunt for turtles, rays, dugongs and sometimes sharks. In the forest, mousedeer and wild boars are prized by hunters, while monkeys and birds are overlooked as they are considered elders.

Collecting the rich produce of foreshores and beaches is a women’s task. They look for sand worms, mantis shrimps, small shells and vegetables from the fringes of the forest as well as other “leaves” and yams. Men mostly look for tradable goods at sea and women seek produce for daily consumption on the foreshore (oysters, urchins, worms, shells). Having lived for centuries amongst the islands, Moken have learnt to sustainably manage their resources.



THE MOKEN NOWADAYS IN LAMPI

In the course of the 1990s and the development of a Myanmar fishing industry, many Burmese came to the islands and married Moken women. They relied heavily on Moken to acquire knowledge of the insular environment. A fishing economy developed in parallel with Moken activities, attracting **hundreds of Burmese** to profit from the wealth of the Myeik Archipelago. Moken traditional resources became rarer so the nomads had to adapt. **Squid fishing** started in the 2000s, and with an increasing rarefaction of resources, most of the Moken now dedicate their time to this activity. With one person per *sampan*, towed to site by motorised boats generally owned by the *tokè*, Moken use a line equipped with a fishing jig. During full moon they fish at night (light attracts squid closer to the surface). During new moon periods they fish around rocky islands and islets by day.

Throughout the 2000s, Moken also lost most of their *kabang*, which as a symbol of non-accumulation, was not suitable for storing squid in iceboxes. The Moken became more sedentary.

However, the **Moken’s identity still endures**. Their capacity to resist without confronting others is a tried and tested strategy for survival. The disappearance of the *kabang* in just 5 years across dozens of Moken communities is a conscious choice: waiting for a new configuration that allows, or perhaps will not allow, Moken nomadism to resume.



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SPIRIT POLES – LOBUNG (LEBI MOKEN GROUP)



The spirit poles of the Lebi Moken group are **more abstract** in shape than those of northern groups like the Jait. They resemble those found among the Nyawi group (South of Lampi), yet they often surpass them in height. **The shape of the spirit poles is a marker of the group.**



The two bigger spirit poles represent the founder ancestors of the Lebi group, sometimes accompanied by a third, smaller one, symbolising a child.

They are celebrated and renewed each year for the *bo lobung* ceremony (“making of the spirit poles”), which **marks the transition between dry-season’s mobility and monsoon’s more sedentary way of life.** The second day of the ceremony is held in the Lebi’s cemetery situated under the foliage of the beach on the other side of the canal. These spirit poles also **mark the western edge of the Moken village**, like the Jait group’s spirit poles mark the eastern edge of it.

The way the spirit poles are carved and the associated ceremony is performed varies each year, depending on the events that affect the group during the year (death, abundance of resources, etc.). The last known 3-day ritual of the Lebi group happened in 2013. The shaman has since passed away, and the ceremony is only held over one night and one day, led by the shaman’s wife. Spirit poles are accordingly smaller in this context than those carved for 2013, which reached about 4 meters in height. The Lebi group confined to this village is increasingly surrounded by Burmese residents, allowing less space for ideological and ritual expression by the Moken, in contrast to the Jait group who maintain greater mobility thanks to their distribution over several islands.



CEMETERY (LEBI MOKEN GROUP)

Moken cemeteries are generally orientated towards the West and lie beneath the undergrowth of the beach, in the sand. It can, like this one, be located in front of the village, separated

by strong currents, **meaning strong spirits protect the living from the dead.**

Cemeteries can also be located at the end of the village. This may have been the case for the Lebi before Burmese fishermen as well as other Moken group (Jait) came to settle.

Dead are buried on land rather than at sea in their boat. The belongings of the dead go with him, and the tomb is covered by a mound (a pile of shells, a concrete platform, a tent...) and can be accompanied by a spirit pole (*lobung*). Indeed, the cemetery is also the place where the *bo lobung* ceremony (“making of the spirit poles”) is held by the Lebi group on the second day of the ritual. This is where **the Moken celebrate those who have become worshipped ancestors.**

Ideally, the *lobung* may be dispersed in different locations: one (or more) is kept in the village of the mother island, another one goes to the cemetery, and another is put in another sacred place. The importance of the dead is marked by the presence and the size of the *lobung*.

In Moken beliefs, **the fate of a deceased person varies.**

Some, if appropriate ceremonies are followed, including a ceremony held seven days after the burial, will find a life parallel to that of the living. They spear, sail and live as the Moken, becoming familiar spirits who are not necessarily evil and usually without power.

Others, victims of strange deaths and those that the Moken abandon to their fate without performing the necessary ceremonies, cannot join the world of the dead and plague the living in their daily life, for example by causing illness. Nonetheless, the Moken will later bury them properly and the site becomes a “sacred” place.

What becomes of ordinary people is not well defined. It is said that they stay on the horizon, like the huntsman of the Malays beliefs, or stay with the undead of other populations, always looking to their former life, hence being dangerous. This is why Moken avoid them while respecting the ritual of offering them whatever they used to appreciate when they were alive.

Generally, the first visit made when returning to a mother island is to give offerings to the dead.

The fate of sacred men and women is better explained.

Officiants turn into marine mammals, such as shamans who are reborn as whales and the other officiants as dolphins. The “sacred men” are the ones who make the link between the dead and the living since, as marine mammals, they are able to swim and dive, thus going back and forth between the realms of the living and the dead. The closing of the spirit poles ceremony sees the “dolphins” – that is the reincarnation of sacred men – coming onto land. The sacred dancers are possessed by them, moving like dolphins to the altars to take their offerings, meaning the dead at sea come to pay respect and accept peace between the spiritual and human realms. Then the “doors” between this world and beyond are “closed” and the altar is covered after the dolphins departure.



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THE BO LOBUNG CEREMONY – “MAKING OF THE SPIRIT POLES”

flotillas exploit the resources of various islands during the dry season. During the rainy season, they all regroup to perform the *bo lobung* (“making of the spirit poles”) ceremony and then build their temporary village.

Traditionally, the *bo lobung* ceremony is held **annually on the waxing moon of the fifth month** (between March and April) and **lasts between one and seven days** depending on whether the year was good or bad and whether it is taking place on an island of principal or secondary residence.



It begins with the rising of the poles to the spirits (lobung), towards the rising sun. Trances are held all day long, from dawn to sunset, with dancers turning anti-clockwise. **The cataleptic trance** which is the shaman journey, is held on the second day, an odd day which makes the world “drift”. The ceremony must be **completed by the full moon**. It symbolises the transition between the dry season’s mobility and the monsoon’s more sedentary way of life.

During the ceremony, the **sea and the forest are prohibited** (*sekèn or patang*) and life is organised within a circle of a few tens of meters designed around the posts. **The vertical axis of communication with the world beyond takes precedence over the horizontal axis of everyday life.** The living community is then no longer of this world as it communicates within the circle drawn by the dancers officiating with the beyond. Assistants then takes the opportunity to express grievances, defusing tensions by addressing them with the ancestors, especially in the ceremony *manyark okang* (“convey the words”), which is a **collective catharsis addressing the problems of the group**, coarse and vulgar as they are, with the ancestors. The idea is to discuss everything that should be settled before building houses; even quarrelling couples come and explain their problems.

So there is a **back and forth between worlds**. The ancestors descend; offerings and the words of men ascend. The shaman uses the spirit poles to convey his “double” (*manga*) to the realm of the ancestors, guided by the rhythm of the music (“sound of the waves”, “sound of the high sea”...). The “sacred language” (*makao puti*) keeps the “doors” open.

This language is a composite of old dialects kept alive by the Moken - forgotten languages, mainly old Malay - explaining why the spirit poles represent Malay people most of the time, and reminding everybody that the Moken are of Austronesian origin. The assistants must protect the shaman’s body while his double is gone, and are in charge of transcribing and explaining the “journey”. The sacred dancers and singers are among the officiants who can enter the trance medium, for an hour, a day, or more, becoming a vehicle for the ancestors and spirits descended among humans to feast on their offerings or to disrupt the bodies of ill people.

There are a lot of sequences in one ceremony, but the most important aim is to fix the terms of a **“contract” (karun) with the spirits** and for that the “double” of the shaman has to go to visit the world beyond. This contract is made in order for the men to give offerings to spirits which in turn will leave the Moken in peace. The sacred food is cooked by special women, strong and well respected, who will decide together with the sacred men how to distribute the offerings, the main one being the turtle, if not a wild boar, pig or chicken. The hierarchy of offering recalls that Moken are hunters and not fishermen. Then follows the offerings of sarongs, betel nuts, alcohol, dances and trances.

The Moken’s archipelagic territory is divided into a few **“mother islands”** from where



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SPIRIT POLES – LOBUNG OF THE JAIT MOKEN GROUP

ceremony and then build their temporary village. The spirit poles, *lobung*, are renewed each year or at least “repaired”. Sometimes Moken just add a new one to the old ones, depending on what they have endured over the year.

The ideal number of *lobung* is seven: two founding ancestors and their five children (representing four turtles and one dugong), each year gaining ground until the sea is reached; the link between the sea and the land is thus made. This ideal setting is rarely met since *lobung* are made of wood and rot in one or two years.

Moken constantly adapt to the surrounding populations and environment, so **new characters can be added.**

The spirit poles of the Jait, a group of the Domel Island, reflect a changing way of life. The triplet of *lobung* (2016) depicts a man at the forefront – most probably a Burmese *tokè* (erected on a screed) – leading the traditional couple of ancestors. This **symbolises the growing importance of Burmese entrepreneurs in the life of the Moken group** and the way they affect their place of residence. Burmese *tokè* or military men can displace the sub-group’s village to another island, thus becoming a new kind of ancestor and a protector of the new territory. This is a syncretism and a strong way of interrelating populations that allows Moken to survive.



The Moken group of Jait, part of which chose Lampi as its new island of residence, celebrates the **protective python spirit** together with the male ancestor or **Grand Father** (*ebab*) and the female ancestor or **Grand Mother** (*ibum*).



Behind the spirit poles is the “spirit house” (*omak puti*). It contains the “spirit planks” (*papan puti*, which are kept in the boats during the dry season), representing a **microcosm of the universe, between forest and sea** (back door and front door of the altar with mountains carved into it), and the East and West on each sides, in other words **life and death**.

Spirit poles also **mark the eastern edge of the Moken village**, like the Lebi group’s spirit poles mark the eastern end of its own village.

For every Moken in the archipelago, spirit poles represent the **channel to reach the spirits’ world**, a way for the medium and shaman to receive and send souls to and from the world beyond. But, by carving the body of their founding ancestors in different shapes (e.g. figurative for Jait group, more abstract for Lebi), **each sub-group represents the territory they have chosen**, each one having his own couples of ancestors, with their own story known and transmitted through oral literature.

Territory, sub-group and identity are linked by the spirit poles. You are a Moken if you belong to one of the original five mother islands, translating for example into the saying “*Gatcha olang Jait*”, that is “Gatcha, a man of Jait (Domel Island)”.

However, through the 1980s and 1990s, the growing presence of Burmese fishermen and military control in the islands reshaped the geographical distribution of Moken sub-groups, so for instance the Jait spread over two main locations: Lengan (Sisters Isl.) and Pu Nala (Lampi Isl.). **The *bo lobung* ceremony has been adapted accordingly**, so the one performed in Lampi is part of a 3-day ritual which starts in Bushby Island (near Domel), continues in Lengan (Sisters Islands) to end in Pu Nala (Lampi). In this way, the Jait group marks its new territory.



Text: kindly provided by Jacques Vanoff and Maxime Bourry