

# New Peatland Areas Confirmed in Myanmar



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Rare freshwater crab breeding  
in burrows in the spring mound  
peatland. Photo: David Abrahamson



# Introduction

Until recently, one can only guess the extent of peatlands in Myanmar. Much of the quoted numbers were merely 'guesstimates' based on meagre information. With the recent changes in country leadership and funds from several peatland related projects, it has become possible to do proper surveys to confirm peatland areas in Myanmar.

A preliminary survey held in 2012 confirmed some areas as peatlands but hesitated with others due to mineral deposits that covered the peat surface and infused it with mineral soil. In February 2014, a joint Myanmar-international team of peatland specialists went to take a second look and in March, announced the discovery of rare peatland ecosystems near Inle Lake in North-east Myanmar.

Surveys were taken over a two-week period by a team from Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia and the USA under the framework of the SEApeat (Sustainable Management of Peatland Forests in South East Asia) Project in conjunction with the ASEAN Peatland Forests Project (APFP) funded by the European Union and IFAD-GEF respectively.

Surveys were undertaken between 15-27 February 2014 and involved detailed surveys of the area in and around Inle Lake in Shan State with sampling and peat depth assessments in more than 70 locations.

A total of 9021 hectares of peatland was identified comprising three separate types:

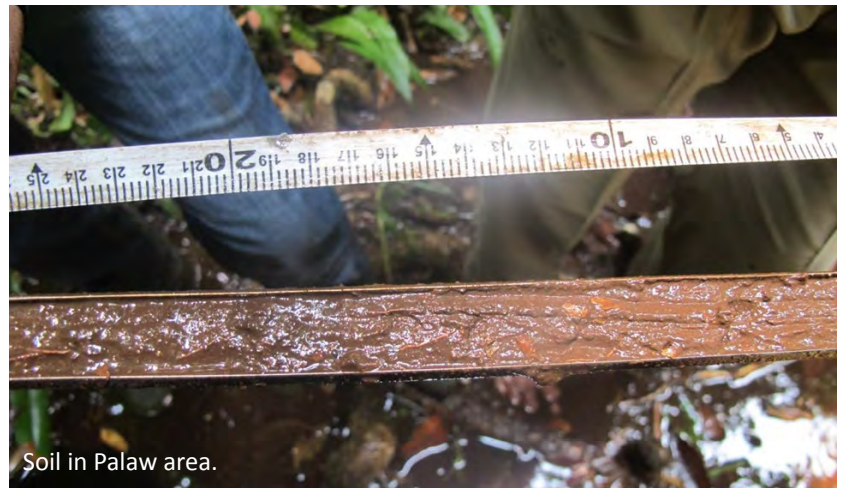
1. Lake-margin peatlands up to three meters thick along the shores of Inle Lake
2. Floating peatlands between 50cm to 1.5m thick floating on the surface of the lake. These are subdivided into two—natural floating peatlands and modified floating peatlands used as floating gardens for the cultivation of tomatoes and other vegetables.
3. Calcareous spring mound peatland

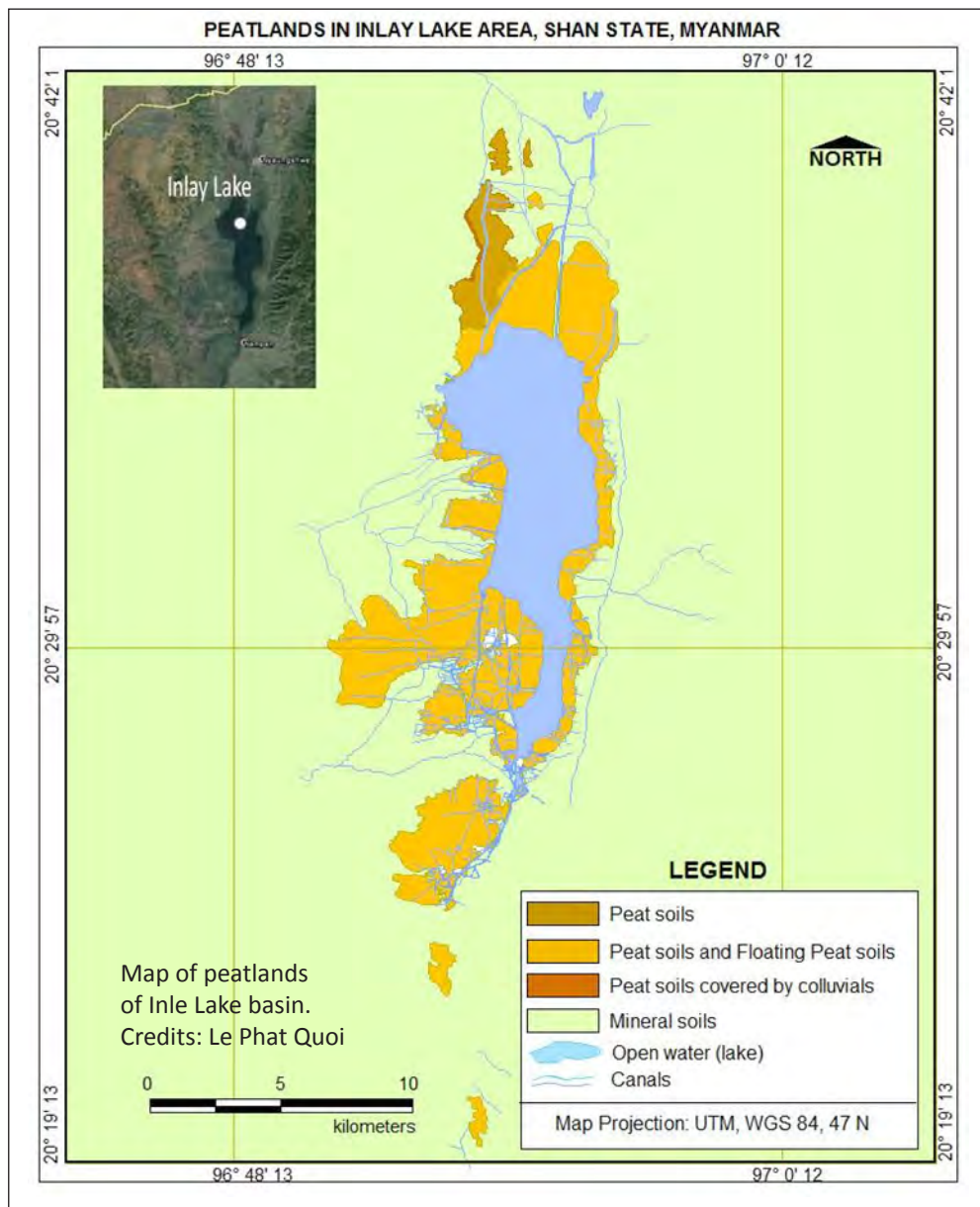
found in Taung Bo Gyi Village in the northwest corner of the Inle Lake wetland. This peatland has been formed over thousands of years around an active spring fed by calcium rich groundwater. It has formed a mound of peat about 6.5 m thick and covers about three hectares. Mound spring peatlands are very rare and this is one of the first to be described in Asia.

## Inle Lake

The peatlands of Inle Lake play a key role in stabilizing water levels and improving water quality in the lake. The floating peatlands are also integral to the culture and economy of the local Intha Community who have cultivated the peat in floating gardens for hundreds of years.

Although the floating vegetation around Inle Lake has been known for years it was not recognized that these were part of a much larger peatland system along the margins of the lake. The 9,021 hectares (ha) of peatlands represents the largest single area identified during 18 months of surveys





Inle Lake is internationally known for its beautiful environment, clear waters and unique customs of the Intha people who row their fishing boats with their legs and balance on one foot as they catch fish with nets and special traps.

Inle Lake has been designated as an ASEAN Heritage Park and joins U Minh Thuong National Park in Viet Nam and Tasek Merimbun National Park in Brunei Darussalam as ASEAN Heritage Sites with significant peatlands.

The peatlands at Inle are home to a range of rare and threatened species including the Eastern Sarus Crane, Ferruginous Duck and a number of endemic fish species. During the survey freshwater crabs were

in different parts of Myanmar. In addition, 1,599 ha of peatlands were found in the nearby Heho Basin where peatlands are all cultivated and covered with soil eroded from nearby hills.

“The identification of the peatlands of Inle Lake are an important component of a national inventory of peatlands under the Ministry of Environment Conservation and Forestry (MOECF) led by the Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA) with support from the Global Environment Centre (GEC)” stated U Sann Lwin, Secretary (Finance) of FREDA.

“We have documented more peatlands around Inle Lake than remain in the whole of Vietnam” said Dr Le Phat Quoi – a Vietnamese peatland expert who played a key role in the surveys.

observed breeding in burrows on the calcareous mound spring at Taung Bo Gyi.

“Calcareous mound spring peatlands are very rare and the discovery at Inle lake may be the first system to be documented in East or Southeast Asia” stated Faizal Parish Director of the Global Environment Centre. “The mound spring in Taung Bo Gyi Village has been protected by the local community who do not allow any cultivation on it – to maintain its function to provide drinking water supply to part of the village and nearby monastery,” he added.

“Peatlands in the Inle Lake basin are facing a number of threats including conversion for agriculture, clearance and burning of the vegetation and pollution by domestic waste and agrochemicals,” – said U Sann Lwin of FREDA.



Tomatoes growing on a floating peat island. Photo: Faizal Parish



“We hope to work closely with the local communities and government agencies in the future to enhance the protection of key sites.”

## Peatland Forests

In March, a team from FREDA went to Kau Ye Gyi Island; Palaw and Bokpyin Townships in Thanintharyi Region to survey the area for peatlands. Surveys and soil tests confirmed the three areas as peatlands. Furthermore, it was forested peatlands, the first to be found in Myanmar. The extent of the new peatlands area is yet unconfirmed.

- The ASEAN Peatland Forests Project (APFP), funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF)/IFAD, and led by the ASEAN Secretariat, aims to demonstrate, implement and scale up sustainable management and rehabilitation of peatland forests while the SEApeat project, funded by the European Union, seeks to reduce deforestation and degradation of peatland forests in Southeast Asia.

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