

Myanmar loses leading conservationist

Title

Dr Htin Hla, known to his many friends and colleagues simply as Tony, a leading figure in Burmese conservation has passed away at his home in Yangon aged 59.

“Those that knew him will remember his dauntless spirit and boundless enthusiasm to tackle challenges as well as his friendliness and charm, which meant he made many friends around the world in the conservation movement”, said Dr Marco Lambertini, BirdLife’s Chief Executive. “His passing is a huge loss for Myanmar’s spectacular wildlife”

Born in 1954, Tony arrived at bird conservation via a background in medicine. A passion for nature conservation came to him later in life and he took on its many trials with characteristic aplomb.

Tony studied for both Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Medicine degrees at the Institute of Medicine II in Yangon. After several years of practicing medicine and later as a representative of a pharmaceutical company, Tony made the switch to a new career in bird watching tourism. In 1994 Tony established Wildbird Adventure Travels and Tours (WATT), which specializes in bird watching, nature adventure and trekking tours and expeditions to remote part of Myanmar. His growing interest in birds lead naturally to an awakening of the need for their conservation.

In 2002, Tony reached out to BirdLife, which heralded the start of a long and productive decade for bird conservation research in Myanmar. Tony, with others was responsible for the formation of the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) in 2004, which later became the BirdLife Partner. There then followed a number of collaborative conservation projects with BirdLife, reflecting Tony’s keen and growing interest in birds and conservation, which most notably lead to the re-discovery of Gurney’s Pitta in southern Myanmar in 2003.

Subsequent research guided by him has shown the species to be far more numerous and widespread than previously believed. The years that followed saw projects to survey the vultures of Myanmar and wetland surveys of the Chindwin basin, which as a result is known to support the largest populations of Masked Finfoot and White-winged Duck in South-east Asia. More recently as Chairman of BANCA, Tony directed research and conservation action on efforts to conserve Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Myanmar. All of these projects were initiated by Tony and without his drive and determination and great organisational skills none would have succeeded.

It wasn't only nature that benefitted from Tony's skill and determination. When cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in May 2008, he worked tirelessly as a medical doctor, for the survivors. He also raised money for medicines and organised a team of fellow doctors to treat people in the worst hit areas.

In 2008, Tony lead BANCA in a different direction when they were engaged as consultants to undertake the environment impact assessment (EIA) for the controversial Myitsone Dam near the source of the Irrawaddy River. After the completion of the EIA and amid growing public controversy, Tony argued for full public disclosure of the EIA to facilitate open debate on the matter. On 30 September 2011, President Thein Sein announced that the Myitsone dam project was to be suspended during his tenure.

Tony stepped down as chairman of BANCA in 2013 but remained an active force in conservation until only a few months before his death. It is hoped that those he helped and supported will continue the important work he started on so many species in the future.