

# From Lumpondeng to Umngot: The Battle for Meghalaya's Environment

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Green-Tech Foundation's spectacular success in reversing the government's decision to develop a resort at Lumpondeng Island is indeed a landmark moment for agitation politics in Meghalaya. From a nondescript organization formed in 2019, the last few years have seen them take up a myriad of issues. There are those who are still unsure about their true antecedents: are they an independent organisation, a front for certain influential individuals, or a cover for a political organization? Many, in fact, have commented on the organization's silence on several important issues such as coal mining, river pollution, and others. I think such criticisms are unfair and reflect whataboutery, whose logic is based on the idea that if someone does not fight for every issue, they must be biased or harbour a hidden agenda. Viewed from that perspective, every movement becomes suspect. We should avoid cynicism and instead evaluate issues on their own merit.



In this case, the government itself admitted that the cutting of trees on the island was done without permission, which I find hard to believe. The clarification that only temporary structures would be built on the island also appears to be a concession made by the government as a reaction to the protest. The local community, however, does not want the project to be scrapped, as they seek opportunities for local employment. Therefore, the

**decision to continue the project while excluding the island represents a satisfactory compromise.**

**I congratulate the organization for its success. Now it will be interesting to see whether they take up, with the same commitment, issues that do not directly involve the government but instead implicate private players—such as influential business families, coal mafias, sand mining**

cartels, the hollowing of mountains for export to Bangladesh, river pollution, and the destruction of catchment areas. They need not take up every issue, but they should address some that do not directly involve the state government. After all, it is not only the government that is responsible for our environmental crisis. That said, there is one issue involving the government that will need to be confronted at some point in the future: the now-suspended Umngot Hydro Electric Project. I first became aware of the Umngot Hydro Electric Project a few years ago while reviewing its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Although I had visited villages that resisted the project, I had not fully appreciated the importance of the river to the community and their reluctance to accept the dam. This time, I had the opportunity to visit the site and speak with the community. I was deeply moved not only by their kindness but also by the long history of interaction people have had with the river, which continues to this day.

The major concern for the communities regarding the project is its impact on their agricultural fields. Umsawwar, like many project-affected villages, has land both on the



tableland and on the slopes of the canyon through which the Umngot flows.

The most lucrative plots are those on these steep slopes, which were previously used for shifting cultivation but are now used for broom grass cultivation. The tableland plots are community-owned and allocated to households in need, while the slope lands are privately owned. These lands became privately owned after the village fought neighbouring villages over farming rights. After Umsawwar prevailed, some households purchased these plots and have cultivated them for decades. Although not

every household owns land in this area, nearly every family depends on it—either by working on the plots or renting them for cultivation. Because blood was shed for these lands, the emotional connection to them is extremely strong. This has been true of Indigenous communities throughout history. Land to outsiders will never be relinquished without a fight.

While broom grass is the main crop, the system is not a complete monoculture. Farmers grow Khasi mandarin, guava, banana, jackfruit, pineapple, and other fruit trees among the broom grass clumps.



During a transect walk through the plantations, our guide picked a fruit known as Soh Bataw and shared it with us—it tasted as if someone had poured liquid sugar into our mouths. There are also many wild fruits such as Soh Um, Soh Ling, and Soh Jakum, along with wild bananas and vegetables like Jaymrdoh, Jali, Jatira, Jalyndem, Jatyndon, Jawah, and various species of mushrooms. Many medicinal herbs are also found here. In fact, in the house where we stayed, no meal was complete without at least one wild edible sourced from the Umngot. The community identified more than 100 species of food plants—both domesticated and wild—found along the river. Fruit trees thrive especially near the river, and both wild and cultivated fruits are sold in markets such as Jatah and Smit. Wild vegetables are also sold, though only during certain seasons. What is noteworthy is that while cultivated fruit trees belong to

the farmer who planted them, wild vegetables and fruits can be harvested by anyone. Thus, even those who do not own land can harvest and sell these in the market.

These sources supplement income from broom grass, and their importance is likely to increase as broom prices continue to decline. The inclusion of fruit trees within broom plantations may represent a viable transition strategy for farmers. Although the government initially compensated farmers by purchasing broom, payments were prompt only at first; many have not received compensation for over six months.

Another vital resource from the Umngot is its aquatic life. The community listed nearly 30 species of fish, crustaceans, and amphibians they depend on. Some farmers build small huts on their plots and even dig ponds

to rear fish caught from the river, which are later sold in the market. While many fish for self-consumption, others sell their harvest. Fishing practices are strictly regulated—poison, dynamite, and large nets are prohibited. Not long ago, an offender was fined over ₹15,000 for violating these rules.

The primary concern regarding the dam is the potential loss of these highly productive lands. With the government increasingly stepping away from creating formal employment opportunities (with their rhetoric of looking beyond reservation), this loss would be even more severe. As one senior member of the Dorbar Shnong told us, “Not many can afford to leave the village permanently, and even those who do often return due to lack of opportunities.” In response, the community has developed its own networks of local traders who transport their produce to



markets. The village also has a rotational system for selling pork locally, ensuring that everyone has a chance to earn and that affordable meat is available within the community. However, the losses from any threats to Umngot would not be only economic.

Umngot is also a landscape imbued with spiritual meaning—home to puris and other spirits believed to inhabit the valley and its water sources. Some of the puris used to inhabit the large trees that grew along the valley. When those trees were felled for broom grass cultivation, they migrated to other spots within the surrounding area. There are stories of people who have been touched by the puris—a familiar motif in Khasi cosmogony. While the river itself is not worshipped, it is deeply

respected for sustaining life. Everyone we met spoke of it with affection. The river also nurtures human connections and one story in particular stands out.

A Mei-ieid told me that in the past, people would travel to Iew-Musiang to sell fruits from Umngot. Along the way, she would meet friends and give them fruits. By the time she reached the market, her basket would be empty—but she felt happy because she had met her friends.

This is what the river has given the people: a life full of memories—not just of mundane struggles, but also of moments of immense joy. This was threatened when the project was announced, prompting a long and determined resistance. Although the project has been suspended, fears remain that it

may be revived. It would be meaningful if Green-Tech Foundation and its supporters visited Umsawwar and surrounding villages to assure the community that they will stand with them if the project is ever revived. That, to me, would be the true test of their credibility. Hopefully, that moment never comes—but if it does, one hopes they will be ready.

*(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)*



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