

Letters on any issue covered on the environment pages can be sent to Society Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER or fax 020-7713 4154 or email [society@guardian.co.uk](mailto:society@guardian.co.uk)

# Trumpet fanfare

Can we halt the decline of rainforests? Michael Brooke on a bold attempt to save the Gola forest in Sierra Leone

**T**he waspish buzz of the chainsaw is followed by the tearing of wooden limbs, then by a pulse of silence. A few minutes later the wildlife, which has survived the felling of the giant hardwood, begins to hum once more. But for how long can the world's rainforests withstand these assaults? In Indonesia, the rate of forest clearance is increasing. Brazil lost an area of forest the size of Switzerland in 2003.

Now the RSPB, Europe's largest conservation NGO, has become involved in a project to save one large tract of Africa's rainforest, the Gola Forest in Sierra Leone. Instead of the chainsaw, the 293 sq miles forest will resound to trumpeting elephants if all goes to plan.

The Upper Guinea forests once covered an area the size of the UK, stretching from Sierra Leone in the west to Ghana in the east. That forest is now 80% gone. Gola is one of the largest chunks remaining, a mix of majestic forest up to 55m tall, and rocky crags on which the Picathartes, a dove-sized bald-headed bird, builds its mud nests.

Since colonial times, commercial interests have cut the forest for profit, bringing revenues to middlemen in Sierra Leone and investors overseas and in urban areas. Under the new agreement, commercial logging will cease.

Dieter Hoffmann, head of global programmes at the RSPB, says that it has not taken on the task of protection over the heads of local people. "The Forestry Department and the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone came to us, and local chiefs also asked for our help with managing the area," he says. "They had found that previous forestry had destroyed the forest without bringing tangible benefits to the local people living nearby."

If any country needs such support it is Sierra Leone, with a per capita GDP of £235. Describing the office of the head of the Wildlife Conservation Branch, Hoffmann notes: "There is nothing – the odd skin, a fading poster of some British birds. Even a second-hand bicycle would be welcome."

While the RSPB has signed an agreement to provide management advice and infrastructure for the next two years, the challenge will be to raise funds to create a multi-million pound endowment that will generate some \$400,000 (£208,365) a year to allow the forest to be run as a protected area.

"We want to start discussions with the corporate sector, and with organisations such as Conservation International in Washington, and we hope our members will dig into their pockets," Hoffmann says. He hopes the next agreement to be negotiated will run for 25 years, during which time the area will be declared a national park. Before such an agreement can be signed, legal issues have to be resolved. For instance, how can the endowment be used to fund local projects in return for the Sierra Leone government losing the fees that would have been paid by commercial foresters?

For years, an approach favoured by conservationists has been to work with local communities, facilitating development projects such as low impact forestry, which gives the communities an economic boost and serves the conservation cause. But such projects have achieved mixed results. "Projects that seek to integrate conservation and development have tended to be over-ambitious and underachieving," says Bill Adams, a professor at Cambridge University. It is no surprise that conservationists, often from the developed world, are now turning instead to

paying other people, often in the developing world, for conservation. The Gola project reflects the trend.

Agi Kiss, of the World Bank, is one who has championed direct payments for conservation. "People are uncomfortable with the idea of paying for nothing, but we are paying for an output from the land."

In England, the single payment scheme rolled out this year by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does exactly this: it is designed to reward farmers for treating their land sympathetically. Similarly, since 1997, Costa Rican landowners have been paid from fuel taxes for the community services that their land provides. These are examples where payer and payee are of one country.

**T**he relationship between the two is arguably more complex when they come from opposite sides of the globe. In east Africa, some Masai now receive \$4 (£2.08) an acre not to fence the land and not to harass the wildlife that migrates across it, so foreign tourists can enjoy a more thrilling spectacle. In northern India, pastoralists are paid from US funds to set aside land where wild blue sheep – the favourite meal of snow leopards – can prosper.

This may be an inexorable trend. As the world gets smaller, multinationals seek new markets, and conservation NGOs seek to spend money where the wildlife need is greatest. That may be no bad thing if Gola Forest once more resounds to trumpeting elephants.

Michael Brooke lectures in conservation biology and is curator of birds at Cambridge University's department of Zoology.