

Protecting the Gola Forest

A new approach to conservation in Sierra Leone



Gola's importance

The Upper Guinea forests were once a vast expanse of lowland rainforests that covered the coastal region of West Africa from Guinea to Ghana. The Upper Guinea forests are fragments of what they once were, most of it lost to commercial logging and gradual expansion of farming. It is widely reported that more than 70 percent of the original forest cover has gone.

The remaining forests are a 'biodiversity hotspot' of global importance thanks to the rich variety of plants and animals living there, including many found nowhere else in the world. The Upper Guinea Forest is one of the 25 Global Biodiversity Hotspots - sites of critical importance for conservation - identified by Conservation International.

The Gola Forest is by far the largest and most diverse remaining forest in Sierra Leone and is one of the top priority sites for conservation in West Africa. The Gola forest is home to 14 globally threatened bird species, including the unique white-necked picathartes (pictured). Forest elephant, western chimpanzee and the pygmy hippo also occur in the forest. It occupies 75,000 hectares amongst the low-lying hills and swamps between the Mano and Moya Rivers in the eastern part of the country. It is recognised as an Important Bird Area (IBA) as well as an Important Chimpanzee Area and a critical part of WWF's Global 200 priority Eco-regions. Until recently, the Gola Forest was designated, for commercial logging.



The Vision

The partners' shared aim is to prove the success of the conservation concession approach that provides funds for management of the Gola Forests and for the development of local communities. Critical also is securing the endowment fund so that these benefits can be provided in perpetuity and the eventual declaration of the Gola Forests as a National Park by 2010. These actions will safeguard the area from commercial logging far into the future, safeguard its importance as a biodiversity hotspot on the map of West Africa and provide support for local communities. Even with this change of status, the endowment fund will continue to finance the area's management and community development in perpetuity.

When the Gola Forest is declared a National Park, it will be only the second National Park in Sierra Leone and the country's first Rainforest National Park. It will complement the Rainforest National Parks of Sapo in Liberia, Tai in Ivory Coast and Kakum in Ghana. In the long term, it is hoped that Gola's unique features can attract some level of tourism to the area.

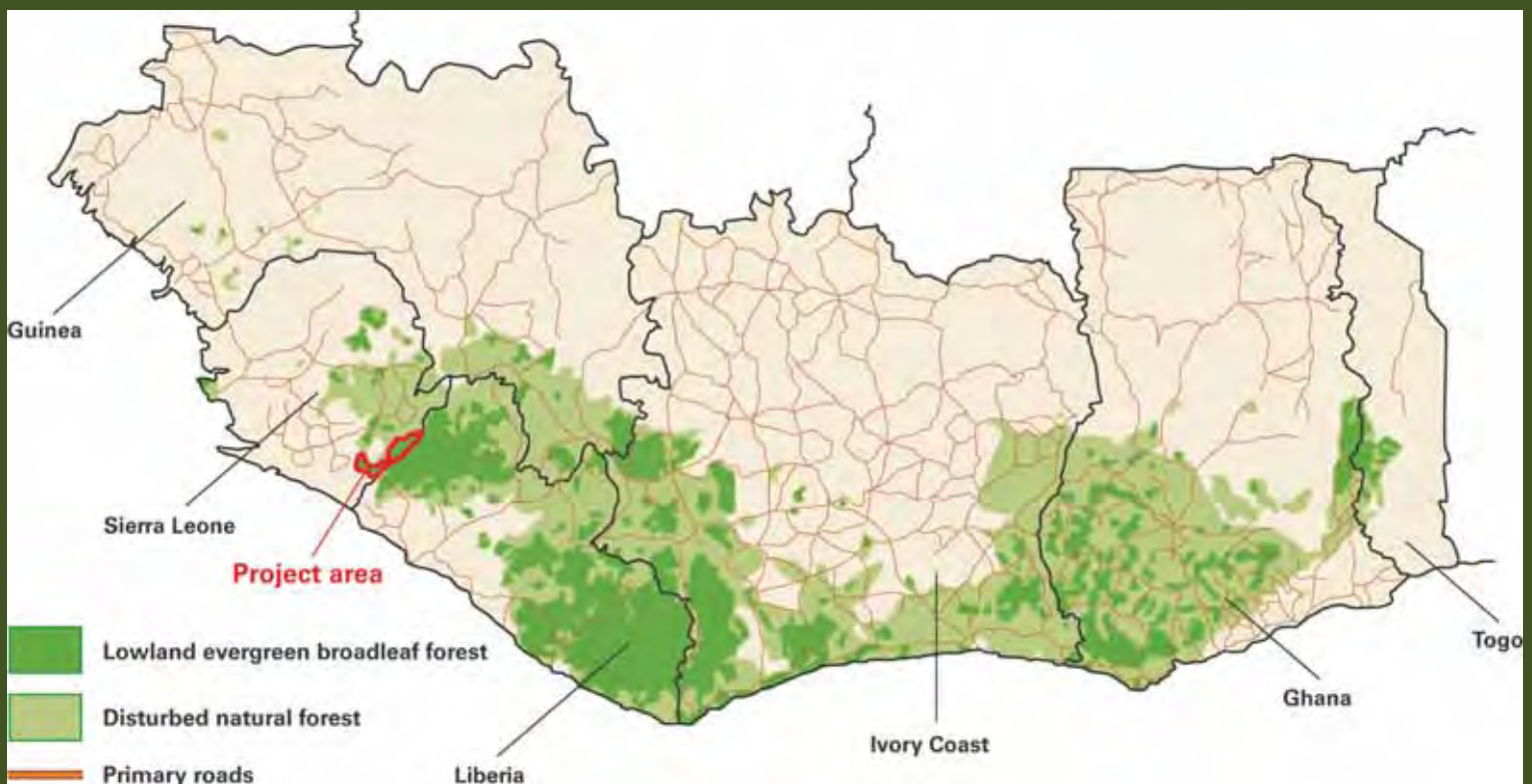


Conservation Concession Approach

The Government of Sierra Leone, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) have been working in partnership to manage the Gola Forest since 1990. Although the civil war interrupted conservation activities for some years, the long-standing partnership allowed the organisations to renew their joint conservation efforts when the conflict ended. We consider that running the Gola Forest as a 'conservation concession' provides a practical approach to managing and financing the area.

Under this approach, RSPB and CSSL will sign an agreement with the government to preserve the forest and provide an income stream to government and communities in lieu of income they might have received from logging. This agreement will ensure that government and communities receive much-needed income and will avoid the need to sell the logging rights. The forest remains in the ownership of the government and the National Commission for Environment and Forestry will lead on management activities. The RSPB and CSSL in addition to providing finance will provide support with technical and educational issues and biological monitoring.

Sustained financing is essential to underpin the forest's management for the long term. The partners are working to establish a dedicated endowment fund. Once the desired target of \$10 million is secured, the fund's annual interest payments will be sufficient to cover the conservation management costs for the forest and sustainable livelihoods projects for local communities in perpetuity. The Partners are in the process of seeking grants to reach the funding level required.



Community Involvement

The Gola Forest covers seven chiefdoms with a population of more than 100,000 people. In the past, local communities near the forest have benefited only intermittently from commercial logging operations. Now the RSPB-CSSL-Sierra Leone government partnership will supply them with a permanent income for development projects that they will select and carry out themselves.

The project will offer benefits to local communities in the form of development payments, employment and involvement in developing and implementing the management plan. These benefits will contribute to efforts to improve local livelihoods and aid in post-war reconstruction, as well as secure communities' active support for conservation.

A Global Responsibility

The RSPB is the BirdLife International partner in the UK, and regards its support for the Gola Forest's conservation as part of its greater responsibility to protect the world's biodiversity. A significant proportion of the world's endangered species are located in developing countries and many of these in tropical forests. Not only do developing countries lack the resources to protect their biodiversity, but they desperately need revenue to help their populations out of poverty. No more is this the case than Sierra Leone.

Biodiversity is a global good, and the world must pay for its conservation. The Gola project will have the effect of helping the people of Sierra Leone to conserve their biodiversity and to receive funding for this. The endowment fund ensures that this funding is sustainable. The RSPB itself will invest US\$3million of its own money in this project. The partners are grateful for support from the Global Conservation Fund of Conservation International and the UK's Darwin Initiative, but much more support is needed. We are looking to donors to provide matching support to ensure the projects success. North-South partnerships to help Africans safeguard their protected areas contribute to:

- the Convention on Biological Diversity's aim to halt the decline in biodiversity by 2010
- the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to cut global poverty and promote sustainable development.

A Ground-breaking Project

The Gola Forest project is a truly exciting and ground breaking project for Sierra Leone, which if it is fully successful will change the way in which Sierra Leone's forest resources will be managed in the future. The project has high levels of support from the Government of Sierra Leone and other influential Sierra Leoneans.

] For us this [The Gola Programme] is a unique and welcome development, which helped us to conserve our forest. While we extend gratitude to the RSPB, I would like to appeal to the international community to support the project as well as environmental protection of other areas.

Opening Address by His Excellency Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, President of The Republic Of Sierra Leone on The Consultative Group Meeting for Sierra Leone 29 - 30 November 2005, London



National Commission for Environment and Forestry.

The National Commission for Environment and Forestry was established in 2005 as the new forestry and environment authority in Sierra Leone undertaking day-to-day environmental management and forestry functions in the Country.



Conservation Society of Sierra Leone

CSSL, established in 1986 is Sierra Leone's most prominent Biodiversity conservation NGO. Its main aim is to promote the wise use and management of Sierra Leone's natural resources through education, advocacy and support for research, management activities and sustainable development programmes



RSPB

The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all. The RSPB is Europe's largest conservation charity and operates across the world.



BirdLife International

BirdLife International is a global Partnership of independent NGOs from over 100 countries, working together to safeguard the environment and develop new ways of managing natural resources sustainably. The RSPB and CSSL are the BirdLife Partners in the UK and Sierra Leone respectively.

The project is also supported by Conservation International through its Global Conservation Fund and the Darwin Initiative of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of the UK Government