

Title On October 11th, the Across the River - a Transboundary Peace Park for Sierra Leone and Liberia project presented an over view of the biodiversity research done in the past three years in the Gola National Forest in Liberia and the Gola Rainforest National Park in Sierra Leone. The event was held at the University of Liberia and was very well attended with over 100 students, faculty members and other invitees. The Across the River Project which is funded by the European Union aims at linking the Gola Rainforest National Park in Sierra Leone with the proposed Gola National Park in Liberia, creating one transboundary protected area of over 200,000 hectares. The main objective of the event was to provide students of the College of Science and the College of Agriculture and Forestry with practical examples of the natural resource management, forestry and conservation work that they, the country's future natural resource managers, will hopefully pursue as a career after graduating from the University. The event presented a unique opportunity for the students to learn more about the practical side of natural resource management. The Across the River Project Research Coordinator and two Liberian Research Technicians, who both have received extensive research training under the project, presented on various animal species found in the Gola forest, including forest elephants, pygmy hippos, chimpanzees, bats, birds, dragonflies and butterflies; animal species which are all of great importance to both Liberia and the international community. The Gola forest is part of the Upper Guinea Forest Eco-Region of West Africa which is considered a biodiversity hotspot of global importance and which provides livelihoods for millions of West Africans. The research conducted under the project confirms the uniqueness of the Gola forest: large numbers of animal species were recorded including several species never before recorded in Liberia and several species completely new to science. But the research also confirms the urgent need to properly protect and conserve the area: the researchers indicated that the field research has recorded extensive threats to the area as signs of illegal activities were observed throughout the forest. The general need to expose the students to information other than what can be gained from books became apparent from the comments after the presentation. One of the students said "I have never visited this unique and untouched rainforests of our country. I feel fascinated by the presentation and realize I hardly knew the unique biodiversity of this country and the techniques used to research and monitor it." In addition to the research presentation, the Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia (SCNL - BirdLife in Liberia) presented its conservation and community work in the Gola area, a vital component of the project. SCNL is implementing a large micro-credit scheme among 28 groups in the forest edge communities. The revolving loans provide community members with an opportunity to develop sustainable income generating activities as an alternative to activities that have a negative unsustainable effect on the forest, its biodiversity and other natural resources. The presentations reflect part of the work done under BirdLife International's Across the River project. The current next vital step in the establishment of this Peace Park is to Park, a process that has been initiated but which is experiencing delays. The presentation and interaction with students and the wonder and enthusiasm they expressed about biodiversity and natural resources gives hope for the future. It also points to the need for projects and decision makers to share information with young people. The next vital step in the project is for the authorities to upgrade the status of the Liberian Gola from a National Forest to National Park to enable the establishment of the transboundary Peace Park. This will ensure that this forest of international allure continues to be conserved for current and future generations.