

Capacity for policy and site casework in West Africa boosted

Title

The capacity of 15 civil society organisations from seven West African countries, to tackle environmental degradation was boosted recently. This followed a 3-day training workshop organised by BirdLife International, in collaboration with the Ghana Wildlife Society (GWS, BirdLife in Ghana) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife in the UK). The Sub-regional Training of Trainers, attended by 17 participants, was held at Miklin Hotel, Accra, Ghana from 10th to 12th September 2013. Participants were drawn from Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Mauritania and Nigeria. The workshop facilitators were Ken Mwathe (BirdLife International), Helen Byron (RSPB), Funmi Tsewinor (Nigerian Conservation Foundation, BirdLife in Nigeria), Gillian Cooper (RSPB), Reuben Ottou (GWS), Joyce Dzikunu (GWS) and Paulinus Ngeh (BirdLife). The opening ceremony was officiated by Mr. Carl Fiati of the Ghana Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and covered by the national TV station, GTV. Mr Fiati lauded the use of birds as an entry point for training in advocacy, for their aesthetic and economic value, through eco-tourism, as well as being valuable indicators of the quality of the environment. Dr Paulinus Ngeh of BirdLife International described advocacy as “personal tool” and said it was required for delivering win-win situations in areas where biodiversity was threatened by economic activities such as mining. Mr Reuben Ottou, Acting Director of GWS called upon governments to help in solving environmental problems by making nature conservation an integral part of the development related decision making processes. Lauding the training, he said advocacy was not just about winning battles but making the victory sustainable. During the training, the Participants were taken through an intensive course on written and face to face advocacy; skills in advocating for sites facing damaging threats (Site Casework); engagement with the media as well as incorporating policy elements into projects. Funmi Tsewinor led the participants in a hands-on discussion on how to influence legislation-making processes at national level.

Role play session: Lobbying a Sao Tome Lowland Forest ?Community Elder?. Photo: Ken Mwathe.

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Picture-201.jpg>

Participants also had a chance to apply skills learnt in an advocacy session role-played by a professional actor posing as an advisor in the Office of the President; CEO of a biofuels investment company and a respected Community Elder. They also interacted with two Government officials from the Environmental Protection Agency and Wildlife Division during which they received tips on how to lobby government officials. Helen Byron of RSPB shared tips on how to use Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment as safeguard mechanisms for sites facing damaging development. Thanking the organisers for the opportunity to learn advocacy skills, Ms Jacqueline Kumadoh of Arocha Ghana said the training had opened the participants' horizons and was a source of great inspiration. "We now feel better equipped to deal with the challenges facing species, ecosystems and the environment in general. We are in a better position to engage and work with governments and other stakeholders from an informed position" she said. Ken Mwathe, BirdLife's Regional Policy and Advocacy Coordinator said BirdLife's vision was to build an "army" of people skilled in advocacy across the continent. "We did it in Nairobi in June 2012 and now in Ghana. Advocacy capacity building will continue to be a high priority for the BirdLife Africa Partnership," he concluded. **By Ken Mwathe and Caroline Njoki**