

Micro-loans and a voice for women around the Gola Rainforest National Park

Title As part of the 'Across The River' Trans-boundary Peace Park project in the Gola forest between Sierra Leone and Liberia, BirdLife Partners are making sure that local people benefit from the conservation and sustainable use of the forest. A belt of community-owned forest surrounds the Gola Rainforest National Park in the Eastern part of Sierra Leone. Here the project is promoting sustainable alternative livelihoods, and the BirdLife Partners have taken on the responsibility of providing cash loans, funded by the European Union. The loans 'revolve' after every three months to reach other beneficiaries in the same community. This livelihood support has helped families to pay school fees for their children, and medical bills for family members. The rate of school dropout because families are unable to afford the fees has fallen considerably. A factor contributing to the poverty of the communities around Gola is their isolation, and the cost of basic commodities like rice. The community-based Site Support Group (SSG, Local Conservation Group) has helped to address this by organising the bulk-purchase of milled rice on behalf of the community, so families have access to affordable food in the rainy season. Money accrued from the sale of milled rice has been used to establish a community 'seed bank' for groundnuts, which are distributed among members during each planting season. Community tree-planting schemes are underway, and the shifting cultivation that was once common around the edges of the Gola Rainforest National Park is declining. Through the work of the SSGs women are now playing leadership roles, and have a voice in decision-making in the community. *Nathaniel Bockarie-ARTP Kenema*