

Fact finding expedition to São Tomé & Príncipe puts biodiversity hotspot on the map

Title

SPEA maps palm oil company's effect on local biodiversity São Tomé and Príncipe, an island nation located in the Gulf of Guinea, off the western equatorial coast of Central Africa, is probably one of the last unknown biodiversity hotspots in Africa. The country's forests are home to 28 species of endemic birds, an extraordinary number considering the country's size (the Galapagos, which is eight times bigger, has 22). Habitat destruction, together with the absence of any census or monitoring schemes, are the country's biggest threats. In 2010 the São Tomé and Príncipe Government signed a contract with Agripalma (a joint venture between the company Socfinco and the São Tomé Government), loaning a 5,000 hectare concession to plant oil palm. According to Agripalma, this size would be necessary in order to secure the profitability of this venture. Unfortunately, and according to SPEA's (Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds, BirdLife in Portugal) previous visits, these 5,000 hectares include rich secondary forest zones located in the surroundings or directly within the Obó Natural Park. This Park covers one third of the island and is home to some of the most endangered birds of the world, such as the critically endangered Dwarf Olive Ibis *Bostrychia bocagei*, the São Tomé Fiscal *Lanius newtoni* and the São Tomé Grosbeak *Neospiza concolor*. If we are serious about preserving these iconic species while allowing a sustainable country's development, we must act and we must do it now. Following an assessment done in 2012, a joint mission this month led by SPEA and funded by RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), will arrive in São Tomé. Counting on the support of local ABS (Associação de Biólogos São Tomenses), SPEA's biologist Nuno Barros will spend two months mapping all the areas currently affected by the Agripalma palm oil company. The results of these surveys will be made available to both Agripalma and the São Tomé and Príncipe government in order to inform further decision-making. But SPEA's objectives are not only focusing on the terrestrial species. With the support of BirdLife's **Global Seabird Programme**, and counting on the vital sponsorship offered by **Bom-Bom Island Resort**, SPEA will lead BirdLife's first expedition to the **Tinhas Islands**.

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Bom-Bom Resort sponsors the SPEA expedition
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This tiny archipelago, located 12 miles south-west of Principe Island, hosts more than 300,000 breeding seabirds, including Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*, Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, Black Noddy *Anous minutus* and the White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*. Some other species, such as the Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* and Madeiran Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma castro*, could also be breeding there, but so far has not been confirmed. "We are very excited about this field-trip" says SPEA's biologist Nuno Barros. "São Tomé and Príncipe is clearly one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, yet there is so much to be done in terms of data collection, monitoring and management, we really hope this will be the first of a series of projects, there is a lot of work waiting for us out there!" Would you like to help SPEA and the Global Seabird Programme to carry out further research in both the tropical forests and the unknown seabird colonies of São Tomé and Príncipe? Please get in touch with Ivan Ramirez, European Marine Coordinator, BirdLife Europe on email: ivan.ramirez@birdlife.org
