

BirdLife's History in Objects, #9: The Leaf

Title

Forest conservation has no boundaries

Two countries with common wildlife, common tribal makeups and common challenges are united across the river by the Transboundary Peace Park.

In the Greater Gola Forest, the sounds of gunshots were commonplace in the 1990s. With Liberia in a state of civil war, and high tensions in Sierra Leone, rebels could be seen crossing the Mano River at the lushly forested border between the two countries. For a bystander in the rapidly degrading rainforest at the start of the conflict, it would have been hard to conceive that 21 years later the area would symbolise peace and a dedication of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean governments to nature conservation. However, for Hazell Shokellu Thompson, a Sierra Leonean who was studying for his PhD on the ecology of a Red List bird species found in Gola Forest, these events profoundly influenced his career as a conservationist, and played a major part in the eventual conception of the idea of an 'Across the River' Transboundary Peace Park.

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[Gola rainforest at the border of Sierra Leone and Liberia David Zeller RSPB](#)

For Dr Hazell Shokellu Thompson (now BirdLife's Global Director for Partnership, Capacity and Communities) biodiversity conservation, social and environmental justice, conflict resolution, sustainable development and poverty alleviation are inextricably interconnected. With the end of the civil unrest, it was with these values that a process was

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[Three quarters of all bird species are found in forests, chiefly in the tropics. White-necked Picarhartes C](#)

started by Dr. Thompson and others that resulted in the formation of the Transboundary Peace Park in 2011- a symbol, in the words of President Ernest Koroma of Sierra Leone and President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, of "our renewed commitment to peace, stability and biodiversity conservation in the region".

Gola is one piece of forest separated only by a political border. For the tribal communities in

the area and the many species of conservation concern, BirdLife has been working hard to prevent the degradation of the Gola forest for over two decades. Work was started in Sierra Leone in the 1990s by the BirdLife Partner in the country (Conservation Society of Sierra Leone, CSSL) and the RSPB (BirdLife in UK). After the Society for Conservation of Nature in Liberia (SNCL) became a BirdLife Partner in 2005, work was expanded into Liberia with the help of VBN (BirdLife in the Netherlands), and henceforth the size of protected forest was tripled in 2009.

Long-term considerations

Local research technicians are conducting biodiversity monitoring in potential corridor areas, to establish

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http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/IMG_1999-300x225.jpg

Even though massive iron-ore reserves are recognised in the area, local communities and the Presidents of both countries understand the benefits of long-term conservation of the forest and its natural resources over short-term unsustainable exploitation. Thompson adds:

“It is also easy to underestimate the pride people take in possessing something that is acknowledged to be a global treasure. People have questioned me on how to work together to ensure that their children don’t suffer the difficulties our generation went through, and how their lives can be made better.”

BirdLife International has been working in tropical forest conservation for decades, in more than 50 countries, conserving biodiversity, combating climate change and creating sustainable livelihoods for local people. In 2004, BirdLife created the Forests of Hope programme to bring together and build on its successful forest conservation and management programmes throughout the tropics. This article is part of a series celebrating 90 years of BirdLife International’s conservation work.



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