

# Living off the Land: BirdLife's History in Objects, #13

## Title

On flat dusty clearings bordered by spindly trees in rural West Africa, women can be seen rolling out balls of what look (and smell) like large mammal droppings. They are processing seeds from the African locust bean tree to make a condiment called *soumbala*. Making and selling *soumbala*, a stock seasoning for soups and sauces made from *Parkia biglobosa* seeds, is one of the few ways local people can make a living in rural Burkina Faso. Though not the most alluring of forest resources (it is fermented over a few days - hence the putrid odour), it shows that whatever nature provides has value to people.

Image not found

Balls of soumbala. Photo: Marco Schmidt /soumbala\_Marco-Schmidt-300x224.jpg

But due to deforestation, the vital *Parkia* beans are in short supply. So through Naturama, BirdLife's Partner in Burkina Faso, local conservation groups have been encouraging sustainable use of such non-timber forest products in Parc National Kabore Tambi, which provides high densities of the trees that people need. These efforts are coupled with support for the local women, whose communities and livelihoods depend on this highly biodiverse Important Bird Area.

## *Good for nature, good for people*

The *soumbala* sustainability project epitomises BirdLife's **Local Empowerment Programme**, an initiative that benefits local people whilst conserving nature. Since the 1990s, the BirdLife International Partnership has been working on the ground with local people at over 2,000 Important Bird Areas worldwide. From experiences with local communities whose lives are built around seasonal pools in forests in Cambodia, to sustainable harvesting of papyrus in Rwandan wetlands, to valuing ecosystem services in Nepal; a common theme has emerged: **human wellbeing is intimately linked to the health of the world's ecosystems**. This principle is recognised by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which aim to eradicate extreme poverty by 2015.

Image not found

Nepal's rich biodiversity and its varied ecosystems provide vital services and livelihoods for most poor

But the goods and services that nature provides are important to *everyone* on this planet. Pollination of crops, soil formation, water purification, carbon storage, waste recycling, food, disease control, happiness, recreation... These are just a few of the services that healthy ecosystems provide to us for free, and that are being lost at an estimated cost of US\$2 to \$6.6 trillion a year. BirdLife campaigns passionately at international conferences (such as the UN Conference on Sustainable Development earlier this year) to have the value of nature written into international policy. However, far away from supermarket aisles and online credit card payments, nowhere is human reliance on nature clearer than in the rural areas of less developed countries where people are most directly connected to their land. Projects from BirdLife's Local Empowerment Programme further illustrate this link.

### **Forest pools**

White-shouldered Ibis use trapaengs to raise their young. Just 250 birds are thought to exist globally. PH

Image not found

[http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/b\\_white-shouldered\\_ibis2\\_J-C-Eames\\_just-250-thought-to-exist-globally-150x150.jpg](http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/b_white-shouldered_ibis2_J-C-Eames_just-250-thought-to-exist-globally-150x150.jpg)

Take for example northeast Cambodia. Scattered under the broad leaves of the Western Siem Pang forest, seasonal pools called *trapaengs* are central to the lives of people and are critical habitats for remaining wildlife in the area, including the critically endangered White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni*. *Trapaengs* are sources of water and fish for humans and birds alike, and provide a wealth of non-timber forest products. Since 2006 BirdLife has worked with local people to improve natural-resource management. Comprising local stakeholders with a common interest in protecting *trapaengs* (including former hunters in some cases), BirdLife in Indochina established a network of Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) who agreed a *Trapaeng Management Protocol* to protect the essential pools whilst meeting the needs of local people.

### **Reaping benefits**

Villagers erecting forest reserve signs at the beginning of the project, Kilim-Ijim. Photo: BirdLife

Image not found

[http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Villagers-erecting-forest-reserve-signs-at-the-beginning-of-the-project\\_kilum-ijim\\_birdlife-300](http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Villagers-erecting-forest-reserve-signs-at-the-beginning-of-the-project_kilum-ijim_birdlife-300)

In one of the most densely populated areas of West Africa, a pocket of forest called Kilum-Ijim remains in northwest Cameroon. Last stronghold of Banded Wattle-eye *Platysteira laticincta*, the forest provides drinking water, firewood, food and medicine for the bordering neighbourhoods. In 1987, BirdLife initiated a project with the surrounding 35 communities to establish agreed forest boundaries, plan for suitable use of resources, improve agricultural practices and identify alternative sources of income. Both conservationists and communities wanted the forests maintained and the communities often suggested rules that were stronger than their project partners expected. Recent satellite imaging research has shown that since 1995 Kilim-Ijim forest has actually significantly regenerated.

Weaving sustainable papyrus at Nyabarongo wetlands. Photo: David Thomas

Image not found

[http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/rwanda-papyrus-weaving\\_david-thomas-300x201.jpg](http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/rwanda-papyrus-weaving_david-thomas-300x201.jpg)

BirdLife supported its Partner in Rwanda (ACNR) to develop a local cooperative to prevent the unsustainable exploitation of the highly biodiverse Nyabarongo wetlands. Now trained to rotate their harvest plots, members are able to reap regenerated papyrus which they weave into handicrafts such as baskets and ceiling panels for income.

### ***Nature's bounty***

When it comes to quantifying the value of nature, Nepal is leading the way. Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN, BirdLife Partner) has undertaken a nationwide assessment of ecosystem services at Important Bird Areas. One such place is Rara National Park, where BCN interviewed local people about the harvested wild goods, crops and water services provided by the park. They found that people in Rara have a high dependence on natural resources: for example pine needles are collected from the forest floor and used to improve the fertility and condition of the soil on people's farms.

Interviews at Rara National Park, Nepal. Photo: David Thomas

Image not found

[http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Nepal\\_Rara\\_April2012\\_David\\_Thomas-crunch-300x225.jpg](http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Nepal_Rara_April2012_David_Thomas-crunch-300x225.jpg)

Nature tourism is a highly valuable ecosystem service for countries all over the world and is increasingly being included in models of sustainable development in areas of high biodiversity

importance. In Europe, a new BirdLife-led project is promoting sustainable birdwatching tourism throughout the Mediterranean basin, where many biodiverse areas recognised by the European Union are found.

"Our belief is that birdwatching tourism is an ideal way of bringing sustainable development to Natura 2000 areas and Biosphere Reserves, maximising the benefits to local people and biodiversity, while minimising the negative impacts that tourism sometimes provides," said Cristina Sanchez, the Ornithological Tourism Project Leader and Director of SEO/BirdLife Catalunya.

Cousin Island in Seychelles is a superb model for sustainable tourism, whereby in 2010 Nature Seychelles (BirdLife Partner) celebrated the island becoming the world's first carbon neutral Nature Reserve: meaning each year 10,000 visitors bring revenue to the local area and have a clean environmental conscience.

### **...sombala**

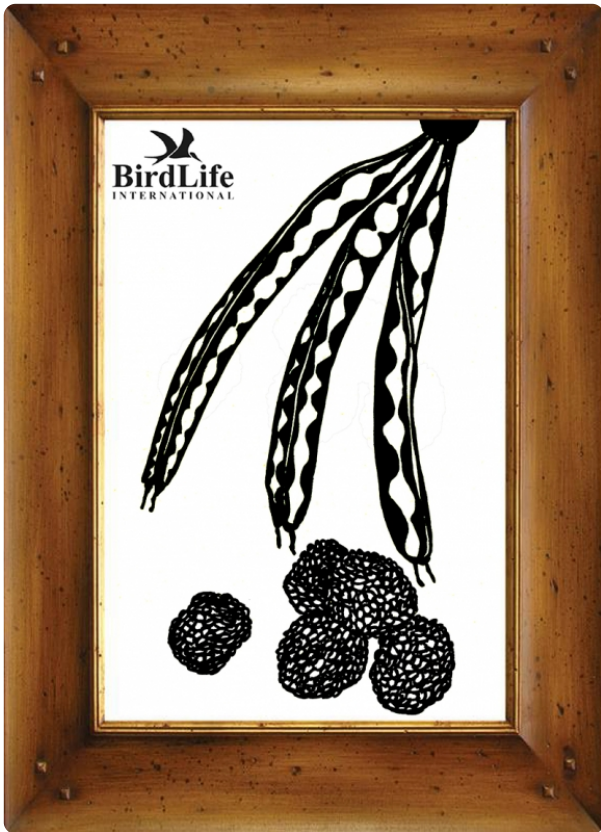
Returning to Burkina Faso, people strongly opposed Parc National Kabore Tambi in the past, culminating in the shooting of a park ranger whose name the park now bears. Through BirdLife's *sombala* project, Naturama has provided *sombala* production kits and initial working capital for resident producers, allowing the doubling of weekly production and empowerment of women in the community.

"I earn more money every month, which I use to take proper care of my children and to improve the quality of the food I buy," said one *sombala* producer.

Good for nature, good for people: producing *sombala* in Burkina Faso. Photo

Image not found  
<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Sombala-woman-300x196.jpg>

Today, the tangible socio-economic benefits seen in this Local Empowerment Programme project have generated strong support for conservation, and the neighbouring communities are already undertaking reforestation projects which will support not only the endangered flora and fauna found in the park, but all the natural resources that these people depend upon.



Other articles in this series:

1. [Birds of a Feather](#)
2. [Ever fantasised about owning your own private tropical island?](#)
3. [All Hands on Deck](#)
4. [Caribbean Treasures](#)
5. [The Power of a Local Tradition: \*Hima\*](#)
6. [The Dramatic Relationship between Man and the Northern Bald Ibis](#)
7. [Bringing the Hammer Down on Governments to Save Nature](#)
8. [If a bird calls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it really exist?](#)
9. [Forest Conservation has no Boundaries](#)
10. [A Drink for Nature](#)
11. [The Frontier of Marine Conservation](#)
12. [A Migratory Bird's-Eye View of the World](#)
13. [Living off of the Land](#)