

A Global Responsibility

The RSPB is the BirdLife International partner in the UK, and regards its support for the Gola Forest's conservation as part of its greater responsibility to protect the world's biodiversity. A significant proportion of the world's endangered species are located in developing countries and many of these are in tropical forests. Not only do developing countries lack the resources to adequately protect their biodiversity, but they desperately need revenue to help their populations out of poverty. Nowhere is this more the case than in Sierra Leone.

Biodiversity is a global good, and the world needs to pay for its conservation. The Gola project will have the effect of helping the people of Sierra Leone to conserve their biodiversity and to receive funding for this. The endowment fund ensures that this funding is sustainable. The RSPB itself will invest US\$3 million of its own money in this project. The partners are grateful for support from the Global Conservation Fund of Conservation International and the UK's Darwin Initiative, but much more support is needed. We are looking to donors to provide matching support to ensure the project's success. North-South partnerships to help Africans safeguard their protected areas contribute to:

- the Convention on Biological Diversity's aim to halt the decline in biodiversity by 2010
- the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to cut global poverty and promote sustainable development.

Protecting the Gola Forest

A new approach to conservation in Sierra Leone

A Groundbreaking Project

The Gola Forest project is a truly exciting and ground-breaking project for Sierra Leone, which, if fully successful, will change the way in which Sierra Leone's forest resources are managed in the future. The project has high levels of support from the Government of Sierra Leone and other influential Sierra Leoneans.

For us this [The Gola Programme] is a unique and welcome development, which helped us to conserve our forest. While we extend gratitude to the RSPB, I would like to appeal to the international community to support the project as well as environmental protection of other areas.

Opening Address by His Excellency Alhaji Dr Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, at the Consultative Group Meeting for Sierra Leone, 29-30 November 2005, London



Rufous fishing owl



National Commission for Environment and Forestry

The National Commission for Environment and Forestry was established in 2005 as the new forestry and environment authority in Sierra Leone undertaking day-to-day environmental management and forestry functions in the country.



Conservation Society of Sierra Leone

CSSL, established in 1986, is Sierra Leone's most prominent biodiversity conservation NGO. Its main aim is to promote the wise use and management of Sierra Leone's natural resources through education, advocacy and support for research, management activities and sustainable development programmes. CSSL is the Sierra Leone partner of BirdLife International.



The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all. It is Europe's largest conservation charity and operates across the world. The RSPB is the UK partner of BirdLife International.



BirdLife International

BirdLife International is a global partnership of independent NGOs from over 100 countries, working together to safeguard the environment and develop new ways of managing natural resources sustainably.

The project is supported by the Global Conservation Fund of Conservation International and the Darwin Initiative of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of the UK Government

RSPB registered charity no 207076

Front cover: Gola Forest by Alex Hipkiss (RSPB). Inside: people images by Alex Hipkiss (RSPB), white-necked picathartes by Jason Weckstein and Ben Marks, forest elephant by Ariadne Van Zandbergen (FLPA). Back cover: rufous fishing owl by David Hosking (FLPA). Map copyright of Conservation International.



Gola's Importance

The Upper Guinea Forest was once a vast expanse of lowland rainforest that covered the coastal region of West Africa from Guinea to Ghana. Today, most of this forest has been lost to commercial logging and the gradual expansion of farming, and fragments are all that remain. It is widely reported that more than 85% of the original forest cover has gone.

The remaining forests are a 'biodiversity hotspot' of global importance thanks to the rich variety of plants and animals living there, including many found nowhere else in the world. The Upper Guinea Forest is one of the 34 Global Biodiversity Hotspots – sites of critical importance for conservation – identified by Conservation International.

The Gola Forest is by far the largest and most diverse remaining forest in Sierra. The Gola Forest is home to 14 globally threatened bird species, including the strange white-necked picathartes and the rufous fishing owl (pictured). Forest elephants, western chimpanzees and pygmy hippos also occur in the forest. It occupies 75,000 hectares among the low-lying hills and swamps between the Mano and Moya Rivers in the eastern part of Sierra Leone. It is recognised as an Important Bird Area (IBA) as well as an Important Chimpanzee Area and a critical part of WWF's Global 200 priority eco-regions. Until recently, the Gola Forest was designated for commercial logging.



Forest elephant

The Vision

When the Gola Forest is declared a national park, it will be only the second national park in Sierra Leone and the country's first rainforest national park. It will complement the rainforest national parks of Sapo in Liberia, Tai in Ivory Coast and Kakum in Ghana. In the long term, it is hoped that Gola's unique features will attract some level of tourism to the area.

'There is an urgent need to protect and conserve the Gola Forest Reserves because of their unique biodiversity and the many products and services they provide to people.'

Joint statement of local chiefdoms, government and the RSPB and CSSL 2003



White-necked picathartes

Community Involvement

The Gola Forest covers seven chiefdoms with a population of more than 100,000 people. In the past, local communities near the forest have benefited only intermittently from commercial logging operations. Now the RSPB-CSSL-Sierra Leone Government partnership will supply them with a permanent income for development projects that they will select and carry out themselves.

The project will offer benefits to local communities in the form of development payments, employment and involvement in developing and implementing the management plan. These benefits will contribute to efforts to improve local livelihoods and aid in post-war reconstruction, as well as secure communities' active support for conservation.



Conservation Concession Approach

The Government of Sierra Leone, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) have been working in partnership to manage the Gola Forest since 1990. Although the civil war interrupted conservation activities for some years, the long-standing partnership allowed the organisations to renew their joint conservation efforts when the conflict ended. The partners intend to fund the conservation of the Gola Forest through a 'conservation concession'.

Under this approach, the RSPB and CSSL will sign an agreement with the government to preserve the forest and provide an income stream to government and communities in lieu of income they might have received from logging. This agreement will ensure that government and communities receive much-needed income and will avoid the need to sell the logging rights. The forest remains in the ownership of the government and the National Commission for Environment and Forestry, which will lead on management activities. The RSPB and CSSL, in addition to providing finance, will provide support with technical and educational issues and biological monitoring. In the future, the forest will be declared a national park.

Sustained financing is essential to underpin the forest's management for the long term. The partners are working to establish a dedicated endowment fund. Once the desired target of US\$10 million is secured, the fund's annual interest payments will be sufficient to cover the conservation management costs for the forest and sustainable livelihoods projects for local communities in perpetuity. The partners are in the process of seeking grants to reach the funding level required.

