Promoting Community Landscape Management in the Gola Transboundary Forest

The Greater Gola Landscape covers an area of 350,000 hectares that straddles the Sierra Leone and Liberia border. This landscape represents the largest remaining block of Upper Guinean Forest and is of global conservation importance. This highly threatened habitat is a biodiversity hotspot and a critical wildlife corridor that encompasses the Gola Forest National Park, the proposed Foya Nature Reserve in Liberia, and the Gola Rainforest National Park in Sierra Leone.

The forests in this landscape are home to 60 species that are classified as either threatened or endangered. Over 899 vascular plants, including 232 trees (at least 21 threatened), 49 mammals (9 threatened), 327 bird species, and 43 amphibians have been recorded and are dependent on this forest landscape. Populations of priority globally threatened species of the Upper Guinea Forests of West Africa Biodiversity Hotspot such as the endangered Pygmy hippopotamus, are widely dispersed in the fragmented forest landscape, both in protected and unprotected areas. The forest plays a critical function through the range of ecosystem services and it provides and contributes to the mitigation of climate change impacts both globally and locally.

Sierra Leone and Liberia are among the countries lowest on the Human Development Index, ranked 181 and 177 respectively out of 188 (UNDP, 2015). Forest edge communities living in the Greater Gola Landscape are among the most disenfranchised, poorest and most vulnerable in their respective countries. Remote from towns and other infrastructure, they are highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. They have no, or very restricted access to, education, health or agricultural support services, or international aid. For example, proposed project communities in Sierra Leone rely on subsistence agriculture for 90% of their livelihoods, which if not done sustainably contributes to deforestation. Income levels are particularly low, which is an additional driver for community members to engage in unsustainable and often illegal activities, such as unsustainable forest clearing for agriculture, artisanal mining (gold and diamonds) and commercial bush meat hunting. All of these activities contribute, to some degree, to deforestation and forest ecosystem degradation.

**PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

To ensure the viability of this threatened landscape, there is a strong need to ensure a holistic approach to forest management at a landscape scale, demonstrating that livelihood
interventions can be integrated with efforts to conserve the biodiversity of the Gola Rainforest. Without such an integrated intervention, the loss of critical biodiversity and the loss of ecosystem services that underpin local livelihoods will continue.

To protect this unique landscape, USAID West Africa through the West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change (WA BiCC) Program issued a grant under contract to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – RSPB, to implement activities on “Community Landscape Management to Reduce Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss in the Gola Transboundary Forest Landscape”. The project is building on the efforts of government and partner organizations in both Sierra Leone and Liberia by focusing on supporting and empowering local communities in key forest corridor areas to become active stewards of the natural resources which underpin their livelihoods.

KEY EXPECTED RESULTS/OUTCOMES

Through implementation of the program, WA BiCC and partners aim to achieve the following:

- Enhanced agricultural production and other sustainable livelihood activities that contribute to the improved wellbeing of populations within the two model sites (Gola Sierra Leone and Gola Liberia.)
- Increased capacity to develop and implement community land use plans and community forest management plans across all level of stakeholders in the landscape, including community members and national governing bodies.
- Increase in Knowledge and Learning on best practices, generated from the landscapes and shared across the national and regional stakeholders.

ABOUT WA BiCC

The West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change (WA BiCC) program is a five-year program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that aims to improve conservation and climate-resilient, low-emissions growth across West Africa. Although regional in scope and design, WA BiCC focuses on targeted geographical areas within the region to improve governance and policy over critical natural and human systems. By working through the core regional partners, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Mano River Union (MRU) and the Abidjan Convention, and with targeted national and sub-national institutions, WA BiCC increases the capacity of institutions at all levels to address the three core WA BiCC components. These are 1) Combatting wildlife trafficking; 2) Increasing coastal resilience to climate change and 3) Reducing deforestation, forest degradation, and biodiversity loss.

West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change Program (WA BiCC)

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