
Liberia: At the centre of it all is the indigenous community

Liberia hosts the last two significant blocks of the remaining closed canopy tropical rainforest within the upper Guinea Forests of West Africa, which spans Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. The original extent of tropical rainforest in the region is estimated at 727,900km², but has shrunk to about 92,797km² - about 12.7% of its original size! Liberian forests account for 44.5% of the remaining 92,797km² followed by Cote d'Ivoire with 29.1%.

Liberia's rainforest is of incalculable value to the sub-region given the poor state of the remaining tracts of forest in all of humid West Africa. The forest hosts numerous endemic species and many others that are virtually extinct elsewhere in the region. It supports hundreds of species of birds, nine of which including the white-breasted guinea fowl (*Agelastes meagris*) are endangered, large amounts of endemic fauna and flora and is a unique habitat for some of the rarest species in the world. The Jentink's duiker (the rarest in the world), pygmy hippopotamus (*Cheropsis liberensis*), Liberian mongoose (*Liberictis kuhni*), several dozens of reptiles, including three types of crocodiles and at least eight poisonous snakes, inhabit Liberia's forests. Although there has been no recent scientific survey of the forest, it is believed to abound with more than two thousand different types of flowering plants – 240 of which accounts for valuable timber species and hundreds with medicinal values. The fauna and flora of this region are distinct and conservation of its biological diversity is recognized as a global priority.

Liberia is recovering from a savage civil war that left its economy and much of its infrastructures in ruins. Unemployment is high and more than 75% of the citizenry live in abject poverty. The country owes international lenders an estimated US\$ 3 billion dollars and has not benefited much from international since of the war ended in 1997. Also corrupt government officials squander most of the little aid trickling in. The government has turned to the forest, which is now its second largest foreign exchange earner next to the maritime programme.

Pressure on the Liberian forest has intensified in the last few years, primarily due to an upsurge in logging activities. Although other factors mitigate the problem of deforestation in Liberia, logging and agricultural expansion pose the gravest threat to our rainforest. Almost every significant national forest land, including areas previously designated as national parks or forest reserves, has been granted as concessions to logging companies who operate with virtually no monitoring from the forestry authorities. Logging operations have reached an unprecedented proportion, with approximately 60% of the country's forests now severely degraded. The country's biodiversity is further threatened because deforestation has effectively separated the two blocks of the rain forest further jeopardizing its overall ecological integrity.

The loss of the forest is taking a serious toll on nature here. The animal population is noticeably declining with the loss of forest cover. The pygmy hippopotamus, elephant, leopard, etc. are almost extinct. Rare sightings by villagers are often difficult to confirm, as the surviving population seems to be always on the move in search of dense forest regions.

Not only log extraction and harvesting practices are disturbing the forest. Roads constructed by

logging companies into once remote forest regions make movement of hunters easier thus exposing already endangered species to further threat. The bush meat trade is flourishing with all its negative consequences for the country's biodiversity.

The logging companies are not the only people responsible for the destruction of our rainforests. Western consumers, especially Europeans, are as guilty as the companies themselves. They provide the money and market that keeps the trade in Liberian timber alive. In 1999 Europe, the traditional importers of Liberian timber, imported 155,559.639m³ of log about 82% of the total logs export. France imported 37%, followed by Italy 19% and Turkey 15%. The port city of Bordeaux (France) is recorded as destination of the largest percentage of Liberian timber. Spain and Portugal also imported Liberian timber during the period.

In the first six months of 2000 there was a sharp increase in the production of round logs. The 679,352.376m³ recorded by the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) for the period far exceeded the total production of 596,355.116m³ recorded for the preceding four years from January 1996 to December 1999. During this period the Asia imported 49.4% of Liberia's export while 38.4% went to Europe. France alone imported 17.9% of the round logs and 51.4% of sawn timber exported from Liberia.

About sixty species of trees are currently being harvested in Liberia. Ten of these sixty species constituted about 65.4% of the total export. Ekki (*Lophira alata*), known locally as ironwood and used mostly for bridge and house construction by the rural people, was heavily exploited accounting for approximately 20% of the total production. Niangon (*Heritiera utilis*) was second constituting about 13% and Abura (*Mitragyna ciliata*) with 7%.

The World Bank is arguably the pioneer of deforestation in Liberia; a situation the bank is yet to acknowledge. In the 1970's and early 80's the bank financed agricultural projects such as cocoa, coffee and oil plantations that did little to alleviate poverty but did more to destroy the rich tropical rainforest mostly intact then. One of the projects, the Bong County Agricultural Development Project induced a massive shift from food to cash crop production undermining the national government's drive for self-sufficiency in food production.

Again in 1999 the International Finance Corporation (IFC) - the private lending arm of the World Bank, granted the Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC) a US\$ 3.5 million loan to ostensibly upgrade and expand its rubber plantations in rural Liberia. Large tracts of primary and secondary forests have been cleared and is being planted with rubber, despite protest from local environmentalists. The bank argued that the area earmarked for the expansion was mostly broken forest and therefore not covered by the bank's own policy which forbids investing in projects that would lead to conversion of primary forest. Perhaps the bank chooses to ignore or it is ignorant of the fact that when the companies abandon the plantation due to low yield or other factors, charcoal miners move in. The rubber trees are felled and burned to produce charcoal leaving behind hundreds of acres of empty fields and wasteland.

The forest is the life-line of the indigenous communities, the people rely on it for their livelihood. The forest provides shelter for their cultural and religious practices including shrines, traditional bush schools, cover for the streams, medicinal herbs, farmland, etc. It also provides them means of self-employment and income for sustainable livelihood with trade in arts and craft accounting for more than 40% of their earnings.

Conversant of the need for sustainable forest exploitation, indigenous people practiced nature

conservation for centuries. Hunting and farming in some dense forests was prohibited and fishing restricted to certain portions of the rivers. Individual fishing in communal streams was discouraged and fish was harvested once a year during the dry season. Felling trees of cultural or spiritual value is considered a taboo. The hunting of certain animals including leopards and tigers was strictly forbidden.

The loss of the forest has not only limited the people's ability to feed themselves and lead healthy lives, it has effectively undermined the authority of their social structures. The traditional bush school hosted only in high forest is dying fast. Societies such as the Poro and Sande also usually headquartered in dense forest have almost disappeared completely. All of these institutions promoted unity and love in the community, instilled discipline into the youths and ensured strict adherence to moral standards set by the society as well as enforce law and resolving conflicts. A situation that is causing despair and apprehension in our communities.

Whither we go from here, is no longer a point of speculation. The reality of the danger ahead is looming larger than life itself.

By: Silas Siankor, SAMFU Foundation, 18/3/2001,