

# Liberia at the Crossroads



## FOREST PARTNERS INTERNATIONAL Forest Partners News

Fifteen years of devastating civil war in Liberia have finally culminated in nationwide disarmament and a newly formed transitional government. Once labeled by the New York Times as “the poorest nation in the world”, Liberia is at a crossroads as reconstruction and rebirth begin.

In economic and social ruin, instability across the region was fostered by the sale of illicit (blood) diamonds and the over-exploitation of forests to buy guns throughout the conflict. These activities ultimately led to UN sanctions being placed on diamond and timber exports.

In October 2003, the civil conflict came to an end. The United Nations, supported by several member states, established a National Transition Govern-

ment and is in the midst of implementing a 15,000 person strong peace-keeping mission. With disarmament and the promise of a lasting peace at hand, this represents a unique opportunity to rebuild this failed state. Many important issues lie ahead for the people and government of Liberia.

One issue Liberia must address is how it will grow its national economy. Historically, it has been financially dependent on the



UN armored personnel carrier in Monrovia

maritime, forestry and mining sectors.

As their country is rich in natural resources, past Liberian presidents have supported over-exploitation for their own gain, with the people of Liberia receiving little benefit.

UN sanctions on timber provide a much needed respite from the devastation of Liberia’s forests that has occurred over the past five years. Harvest levels more than three times legal limits resulted in the loss and fragmentation of large tracts of Liberia’s forests.

FPI, collaborating with partner organizations, will work closely with government, industry and communities to assist them to choose a path of sustainable natural resource management to promote the healthy growth of Liberia’s

## Working Together

Neither governments nor conservation organizations alone can meet the needs of forests, wildlife or the rural poor that depend on them. In Liberia, FPI works with a variety of partners from governmental ministries to Liberian businesses to pro-

mote sustainable conservation.

As a member of the Alliance for Conservation in Liberia, FPI’s messages on forest and wildlife conservation are consistent with our partner organizations. We work closely with our

Liberian partners to implement conservation projects, but are also seeking new colleagues with whom to develop sustainable agricultural practices, promote conservation, and support post conflict reconciliation and development.

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### Special points of interest:

- *The NY Times called Liberia the “world’s poorest nation”.*
- *Vietnam’s golden-headed langur is one of the world’s most critically endangered primates.*
- *A study estimated the value of the wildlife harvest to Liberia at \$66 million.*

## Meet Thomas Norman, Community Relations Officer

Thomas Plagbalah Norman was born March 19, 1966 into the Sapo tribe of Sinoe County, Liberia. Although Liberia has an 85% illiteracy rate, Thomas was fortunate to begin school at age 10. However, his mother's untimely death required that he drop out. Overcoming many obstacles, he returned to school and graduated from the regional high school at age 25.

At 19, Thomas married his girl friend from school, Rebecca Smith. Today they have six children and still live in Juarzon. Thomas is an active member of his church, and is also a member of the Sapo Culture Association.

In 1986, Thomas was among the students who accompanied the first American researchers into the newly founded Sapo National Park. It was during these early years of the Park that Thomas met FPI

board member Dr. Richard Nisbett, who was there to study primate populations in Sapo National Park.

With the outbreak of civil war in 1989, all activities in the Park ceased and Sinoe County was embroiled in the conflict. While many people fled to refugee camps, Thomas remained throughout the war despite having to hide in the forest for long periods of time.

By the time hostilities ceased in 1997, Sinoe County had been left in ruins with thousands living in refugee camps. All

carry memories of those that had been lost in the war. Thomas, like others, was left to pick up the pieces of his life.

In 2000, FPI's President, Reg Hoyt (then Sr. V.P./Conservation & Science for the Philadelphia Zoo), met Thomas, who was then a volunteer teacher in Juarzon. The Philadelphia Zoo was establishing a Rural Extension Project, and Thomas was hired as the first Community Relations Officer. His duties were to promote conservation awareness, collect data on the wildlife harvest in Sinoe, and serve as a liaison between Sapo National Park and the people of Sinoe County. While the Zoo continues to fund Thomas's salary, FPI has taken the lead in managing this program. To learn more about how Thomas and the villages of Sinoe fared during the most recent fighting, see "Villages in the Crossfire" on page 3.



## On the Edge of Extinction?

The golden-headed langur (*Trachypitecus poliocephalus*) is listed as one of the most endangered primates in the world by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and is only found on Cat Ba Island in North Vietnam. By the year 2000, poaching had reduced it to several isolated sub-populations totaling 52 individuals.

In November 2000, the Zoological

Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations and the Münster Zoo initiated a project on Cat Ba Island which aimed to conserve the golden-headed langurs and their habitat. Poaching was brought under control and for the first time in decades the population increased.

The project is now entering its second phase, and will focus on reducing habitat and population fragmentation,

conducting behavioral research, building capacity, and promoting local conservation action.

FPI is proud to join this effort, through a generous grant from the Margo Marsh Foundation.



Photo: T. Nadler

## Sapo National Park Expansion

Sapo National Park, founded in 1983, is Liberia's only fully protected national park. From 1983 until 1989, park staff, local and international NGOs, as well as local communities worked closely to support the management of the park. Unfortunately, during the years of conflict the park was left largely unprotected.

In 2003, the government of Liberia increased the size of Sapo National Park



Sapo National Park Expansion  
(Courtesy of Conservation International)

from an area of 323,075 acres to 445,667 acres. However, it is unclear how local communities will be affected as there have been many changes during the war.

FPI, concerned with maintaining broad community support for Sapo, has received funding from the Tropical Rainforest Programme of the IUCN-Netherlands to conduct a socio-economic survey of those areas that have newly become part of the park.

## Getting Bushmeat on the Table

Liberia contains two of the three largest tracts of remaining forest in the Upper Guinea Forest of West Africa. Once covered in its entirety by rainforest, Liberia retains 35% of its total forest cover. This compares to the less than 10% remaining in neighboring countries. Because its forests house a number of species of conservation concern, Liberia is considered a global conservation priority.

While habitat loss is considered the greatest long-term threat to wildlife, many believe that the over-harvest of wildlife may be the most immediate threat to the survival of many species. A study conducted in 1989 found that Liberians have one of the highest consumption rates for bushmeat (meat from wild animals) of any nation in Africa. The annual harvest was valued at \$66 million. This was more than three times the income gener-

ated by the timber industry in Liberia at that time. Yet, the timber harvest has always taken precedence over wildlife management in Liberia's list of environmental priorities. FPI is attempting to change this view.

Earlier this year Reg Hoyt authored a Wildlife Policy Briefing for the Overseas



*Bushmeat for sale in Monrovia, Liberia.*

Development Institute ([http://www.odi-bushmeat.org/download\\_files/wpb6.pdf](http://www.odi-bushmeat.org/download_files/wpb6.pdf)) outlining the biological and social impact of the bushmeat trade in Liberia, while also providing some recommended actions to manage the harvest and trade.

During Reg's recent visit to Liberia, with FPI Board member Dr. Richard Nisbett, numerous meetings were held with governmental officials to distribute the policy briefing and to discuss the bushmeat issue. Reg and Richard found that there is a growing understanding of the biological and economic impacts of Liberia's wildlife harvest, and a recognition that action must be taken.

FPI is committed to working with the government of Liberia, other conservation organizations, and the people of Liberia to find practical means of controlling the wildlife harvest.

## Conservation Awareness

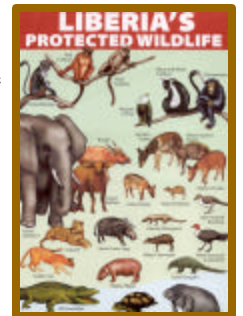
Does anyone care about Liberia's forests and wildlife? Liberians do!

During a hunter survey in 2000, an older hunter challenged interviewers with the question, "Why isn't there a poster telling us what animals are protected by law?" The Philadelphia Zoo responded, and through a generous grant from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) it began to distribute 5,000 posters in communities throughout Liberia.

FPI is now in partnership with the Philadelphia Zoo, again with funding from CEPF, to conduct a national public awareness campaign in Liberia. With the assistance of the Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia, as well as several other Liberian organizations, we will provide radio, newspaper, billboard, street theater, and poster (15,000 more!) messages to promote awareness of Liberia's rich natural heritage and the need to better manage it.

We will emphasize how every citizen can help prevent the extinction of animals and the loss of forests.

In a follow-up in 2005, we will conduct a survey throughout the country to see how well these messages were received.



## Villages in the Crossfire

While Liberia's civil conflict had officially ended with the election of President Taylor in 1997, peace was short lived.

By April 2003 the fighting intensified as the capital, Monrovia, was threatened. Simultaneously, a new rebel group called MODEL attacked from Ivory Coast into southeastern Liberia.

Sinoe County came under attack in late April. Sapo National Park staff fled, but Community Relations Officers Thomas

Norman and Nelson Bobway remained to witness the war.

In modern wars, civilians rather than soldiers suffer the greatest casualties during fighting. Government militia reportedly killed those suspected of being sympathetic to MODEL and burned down entire villages.

Thomas Norman was tied up and beaten by government militia who were looking

for park vehicles to steal. Fortunately, Thomas escaped into the forest. Nelson Bobway remained in hiding for weeks, with his youngest son, living on fruits and roots.

Today UN peace keepers are in Sinoe, and the people are left once again to pick up the pieces of their lives.

If you would like to help these villages, see "Adopt a Village" on page 4.



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*Our Mission: To globally promote sustainable resource management practices in regions of high biodiversity.*

*We will accomplish our mission through long-term partnerships with governments, organizations, communities and individuals that address both conservation and human needs.*

*Want to make a difference?*

*Make a gift to Forest Partners International.*

*By investing in FPI, you will be investing in the future of forests, wildlife and the rural poor of some of the worlds most biologically rich regions on the planet. The future of forests, wildlife and rural poor are inextricably linked—help us make the future brighter for them all.*

## Adopt a Village

Because rural people are the “gatekeepers” of forest resources, Forest Partners International is committed to keeping rural people at the heart of our conservation endeavors. Unfortunately, in many rural villages in Liberia, where 85% are illiterate and few health services exist, even the most basic human needs are hard to come by. To help villages with their development needs, FPI has launched the “Adopt a Village” program.

A modest donation can pay for a conservation officer’s or teacher’s salary, a child’s tuition for a month, or purchase a medical kit filled with basic medical supplies. Participation in this program at any level will make a difference in the lives of our village partners. For more information or to make a donation, please call, write or email us using the information above.

*The future of forests, wildlife and the rural people that depend on them are inextricably linked.*



*Forest Partners International logo t-shirts are available for \$15 (M, L, XL, XXL). Place an order via the email or street address above.*

## Host a FPI Party

Forest Partners International would like to invite you to get involved in a grass-roots effort to spread the word about our organization! We have been hard at work developing a PowerPoint presentation about who we are and what we do, and we would like your help in finding new friends. You can host a “Get to Know FPI” party in your own home for your friends who are interested in making a difference. We believe that information dissemination is among our most powerful tools. The more people we reach, the more people will become aware of conservation and development efforts in areas like Liberia that are so biologically rich yet so economically poor. The larger our family of friends, the easier it will be for us to make a lasting impact on dwindling natural resources and the people who depend on them the most. If you would like more information on hosting an FPI party, please contact us using the information given above.