



Sierra Leone's Green Diamond
Gola Rainforest National Park

About the Gola Rainforest Conservation LG

Gola Rainforest Conservation Company was formed in 2015 to manage the Gola Rainforest National Park. The company was formed through an equal partnership between The Government of Sierra Leone, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) and local forest-edge communities. Gola Rainforest Conservation is a non-profit company and is responsible for managing and selling the Gola carbon credits. The income is spent on managing the Gola Rainforest National Park, implementing livelihood projects with local communities and distributing funds as per the benefit sharing agreement that is in place with the local communities. The aim is to protect the park in perpetuity through effective management, sustained funding and ongoing benefits for local communities. This is the first West African carbon REDD project of its kind and will provide sustainable financing for the management of the park and its neighbouring communities for the next 30 years.

Photos by kind permission of: Annika Hilliers, Camilla Blas-Foglietti, Pietro Sandini, FIAP, & Zoo Basel Printed: June 2012

To find out more about Gola Rainforest National Park visit the main office in Kenema at 164 Dama Road call +232 76 4202018, email: golarainforest@yahoo.com or visit: www.golarainforest.org



The Birth of a National Park

The area that is today's national park was originally designated in the 1920's as the Gola Forest Reserves for the purpose of commercial timber extraction. In the late 1980s various conservation organisations conducted the first biodiversity surveys in the reserves, discovering an unparalleled richness of wildlife and plant life within the region. In 2003, the government, together with the communities, the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), agreed to manage the reserves for conservation, culminating in the approval of a conservation concession in 2007 and in December 2010, after 20 years of effort, the Gola Forest Reserves were officially proclaimed as the Gola Rainforest National Park (GRNP), becoming Sierra Leone's second only national



Rangers take a rest atop a view point overlooking the forest

park and the new 'green diamond of the nation'. Hopes are now high that the GRNP will be nominated for World Heritage status in further recognition of the forest's outstanding contribution to global biodiversity conservation. In the meantime the first REDD+ of its kind in West Africa was established by GRNP in 2015 with the carbon credits being sold on the voluntary market raising valuable funds for the project to be able to run for many years to come.

The Forest

Covering an area of 71,070 ha, GRNP is characterized by extensive rolling hills cloaked in evergreen and semi-deciduous forest divided into three blocks – Gola North, Central and South. The park comprises the largest remaining area of intact, lowland rainforest in Sierra Leone and is a significant remnant of the once vast Upper Guinea Forest belt of West Africa, a global biodiversity 'hotspot' and a priority for international conservation efforts. Botanical assessments have identified close to 1,000 plant species, half of which are endemic to the Upper Guinea Forest ecosystem. The forests of the GRNP have largely remained intact in spite of sporadic logging and a decade of civil war during the 1990s. Regenerating secondary forest (in old logging areas) is largely confined to the edges of the park with the core interior zone supporting high, primary forest and abundant wildlife. Current satellite imagery shows the park as an 'island of green' in a largely agricultural landscape, confirming that the park's forests are continuing to be effectively protected.



Aerial photo of GRNP forests

Mammals

A total of 49 large, mammal species have been recorded in the GRNP, including globally significant populations of the endangered Pygmy Hippo, Forest Elephant, Chimpanzee and Western Red Colobus. The Park also provides a refuge for a host of other rare and threatened mammal species such as the Diana Monkey, Western Pied Colobus, Olive Colobus, Sooty Mangabey, a number of rare duikers (Jentink's, Zebra, Yellow-backed, Maxwell's, Bay and Ogilby's), Bongo, African Buffalo, Leopard, Golden Cat, Spotted-necked Otter and Water Chevrotain. A recent survey recorded 41 species of bat, making the GRNP one of the richest forest areas in the region for this group.



Forest Elephant



Pygmy Hippo



Chimpanzee



Western Red Colobus

Birds

Perhaps more than any other species, the White-necked Picathartes is symbolic of the rarity, endemism and beauty of the Upper Guinea Forest and was thus chosen as a fitting logo for the national park. A total of 333 bird species have been recorded in and around the park with 163 of these restricted to the Guinea-Congolian forest biome. Some of the most important endangered and rare species include Rufous Fishing Owl, Gola Malimbe, Western Wattle Cuckoo-shrike, Nimba Flycatcher, White-breasted Guinea fowl, Yellow-bearded Greenbul, Green-tailed Bristlebill, Brown-cheeked Hornbill, Yellow-casqued Hornbill, and Yellow-footed Honeyguide.



Picathartes



Pseudopontia gola



Tree viper



Fruit bat



Newly discovered sp.

Other Wildlife

Surveys by international experts have recorded over 600 species of butterfly; 43 species of amphibians; 13 species of reptiles, including the African Dwarf Crocodile, Forest Hinged Tortoise and Forest Monitor; over 20 small mammals (rodents and shrews); 140 dragonfly and damselfly species; and 31 species of fish. Many of these species are only found in the Upper Guinea Forest eco-region with several species of butterfly, amphibian, damselflies and small mammals being new to science.

Park Activities

Building Capacity

Over 100 national staff are employed to manage the GRNP through five management programmes – Community Development, Park Operations, Research and Monitoring, Tourism, Administration/ Finance and Human Resources. Through comprehensive training programs, 'on the job' experience, and exposure to best practice protected area management, GRNPMA staff are becoming leaders in their field and future trainers for other protected areas in Sierra Leone.



Community Engagement

All seven chiefdoms surrounding the park are signatories to a benefit sharing agreement with the GRNPMA, which allocates annual funds for development and livelihood projects proposed by the communities. The park has assisted with the building of infrastructure (such as hospitals, schools, bridges), animal husbandry, agricultural assistance, and microfinance. The annual funds also provide for educational scholarships for secondary school students. Future priorities include community forestry initiatives and a volunteer programme for youth to work with the park.



Conservation Education

The park's education programme assists students and teachers to create nature clubs in many of the local schools and provides continuing support for club activities. It also conducts roadshows in the communities to raise awareness about the values of the national park and distributes a range of educational materials, such as posters on the park's endangered animals and the 'Gola Guardian' newsletter.



Biodiversity Research & Monitoring

A team of dedicated staff survey and monitor the biodiversity of the park's forests and conducts various research studies into the ecology of species under threat of extinction. Research technicians visit the forest regularly to monitor the health of the park's key wildlife populations. The park is building partnerships with various Sierra Leone universities and is developing a research centre.



Park Protection

Fifty forest guards have been recruited locally to provide protection and support for the management of the park's forest and wildlife. In teams of five they patrol the width and breadth of the park throughout the year, enforcing the law against illegal hunting, logging and mining and collecting data on wildlife.



Recreation & Tourism

The GRNP is committed to providing visitor and recreational opportunities for national and international visitors. The tourism programme currently operates several trekking and cultural-based ecotourism products and aims to develop GRNP as a high quality nature tourism destination for Sierra Leone and the region (see map overleaf for product and contact details).



Ecotourism Activities in GRNP

IMPORTANT INFORMATION. In order to prevent negative impacts on the park and to ensure availability of accommodation and services for all guests, **visitors are required to visit or contact the park headquarters prior to their trip** for advance tour bookings and to arrange for permits, food, accommodation, camping equipment and guides. All visitors must hold a valid entrance permit before entering the park and must be accompanied by a GRNP staff and community guide. We thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

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There are currently three main areas in GRNP open to visitors: Lalehun, Sileti and Belebu. Basic descriptions of available activities are shown below. For full descriptions of tour itineraries, prices and travel details please visit www.golarainforest.com.

Lalehun

Lalehun provides the quickest entry point into the park located just 40 km (approx. 1.5 hours) from Kenema in Gola Central. Here there is a network of trails that offers opportunities for trekking and camping in the forest and viewing rare wildlife such as the African Buffalo, Gola Malimbe and Picarthartes. Visitors are also able to visit an ancient grave site of the original Gola people. Accommodation and food are available at the park substation for those who want an early start into the forest. Don't miss the 'Gola' masked devil dance performed by Lalehun villagers, which can be arranged for upon request.

Sileti

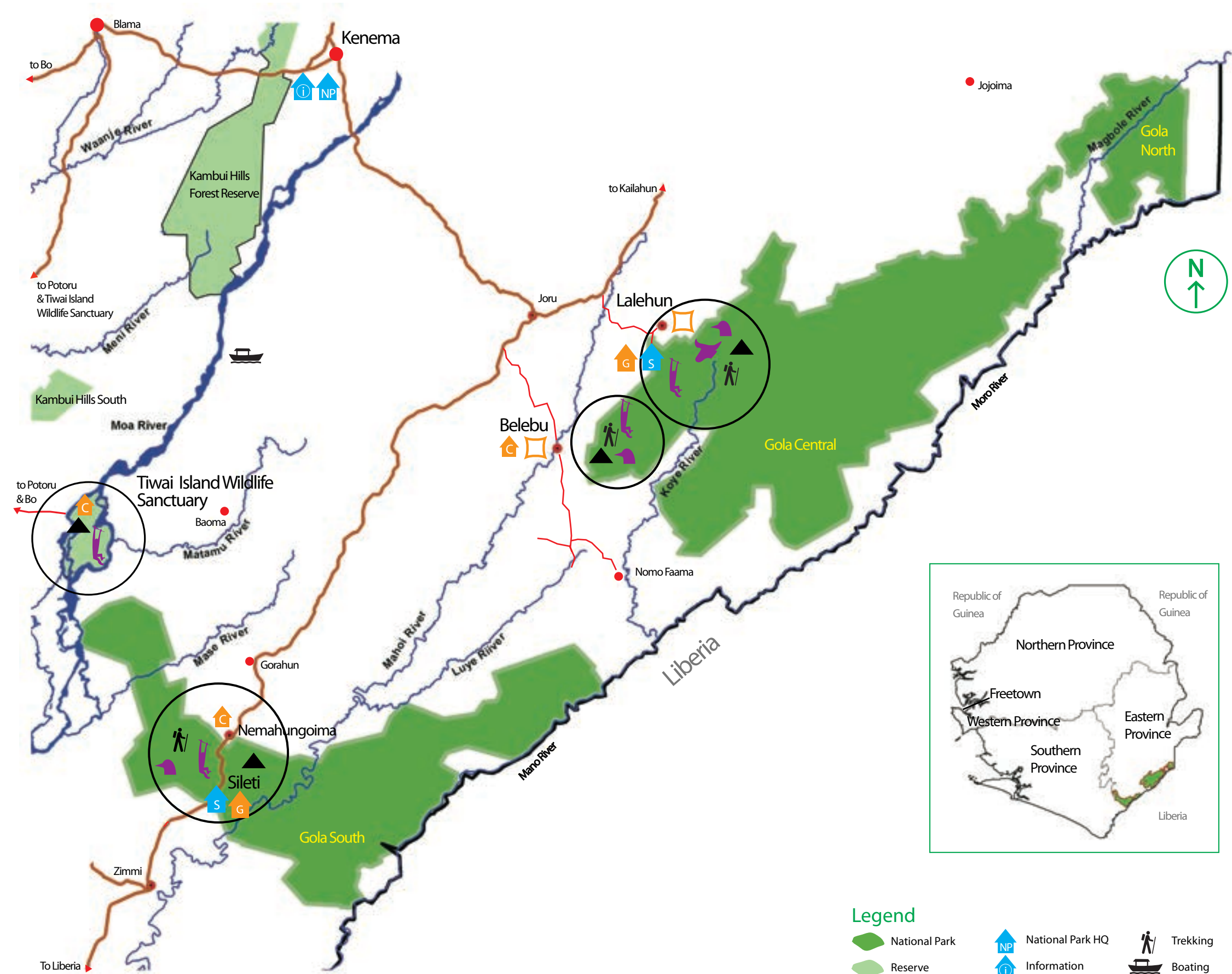
Sileti substation is located in Gola South and is the most convenient area to visit for those traveling to/from Liberia, situated 75 km south of Kenema (approx. 3 hours). There are two half-day nature trails accessible from the park substation that provide an opportunity to see a habituated group of Diana Monkeys and possibly other primates such as the Red Colobus and Black and White Colobus. A 2-day/1-night camping trip along the Mahoi River is also available that requires easy to moderate walking only. For those looking for a more rugged adventure, a 3-day trek through the heart of Gola South finishing at the Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary is also possible. Accommodation and food are available at the Sileti park substation and also in Nemahungoima Village, offering visitors an opportunity to experience Mende village life.

Belebu

Belebu Community, located 40 km from Kenema (1.5-2 hrs.), operates a 2-day/1-night camping trip and a half-day walking trail inside the park through an area that offers mountain climbs and panoramic views in sharp contrast to the generally flat terrain of Lalehun and Sileti. Belebu village guides will share with you their indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants and will help you to spot wildlife, including a Picarthartes nesting site and various monkey species. Chimpanzees are relatively common here and may be seen with some luck. Accommodation and local food are available at the community guesthouse, which has eight rooms and an attached bath. In the evening, traditional Mende games and cultural dancing can be enjoyed in the village, or simply relax in the locally-made hammocks provided at the guesthouse.

Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary

Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary is world famous for its high density of primates and population of Pygmy Hippo. Trips to Tiwai can be combined with trekking in Gola South. For more information on activities at Tiwai Island please visit www.tiwaiisland.org or contact +232 76 755146.



Getting to Gola

The GRNP headquarters is located in Kenema Town in the eastern region of Sierra Leone, 311 km (approx. 4-5 hours) from Freetown. Bo to Kenema is 68 km (approx. 1 hour), with a taxi service running throughout the day. The headquarters is located at 164 Dama Road (the road heading southeast out of Kenema) about 1.5 km south of the National

Pastoral Centre entrance. All roads leading to the park are unpaved and require a 4WD vehicle. GRNP can help to arrange vehicles or motorcycle taxis if needed. Contact the headquarters for details and updates on road conditions. Detailed directions to the main entry points will be provided upon booking.