

SIERRA LEONE ESTUARY: PROPOSED RAMSAR SITE

1. LOCATION AND AREA

The Sierra Leone River Estuary is about 295,000ha and lies between 13°03'W and 8°37'N. The Estuary stretches from Cape Point on the Western Side of the Freetown peninsular along the coast, right down to the Bunce River on one of its banks. On the other side it extends from areas above the Targrin Point and then turns upwards to (areas where the Rokel or Seli River empties) the mouth of the River Rokel /Seli.

2. SITE DESCRIPTION

The Sierra Leone River Estuary is dominated by mangrove ecosystem. The Rokel or Seli empties into the Sierra Leone River estuary. It is bounded in the north and south by a lowland coastal plain, indented by Creeks. The Western Area Peninsular (WAP) mountain rises in the south. At its entrance into the Atlantic Ocean, the estuary widens to about 11km and suddenly deepens at its southern shore to form a natural harbour (the third largest in the world)

The predominant vegetation is mangrove, mainly *Rhizophora* sp., *Avicennia* sp., *Laguncularia* sp., and *Conocarpus* sp., covering an area of 34.23ha, (19% total mangrove in Sierra Leone). A large proportion of the mangrove resource in the western area occur in this estuary.

3. SITE SELECTION CRITERIA

The criteria for selection of the Sierra Leone River Estuary as a Ramsar site (i.e. Wetlands of International Importance especially as habitat for waterbirds) are based on those set by the Ramsar Bureau and therefore reflect global standard:

- (a) The site is known to hold on a regular basis, at least 1% of the biogeographic population of at least eight waterbird species (see list below).
- (b) The site is also known to hold on a regular basis, more than 20,000 waterbirds. Based on the above criteria, the site requires the status of a Ramsar Site. The mangrove cover provides suitable breeding habitat for some waterbirds. A total of 36 waterbirds species were recorded during the 1994 Important Bird Area (IBA) surveys and Tye and Tye (1987 estimated the site to hold more than 20,000 waterbirds.

IMPOTANCE OF THE ESTUARY AS DESIGNATED RAMSAR SITE

The Sierra Leone River Estuary is one of four major coastal estuarine wetland sites identified as important for palaeartic migrant waders in Sierra Leone (Tye and Tye 1987, Thompson and Wood 1994, Williams 1996).

The most common palaeartic migrant wader found at this site includes: Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*, Red Shank *Tringa totanus*, and Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, amongst others regularly winter in this site. The key bird species are listed below together with 1% of their global land Sierra Leone population estimates (IBA surveys, Sierra Leone, 1994).

<u>English name</u>	<u>Scientific name</u>	<u>1% Population Estimate</u>	<u>Sierra Leone Population (1994)</u>
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	3,000	8,600
Kentish Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	1,000	2,100
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	1,000	2,900
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	7,000	9,500
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1,000	1,100
Green Shank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	2,300	700
Red Shank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1,750	4,000
Western Reef Heron	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	250	500

The Sierra Leone River Estuary is threatened by vegetation clearance and unsustainable fishing activities, which could affect the wildlife particularly the waterbirds and the marine life ecology in general. There is need to conserve core areas in this estuary that still holds relatively undisturbed blocks of natural vegetation.

There are still vast areas of untouched mangrove forest along the coast of the Sierra Leone River Estuary and these habitats should be preserved and protected from any form of unsustainable exploitation. In view of the above, government should take action in putting the Sierra Leone River Estuary under some form of conservation management and control of its key sites (Aberdeen Creek, Bunce River, Targrin Point, Pepel/Tumbu areas) by designating the Estuary a Ramsar Site.

The management and control of activities that threatened this very important wetland might encourage increase wader population and improve the conservation importance of the site at global level.

With this being achieved, there is the possibility of securing funds to undertake programmes that may help to promote management of this all-important gateway to Sierra Leone. This will again provide Eco-tourism potentials a big foreign exchange earner, as it is evident of the fine coastal beaches, the historic slave castle on the Bunce Island, to name just a few. Also the artisanal fishing industry and agro-forestry (fuel wood) will be developed and practiced on a more sustainable yield basis in collaboration with the already functioning EU funded Artisanal Fishing Community Development (AFCOD) Programme.

SUMMARY

- 1 An area of 259,000ha stretch of coastal wetland lined by mud flat and mangrove forests (19% of total mangrove swamp in Sierra Leone).
- 2 Important for palaeartic migrant waders in congregation of over 10,000 birds of 36 species (wintering population records of 1995). (Tye and Tye 1987) estimated that the Sierra Leone River including the Aberdeen Creek and Bunce River holds more than 20,000 waterbirds and therefore meets the standard of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention (i.e. Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as habitat for waterbirds).
- 3 The fact that the areas supports eight wintering wader species whose numbers exceeds 1% of their global population also makes the site qualify for designation as a Ramsar site. The lesser-crested tern was recorded for the first time in Sierra Leone.
- 4 The fine sandy beaches on the western most ends of the Aberdeen Creek area and the Lumley beach beyond the large beach hotels and restaurant could afford some ecological friendly background environment.
- 5 The historic slave castle of the Bunce Island is also another touristic attraction.
- 6 The needs for management plan for each core zone is paramount, so as to guide towards integrated land resource management and also promote understanding and cooperation in information exchange between resource planners.
- 7 The designation of the Sierra Leone River Estuary as a Ramsar site will help to bring International recognition and concern to promote closer cooperation and also acquire funds for conservation programmes.