



TECHNICAL BRIEF – Conservation forestry in Liberia: progress, challenges, and recommendations

Executive summary

Liberia has made measurable progress by expanding and strengthening protected-area management; advancing REDD+ readiness, piloting community-based forest management, signing collaborative transboundary forest management agreements, and launching focused mangrove and coastal resilience initiatives.

However, persistent challenges linked to governance, overlap in land use, incomplete clarity on policies, insufficient financing, tenure insecurity in some landscapes, agricultural expansion, legal and illegal mining, and pressure on mangroves¹ continue to plague the sector. Therefore, high-quality conservation outcomes will require resolving governance gaps, strengthening institutional capacity, scaling and incentivising community stewardship, and securing sustainable finance.

Recent years show renewed advances in REDD+ readiness, national biodiversity planning, pilot payment for ecosystem services (PES), and restoration projects. These opportunities have created windows to scale up effective, community-centered conservation programs.

This brief presents a summary of progress, challenges, key lessons learned from national and project experiences, and actionable recommendations for improving conservation outcomes in Liberia.

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/climate-environment-liberia-rainforest-df27397b38db547922241f95c2056de5>

Background

Liberia contains West Africa's largest remaining block of tropical rainforest and globally significant biodiversity. Forests contribute to the livelihoods of forest dependent communities, climate mitigation and building climate resilience.

Before modern conservation, the country's traditional societies had practiced conservation which prohibited hunting and felling trees of value. Since 1976, conservation has been the responsibility of the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) backed by appropriate laws and legislations. The 2006 National Forestry Reform Law (NFRL), which is the main legal instrument that guides the management of forest resources has a goal of placing 30% of Liberia's forest under conservation.

Progress on actions

Protected Area and conservation actions

Liberia has five (5) Protected Areas (PAs), namely: Gola Forest National Park (GFNP), Lake Piso Multiple Sustainable Use Reserve (LPMSUR), East Nimba Nature Reserve (ENNR), Grebo-Krahn National Park (GKNP), and Sapo National Park (SNP) totalling 475,390 hectares (ha). There are ten (10) Proposed Protected Areas (PPAs), namely: Proposed Kwa Protected Area (PKPP), Foya, Grand Kru-River Gee, Cestos Senkwen, Gbi, Kpo, Bong Mountain, Marshall Wetlands, Wonegizi, and Wologizi Forests totalling 899,849 ha.

The following actions represent major achievements in protected area management and overall conservation actions by the FDA and partner organizations.

Expanding the Protected Area network

The FDA is making efforts in expanding Liberia's PA network by facilitating the gazettelement of three (3) PPAs including Foya (104,628 ha) and Wonegizi (27,979 ha) located in Northwest Liberia and the Proposed Kwa National Park (PKNP) (171,888 ha) in Southeast Liberia. These PPAs have almost completed the gazettelement process with only the Customary Land Formalization (CLF) remaining. CLF is the process of documenting community customary land claims in PPAs. The gazettelement process in Wonegizi began in 2018, Foya in 2020, and PKNP in 2016. The FDA aims to complete the gazettelement processes for the three abovementioned PPAs and present the full packages to the National Legislature at the end of 2026.

Activities implemented during the gazettelement process have included livelihood training for farmers on conservation agriculture, sustainable cocoa and low-land rice farming working with cooperatives, provision of cassava milling machines, the establishment of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA), and the provision of micro-loans for women.

Additional broad-based consultation with communities is being implemented to acquire their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in the transition of these PPAs to PAs.

Additionally, the FDA has recently signed an MOU with a partner organization to implement the gazettement of the Cestos Senkwen PPA and is coordinating with other partners to support the implementation.

Management of PAs and PPAs

The FDA and partners have been implementing several projects in various landscapes. Meanwhile, interagency collaboration has improved as FDA strengthens partnerships with agencies including Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME), Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and Liberia Land Authority (LLA) to facilitate law enforcement and address community conservation related issues. The role of communities in conservation has also increased through the Community Ecoguard and Auxiliary Programs in PAs and PPAs to assist FDA rangers in surveillance and law enforcement. New tools were as well developed to enhance conservation and forest protection.

As a result of the abovementioned efforts, major accomplishments include:

- The validation of the National Community Conservation Agreement (CCA) guidelines to standardize conservation agreement practices across all user groups.
- The completion of the Standard Operating Procedure for Management of Wildlife Product Storerooms in Liberia.
- The ongoing peaceful removal of over 15,000 illegal occupants from Liberia's oldest protected area, the Sapo National Park (SNP) by the Joint Security Taskforce (JST) coordinated by the FDA.
- From 2023-25, over 100 animals including pangolins, crocodiles, duikers, and parrots were released in Warkolor Forest within LPMSUR, GFNP, and SNP.
- The conduct of joint assessments in Gbarpolu and Grand Cape Mount Counties and training of more than 500 farmers in human-wildlife conflict mitigation and prevention by the FDA in collaboration with the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) and MOA in response to an increase in cases of human-wildlife conflict emerging as threats to food security and protection of endangered species both northwestern and southeastern Liberia.
- 52 nature school clubs were established and operationalized in northwestern and southeastern Liberia reaching 1,500 children. In addition, facilitators were trained and a handbook was produced.
- New Park headquarters including rangers' quarters were constructed in Wonegizi PPA.
- Development and operations of ecotourism infrastructure in National Parks
 - The Warkolor Jungle Lodge in Robertsport City, Grand Cape Mount County and the Nimba Ecolodge and Reserve in East Nimba Nature Reserve, Nimba County were launched in 2024.
 - Sapo Ecolodge, Liberia's first community-based ecotourism program, was established in SNP and is providing regular income for 33 local community members.
- The continuous support for the National Wildlife Crime Task Force (WCTF) coordinated by the FDA, and establishment of the Liberia Special Wildlife Investigation Unit (SWIU) in May 2023, which is now being integrated in the WCTF, in collaboration with other GoL Agencies and partners, which has resulted in systematic arrests, prosecution, and

convictions related to wildlife crime, for example with wildlife-crime related convictions in 2024.

- The Community Volunteer Program established by the FDA has helped 317 female bushmeat seller across Liberia to change from illegal bushmeat trade to legal businesses between 2023 and 2025.
- A National Coordination Platform and several regional level platforms reactivated in southeast Liberia in 2024 to improve interaction between the FDA, NGO partners and other actors in the conservation sector. These coordination platforms have strengthened the leadership of the FDA within the sector, promoted sharing of information, and identified collective actions in response to challenges faced in the sector.
- The Liberia Conservation Fund (LCF) established to support the ENNR launched in 2025 with the signing of a one-year grant agreement between the FDA and the LCF for ENNR.
- The Payment for Stewardship project which provides direct cash payments, livelihood and governance capacity support to forest communities to protect their forests being piloted covering 50,585 ha of biodiversity-rich forests in the Wedjah and Jeadea Districts of Sinoe County and will run from 2025 to 2027². A roadmap for scaling up has been prepared and published.
- Through Transboundary Management Agreements (TMAs), regular coordination meetings are being held in several landscapes with authorities of neighbouring countries and the management and coordination of transboundary forest landscapes have improved as joint patrols that have curtailed illegal pitsawing, hunting, and illegal mining.
- The Integrated Management Effectiveness Tool (IMET) was used to assess the management effectiveness across SNP, GFNP, and GKNP providing the FDA with incites to improve protected area management.
- The establishment of a REDD+ Pilot Project in Wonegizi PPA to provide sustainable financing for the management of the landscape and ongoing livelihood support to 17 local communities

A snapshot of donor-funded interventions

Across the conservation landscape, there are series of donor supported interventions being implemented by various stakeholder organizations. Below are some of the major donor-funded projects that are currently funding the activities of the FDA:

² <https://laejnet.org/fda-and-idl-to-launch-incentivized-community-forest-stewardship-initiative-today>
https://idliliberia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Roadmap_Alternative_Revenue_Forests.pdf

Table 2. FDA Project in the Landscapes

	Project Name	Project Landscape	Project Value	Partner
1.	New National Park for Chimpanzees and Pygmy Hippos in Liberia	Proposed Kwa National Park Ongoing up to June 2026	US\$3,024,529	Wild Chimpanzee Foundation with funding from Rainforest Trust
2.	The Wonegizi-Wologizi Initiative for Sustainable Ecosystems WISE project	Wonegizi and Wologizi Landscapes	US\$9,000,000	GRET and Fauna and Flora with funding from the French Development Agency (AFD)
3.	Leh Go Green	Gola, Foya, and Grebo-Krahn	US\$4,800,000	The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Implementing Partners with funding from the European Union
4.	PROBIO	Lake Piso Sustainable Multiple Use Reserve, Gola Forest National Park, Foya Proposed Protected Area, Grebo-Krahn National Park, Proposed Kwa National Park, Cestos-Senkwehn Proposed Protected Area, Monrovia & Paynesville Ongoing January 2024 to March 2026	1,875,000 Euro	Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia, Nature Compact, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Libassa Wildlife Sanctuary, with funding from The European Union
5.	Food Systems, Land Use, Restoration (FOLUR) Impact Program	Gola, Foya and Wonegizi	US\$7,139,450	Conservation International, Fauna & Flora, RSPB and SCNL with funding from the Global Environment Facility through Conservation International

6.	Sustainable Forest conservation in southeastern Liberia (SUSTAIN)	Sapo, Proposed Kwa, Grebo-Krahn National Parks, and selected community forests, Ongoing January 2025 up to December 2027	US\$ 3,650,000	Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia, Universal Outreach Foundation, with funding from the European Union
7.	Communities for Conservation (C4C)	Gola Community Forests	2,000,000 Euro	SCNL with funding from the European Union
8.	NaturAfrica – Gola	Gola Forest National Park, Community Forests, and Foya Proposed Protected Area	3,000,000 Euro	SCNL with funding from the European Union
9.	NaturAfrica – Grebo-Krahn-Sapo	GKNP and SNP Ongoing January 2025 to December 2028	4,200,000 Euro	Wild Chimpanzee Foundation with funding from the European Union
10.	GEF-8 CHILD – Strengthening Conservation and Effective Governance of Liberia’s Critical Forests in the Northwest Liberia Landscape	Gola, Foya, Wonegizi, and Kpo 2025-30	US\$3,103,823	SCNL, FDA, and EPA, with funding from Conservation International-Global Environment Facility (CI-GEF)
11.	Conservation of Biodiversity in the Tai-Grebo-Krahn Rainforest Complex	Grebo-Krahn National Park 2025-28	4,718,065 Euro	WCF with funding from the KFW Development Bank
12.	Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) Project	Community Forests in Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu, Grand Gedeh, River Gee and Rivercess Counties 2024-27	8,000,000 Euro	UNDP and FAO with funding from the Swedish Government

Key challenges

Balancing conservation objectives with economic development

While the government of Liberia through the NFRL is committed to conserving 30% of the country's forest land area, other land use sectors including mining, logging and agriculture are key in terms of meeting economic development goals. As a result, significant land area overlaps have been observed across these sectors in PPAs leaving areas of high biodiversity, conservation values, and carbon stocks at risk of being affected. The absence of science-based land use planning and cost-benefit analyses make it difficult to make informed decisions to justify the value of conservation as compared to other land uses.

For example, the size of PKNP has been reduced to satisfy requests from local communities and their national leaders driven primarily by their interest in the creation of jobs and economic activities. An important High Conservation Value Area which was earmarked for long-term ecotourism development has been removed from PKNP and now is a mining concession. Also, in Foya, similar discussions are underway that may adjust the size of the area.

Moreover, as the Land Rights Law has given communities claim to customary land, communities are claiming land in PAs and PPAs that were previously set aside as national forests. Some communities are claiming customary ownership, whilst others are claiming private ownership. As communities claim forest land, some are clearing the land for farming and other activities which is contrary to sustainable forest management goals. Limited coordination and planning amongst government institutions and the absence of a national land use plan is contributing to these overlaps in land use.

Socio-economic drivers and livelihood

Illegal logging, illegal mining, poaching, and limited options for sustainable livelihoods have continued to undermine progress in conservation. Large proportions of the population depend on forests for fuelwood, protein, and income. Without viable alternatives, pressures from agriculture expansion, artisanal mining and bush meat hunting persist. While many livelihood programs have been implemented, there is limited improvement in community livelihoods in the various forest landscapes. Livelihood interventions are mostly driven by donor projects that have short to medium term timelines thus benefitting only a small group of people.

Policy gaps and delays in finalization

From 2023 to date, the development of several policies and legal instruments have been initiated, but yet to be validated mainly due to limited funding. Below is a list of a few legal and policy documents with their status updates.

Table 1. Policy, regulations, and legal framework

	Policy/regulation/legal framework	Status
1.	Liberia Forest Sector Policy (2023 – 2029) is being developed as a replacement of the 2006 National Forestry Policy	To be validated by the FDA
2.	Liberia Forest Sector Strategy (2025 – 2029) aims to align with the Government's ARREST Agenda for Inclusive Development (AAID) and the country's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC)	Still in draft
3.	The National Conservation Strategy was initiated in 2024	To be validated by the FDA
4.	The National Carbon Development Policy aims to create a transparent and practical framework for developing and trading carbon credits in Liberia	Pending validation
5.	The National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Crime	Pending validation
6.	The National Wildlife Conservation and Protected Area Management Law, 2016	This law was revised to be submitted for approval and amendment
7.	The Tourism Concession Policy focuses on forest landscape management, biodiversity protection, and livelihood for local communities	Pending validation
8.	The FDA National Law Enforcement Strategy focuses on the enforcement of the laws around protected areas, wildlife protection and commercial logging.	Pending Validation

Deforestation

Migrants from neighboring countries involved in illegal cocoa farming are significant drivers of deforestation in the southeastern region of Liberia³, mainly in Grand Gedeh County. This contributes to habitat loss, undermines conservation efforts, and risks overwhelming the local economy and environment with unsustainable agricultural practices. This influx also leads to illegal trafficking of Liberian cocoa back into Côte d'Ivoire. From an economic perspective, the unsustainable cocoa farming practices are undermining Liberia's potential in the cocoa economy, in light of the EU Regulation on deforestation-free products.

³ <https://www.euronews.com/green/2025/10/08/as-cocoa-production-in-liberia-fosters-mass-deforestation-campaigners-urge-europe-to-act>

Furthermore, urban expansion, sand-mining, conversion for aquaculture and waste disposal, threaten mangroves along the coast causing significant historical mangrove loss requiring accelerated protection and restoration.

Capacity constraints

Insufficient manpower and logistics to carry out compliance monitoring make it difficult to deter illegal activities within PAs and PPAs. Many conservation actions are underfunded. Project development, management, and monitoring capacity are limited institutionally.

For example, in SNP, there are only 38 rangers. But to fully secure SNP, 150 rangers are required.

Lessons learned

Community stewardship and livelihood improvement

- Projects that are co-managed by communities and the FDA with incentives can lead to reduced poaching and improved local stewardship. For example, in the East Nimba Nature Reserve, where communities are involved in direct implementation and management of the PA, they have demonstrated good stewardship in its protection. A total of ninety (90) community ecoguards have been recruited from the community to support park patrol activities. However, funding to communities should be sustainable for the co-management approach to work and community capacity should be built to ensure effective inclusion.
- There is a perception that conservation does not provide the desired social development benefits. Therefore, more local communities have favoured commercial logging over conservation. Moreover, Community Forestry continues to focus on logging activities without considering the establishment of conservation zones.
- Most alternative livelihoods are not of scale which results in low impact. Therefore, support to community livelihoods should focus on enterprises and value chain development and target the provision of holistic livelihood packages rather than only conducting skills training.
- Due to the high poverty rate in Liberia, FDA and conservation projects should consider collaborating with the relevant ministries and agencies to provide social services such as road development, hospitals and schools.
- Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are effective livelihood interventions because communities take ownership, they have strong rules, and they benefit collectively and personally using their own money.
- Small sized community forests are not conservation friendly because they are costlier and more complicated to manage and control threats.

Recommendations

Below are recommended actions organized across governance, finance, community engagement, technical systems, and law enforcement.

- Establish a specialized unit for project management within the FDA and create a framework for managing and carrying out systematic monitoring of conservation related projects to track performance and ensure tangible results. Donors should integrate the cost of monitoring and coordination when designing and budgeting projects. Some donors have already begun, but this approach need to cut across all projects.
- Prioritize the completion of key policies and operationalize them.
- Reactivate the National Conservation Coordination Platform amongst EPA, FDA, LLA, and other land use related entities for joint decision making and identify coordination focal points in these government institutions. The national coordination platform should meet to discuss progress, review challenges, and address cross-cutting issues related to land use and management.
- Ensure inter-agency coordinated analysis and planning in order to keep the integrity and opportunities for the establishment of carbon projects, ecotourism, and other sustainable nature-based solutions and economic related activities.
- Partners in collaboration with the FDA should support the scaling up of payment for ecosystem services programs across local communities to sustain stewardship and reduce illegal activities. Alternative livelihoods such as sustainable agroforestry, enterprise development, and sustainable fisheries should also be scaled up to reduce dependence on unsustainable forest uses.
- Women and youth empowerment should be encouraged across projects.
- The FDA and partners should prioritize and fast-track restoration in degraded terrestrial forests and mangroves in urban/coastal hotspots. The urgent protection of these degraded areas will reduce continued loss. The FDA and partners should gazette priority mangrove sites, enforce protection, and fund community-led restoration as per the AAID.
- In collaboration with the Liberia Conservation Fund, the FDA should develop a national forest conservation finance strategy with blended finance instruments, and approach the private sector, donors, multinational development banks and philanthropists to contribute to it. Government should also require extractive companies to make offset payments for conservation.
- The FDA should work with its designated partners to develop a collaborative financing plan for each landscape,
- The FDA should create a specialized unit to monitor the outputs and impacts of donor funded projects. The unit should be responsible for the review and approval of projects before they are submitted.
- Private sector involvement should include expansion of the LCF, creating eco-tourism infrastructure, sustainable supply chains, carbon credit financing, environmental restoration projects, and supporting conservation offset programs that contribute both to biodiversity and community livelihoods.

Conclusion

Conservation has been a long-standing interest of government. However, serious challenges exist in implementing programs and plans, and insuring community buy-in. Interagency coordination and collaboration with external partners and donors are key to achieving sustainable conservation goals and objectives. Many conservation NGOs with external support have implemented helpful conservation actions, however, the FDA is rethinking existing approaches in favor of providing more substantive livelihood options and transformative social development services.

Moreover, the FDA aims to secure sustainable conservation financing through the roll out of the CCA, carbon projects, expansion of the LCF, as well as institutional strengthening in project development and management. The FDA will also prioritize the finalization of relevant policies.

This brief has analysed the issues, captured lessons learnt and challenges experienced over the years and has advanced feasible recommendations for stakeholders to consider for implementation under prevailing national circumstances.