

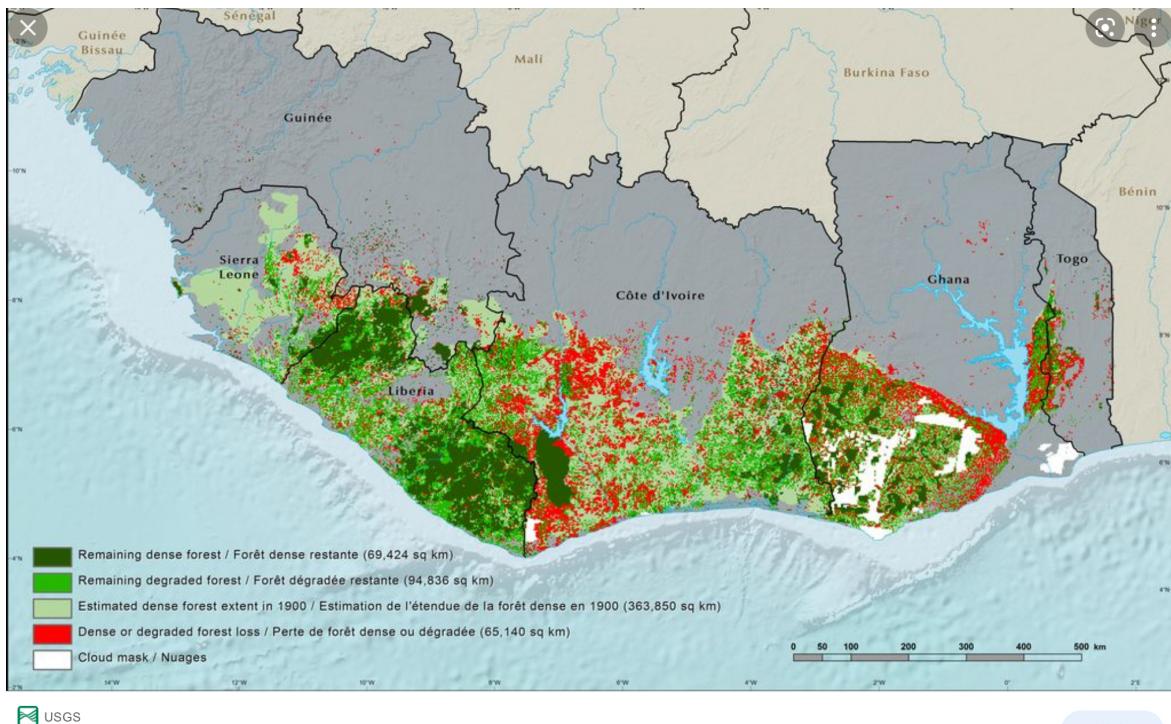


## **Green Be Our Fame: Agro-Eco Tourism at the Kpatawee Waterfalls**

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Liberia is West Africa's most important hotspot for biodiversity and the largest carbon sink in the sub-region. We hold almost half of the last remaining intact tracts of the Upper Guinea forest, the third most important forest in the world.

I cannot tell you how many presentations and speeches I have made incorporating those facts. I even had business cards made showing that deep green spot on the map of Africa, even of the world, showing everyone that when it comes to environmental credentials, when it comes to battling climate change and the effects of global warming, for the preservation of endangered species like the West African chimpanzee, and our own pigmy hippopotamus (*Choeropsis Liberiensis*), Liberia is pulling more than its own weight.



Makes me proud to remind people that we are a major player in sequestering carbon and reducing greenhouse gases. If you don't believe me, just fly over the country... green, green, green as far as your eye can see. It's even written into our national anthem "Green be our fame..."

We've got forests y'all, and please don't mind all those people telling us that we are cutting it down. They don't tell you all that we are doing to grow back what's cut down. And they certainly don't want to admit that when it comes to deforestation and development...other countries cut down their trees to make way for their industrialization. We've still got our trees, and we are doing our best to industrialize in a climate smart way. .



*View from the airplane window, coming in to land at Robertsfield: just green.*

But this article is about tourism. Agro-Eco Tourism. Or how in little and big ways, Liberia can show off to the world the wonderful things it is doing to save the world.

Eco-tourism in Liberia usually focuses on our forests: the Sapo National Forest; the Gola National Forest; the Wologizi and Wonegizi forests and so many more. It's hard to stand in any spot in Liberia and not see trees within 100 yards. According to the World Bank Development Indicators in 2021, 79% of Liberia's land mass was forested.

Whoowee! Almost four-fifths of our land is forested and that is not a small thing! Because forests capture and hold atmospheric carbon, that terrible pollutant that is a leading cause of climate change and global warming. So keeping our forests, as we have done for centuries, is actually huge for a country of our size.

Besides their value in carbon capture, forests also host tremendous biodiversity and Liberia's forests in particular hold thousands of species, several of them classified as endangered or vulnerable to extinction. We've found animals scientists thought were extinct, living comfortably in Liberian forests. In fact, one study by ELRECO shows that about half of the remaining forest elephants in the world live in Liberia. Makes sense,

since we have about half of the forests, right? Some species are unique to just our area.



*The Waterfalls at Kpatawee*

Then of course there are our wetlands, the swamps that we often take for granted because they have always just “been there”. Five of our wetlands have been classified

as RAMSAR sites or of international significance. Because wetlands do even more to capture the carbon emitted by the industrialized countries: almost five times more than forests. So we have Lake Piso, Montserrado, Marshall, Kpatawee and Gbedin. We have more but these are the important ones.

Rivers, lakes, coastal beaches and the recent fan-favorite are the waves at Robertsport that provide some of the world's best surfing. All of these are grand for eco-tourism and lately, one site, the Kpatawee Waterfalls, has distinguished itself by adding agro-tourism to its portfolio but in a climate smart way that other sites do not yet have.

## The Kpatawee Waterfalls



Paramount Chief Nye Suah Koko

Local legend has it that a warrior named Gbar (Kpa) from the Bassa tribe was captured in combat by the famous Chief Nye Suah Koko, Liberia's nineteenth century 'Woman King' and turned over to one of her female lieutenants. Gbar integrated in the Kpelle tribe and 'discovered' the beautiful falls when he was out hunting elephants. Other warriors in the tribe marveled at the new site, and claimed it for the tribe. Gbar-Ta-Wee ("Gbar's town near the water") came on the map. Later spellings put the name as Kpatawee.

The Waterfalls at Kpatawee are arguably one of Liberia's most beautiful sites for eco-tourism. The stunningly beautiful waterfalls flowing through verdant forests into lush meadows, offer nature at its best and showcase the country's outstanding credentials for eco-tourism. Registered as one of Liberia's five RAMSAR sites (wetlands of international significance) since 2006, Kpatawee is a microcosm of Liberia, and already earns its eco-credentials just by being there.

Biodiversity is here folks, in the richness of the species that make their home in Kpatawee. While the river erodes the valley in its upper sections, it accumulates sand and gravel downstream, leaving patches of bare land along its course, which provide wintering grounds for large numbers of common Sandpipers and Palaeartic migrant species such as Little Ringed Plover and Greenshanks. The helmeted Guinea Fowl hangs out with the "country chickens" that make their home there too. A number of eagles, hawks, kites, owls and kingfisher species occur naturally in the Kpatawee forests.

See this fellow, the Beaudouin Snake Eagle, usually found in the Sahel and classified as vulnerable, can be spotted in the forests and land around Kpatawee.



### Beaudouin's Snake Eagle

Beaudouin's Snake Eagle, listed as a vulnerable species with declining numbers, is normally found in Sahelian countries...  
has been spotted in the Kpatawee forests

The list of bird species found in and around Kpatawee is impressive, and includes some species that are becoming vulnerable due to habitat encroachment in other parts of Africa as well as climate change. Several species of eagles, owls and the helmeted Guineafowl that often strolls around the campgrounds, joining the chickens that make their home there.

Then there are the butterflies and moths. Of 1,200 species of butterflies occurring from the northwestern lands of the Gambia all the way to Cameroon, more than 800 of them are found in Liberia, and more specifically in and around the Kpatawee forests.

There is diversity even in the types of trees in the forests around Kpatawee. A study by Cuttington University's Natural Resources Department unveiled 71 tree species across 42 families, with Leguminosae displaying the highest diversity. Leguminosae are flowering trees in the pea or bean family.

Biodiversity? Check! Forests? Check! Wetlands? Check! Then there is the agriculture.

Not long after the time when Nye Suah Koko was made the first female Paramount Chief in Liberia, sometime in the mid-1950s, the two-thousand acres around Kpatawee had been carved out for agricultural production. Nobody was thinking about the ecosystem then. It was just good farmland; the basin was good for growing rice, sugar cane and vegetables; the rich land near the forests were good for tree crops like oil palm and rubber.

In 1961, bilateral cooperation with Taiwan led to the planting of rice fields in the wetlands of Kpatawee. Workers were relocated to the area from other parts of Liberia to farm oil palm, rubber, sugar cane, vegetables as well as the rice that is the staple food for most Liberians. Over the years, agriculture was the mainstay of the local



*The rice fields at Kpatawee in February 2024, irrigated from the waterfalls*

populations until the civil war ended most of the projects there. That didn't stop the people from farming the land though, and harvesting its bounty.

So as Liberia began to finally embrace its ecosystem credentials, and showcase our unspoiled nature, it made sense that Kpatawee would position itself as the first Agro- and Eco-tourism site.

In 2020, JALK Incorporated, the company that has so successfully established the eco-tourism site at Kpatawee, embarked on the revival of the agricultural fields that proliferated in Kpatawee several decades ago. Although palm oil and sugar cane crops proliferate in the area, the first focus was on replanting the rice fields that had been the first of the agricultural projects in the 1960s. With an eye to the conservation value of the area, they first repaired the irrigation pipes that direct water from the falls to the rice fields. Knowing that rice cultivation can also damage the ozone layer because of the methane emissions from the swamps, they instead use the system of alternate wetting and drying that increases soil organic carbon. Additionally, in 2023, they constructed fish ponds to integrate rice and fish farming, an ecologically sound practice. The produce grown is shared with the surrounding communities and used in the delicious meals



*Kitchen garden at the community school, supported by JALK Inc.*

prepared at the campground. The greenhouses are being repaired for organic vegetable production with minimal disruptions to the surrounding ecosystem.



At Kpatawee, I ate country rice grown in the fields in a dish that was specially made with the purest and tastiest palm oil. I even took home some milk fresh from the cow (awesome!) and enjoyed cocktails mixed with John St. Paul's rum sourced from the sugar cane in the fields.

All this in the most gorgeous and serene setting with that cotton tree and the waterfalls playing their special lullaby. Kpatawee Waterfalls is on Trip Advisor and is growing in renown. Now, Liberia has a place where we show the world that we mean business with our green credentials. We

are performing an outstanding service and with tourist dollars, the recognition and compensation that we deserve, should come.

Come see for yourself.



