

Illegal mining threatens biodiversity in Ghana's forest reserves

Some members of the task force inspecting the destruction caused by galamsey activities. © Mary Ama Kudom-Agyemang

The Atewa Range Forest Reserve is one of the remaining blocks of pristine forests in Ghana. Virtually undisturbed and located in the Eastern region of the country, it was recently besieged by illegal miners locally known as “galamsey” operators. But for the vigilance of staff of the Forestry Commission (FC) in the Eastern region and timely intervention of a combined team of military personnel and Forestry Commission staff, this Globally Significant Biodiversity Area would have become a severely degraded Forest Reserve.

A species-rich reserve

The Atewa Range Forest Reserve is classified as an Upland Evergreen Forest because of its botanical uniqueness in terms of floral richness and diversity. The area has a record of 656 species of plants comprising 323 tree species, 83 shrub species, 155 twining and climber species, 68 herbaceous species, 33 epiphytes and five grass species. The list includes five “Black Star” species, considered as Ghana’s highest conservation priority species of global significance and 33 “Gold

Star” species. The area also boasts 460 butterfly species, 130 bird species, 30 species of large mammals, seven species of small mammals, 16 species of reptiles and three amphibian species. It is believed that further intensive research would probably reveal more fauna and flora species than currently known.

The Reserve was constituted in 1925 under the Native Authority bylaws of Akyem Abuakwa State and



approved on 5 January 1926, under section 40 and 41 of the Native Ordinance. It was gazetted in August 1933 and reconstituted as a Forest Reserve under the Forest Ordinance in October 1935. In 1994, the then Forestry Department designated the Reserve as a Special Biological Protection Area and in 1995 it was classified as a Hill Sanctuary under the Protection Strategy Proposals.

As a result of its rich biological diversity, Atewa Range Forest Reserve was also designated as one of the country's 34 Globally Significant Biodiversity Areas (GSBAs) in 1999, and in 2001 was declared to be among the nation's 36 Important Bird Life Areas (IBLA) under the Important Bird Area Project implemented by the Ghana Wildlife Society.

Battling 'galamsey' operators

According to the District Forestry Officer, Simon Liyab, the "galamsey" operators have invaded the Atewa range and with an excavator destroyed portions of the forest along the Birim River in order to extract the gold deposits there. The river, which takes its source from the range, was also affected. Following an anonymous tip-off in 2011, five individuals were arrested for engaging in illegal mining activities in the Reserve. At the time of the arrest, a substantial portion of the Reserve had apparently already been devastated.

The Eastern Regional Forestry Manager, Attah Owusu, confirmed this. He added that, following the arrest of the illegal operators, the office had again been alerted that an excavator – a vehicle usually hired by "galamsey" operators to dig up an area with rich gold deposits – had entered the Reserve around the Kobreso village, a community on the fringes of the Reserve in the Asamankese District. He said that upon this information, a team of military and forestry officials ambushed the perpetrators and impounded the excavator and a pumping machine found by one of the boundary pillars, and handed them over to the police. He explained that the situation was so bad at the time, that National Security personnel came in and set alight an excavator found near the Reserve. Later the owner of the seized excavator sued the Regional Forestry Office at the Koforidua High Court. The case was dismissed by the Court, with there being no case found against the Forestry Office.

Attah Owusu said "galamsey" operators had destroyed about six hectares of the Atewa Range Forest Reserve. He also noted with deep concern that, "illegal mining has of late taken the centre stage in the destruction of our Forests Reserves," and added that "it is the avowed aim of the Forestry Commission to clamp down on the activities of these nation wreckers." After the arrest, Attah Owusu called on citizens of Ghana to

give forestry officials credible information and support to facilitate the arrest of these perpetrators, wherever they are found.

Rapid response to the problem

The Regional Forestry Manager also said forestry officers had been overwhelmed by illegal activities due to factors such as low staff numbers and low morale. To address the issue, new forest guards were recruited to intensify range patrols, boundary clearing and maintenance. A Rapid Response Unit has also been created to set-up monitoring in the Reserves.

The Deputy Eastern Regional Forestry Manager, Bernard Tabil noted that members of the Unit are highly motivated because of the cooperation they are getting from community members, such as those providing information about illegal activities in the Reserve. He attributed this attitude of community members to the realisation of the potential dangers including shortage of raw materials, extinction of non-timber forest products, environmental degradation and water scarcity that they will experience once the forests are gone.

The Eastern Regional Forestry Office has also revitalised the collapsed Community Forest Committees and Community Biodiversity Advisory groups, originally formed when the GSBAs were first established, as part of the activities designed to protect the Reserves. These groups are to collaborate with the Forestry Office in protecting not just the Atewa Range Forest Reserve, but also the 47 other Forest Reserves in the Eastern Region, including the Ajenua Bepo, Alema, Apapamu, Sekyase and Kwei Karu, which have also been assaulted by illegal miners. Official records prepared by the Forestry Office show 40 per cent of the total area of 176, 960 hectares of Forest Reserves has been degraded, not only by illegal mining, but by illegal logging and encroachment by farmers.

A need for wider reform

Forestry officials are convinced that illegal mining usually takes place as a sequel to exploration activities by mining firms that are given licences by the Minerals Commission. Subsequently, "galamsey" operators follow the rock layer right into the Forest Reserves and devastate forest resources.

The Forestry Commission in collaboration with the Ghana Wildlife Society and other collaborators have prepared the Atewa Range Forest Reserve Management Plan, to ensure effective management of the area. However, in view of the aggressiveness of illegal operators, professional foresters are worried that unless measures are hastened to implement the



management plans, the Atewa Range Forest Reserve could lose its rich biological diversity when the invaders strike again.

Forestry experts like Dr Ernest Abeney of the Working Group on Forest Certification Ghana, believe that these illegal operators whether “galamsey” or chainsaw, can strike again. He noted that the GSBAs are currently

the last of the well-stocked forest reserves, but as they coincidentally also possess much of the country’s rich mineral deposits, they are an obvious target for illegal operators, unless these are checked by strict enforcement of laws and regulations governing the forestry sector.

- Mary Ama Kudom-Agyemang, March 2012



Portions of the destruction caused by galamsey operators at Atewa © Mary Ama Kudom-Agyemang

Further information

Growing Forest Partnerships (GFP) is an initiative that helps develop and support networks of people and organisations at local, national and international levels towards an equitable and sustainable management of forestry resources. It brings together actors who may not have worked together before, to ensure that global discussions about forests include the real and current challenges that forest-dependent people and local forest managers are facing and to develop and test new and innovative ways of tackling those challenges.

‘Forest voices’ and the GFP in-country journalist programme

In 2011 GFP established a journalist programme in Ghana, Guatemala, Liberia and Nepal. In each country, a local journalist has been recruited to report on relevant issues in the forest sector, as well as providing updates on the work of GFP. The journalists work in close coordination with the in-country GFP teams, however, they also look beyond GFP to report on some of the other issues that affect forest-dependent people. The articles and features produced by the journalists are a result of interviews with a wide-range of stakeholders, including: local communities, regional and local government authorities, civil society organisations and private sector workers and business owners.

The ‘Forest voices’ series aims, through the work of local journalists, to provide insight into the forestry context in each of these countries and illustrate how locally controlled forestry and partnerships are working in practice on the ground.

For more information on GFP and for more updates on the in-country projects, please visit the GFP website:
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