

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

# Tackling Environmental Challenges in Liberia

*George William Ilebo*



Located on the West African coast, Liberia is a significant reservoir of biodiversity, with its Upper Guinean Forest containing a rich variety of unique plant and animal life.

However, the forest is under continuous threat from recurring floods and harmful human activities such as illegal logging and slash-and-burn agricultural activities which are prevalent in the area. Floods have facilitated the transport of waste into the country's sea, rivers, and lakes, including plastics which are detrimental to life in water.

This fragile situation is worsened by over-fishing which has led to reduced fish stocks in Liberia and other West African countries, thereby threatening food security and the livelihoods of coastal communities and beyond. George William Ilebo, a Commonwealth Alumnus who studied for a Master's Degree in Forestry at Bangor University has led initiatives that are aimed at empowering local communities to support nature conservation activities and improve livelihoods. He has also been instrumental in influencing the Environmental Policy Agenda at national and international level to address these issues and promote biodiversity.



George giving a keynote address at the National Environment and Climate Change Conference held in June 2021 in Liberia.

**George William Ilebo** was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2012 to study for a Master's Degree in Forestry at Bangor University as a distance learner. He is currently working as the Technical Director for Conservation International, an NGO that empowers communities to support nature conservation and promote global biodiversity. He provides the strategic direction, technical oversight, and overall management of conservation programmes in Liberia. George led the establishment of a Blue Oceans Unit for the Conservation International Liberia Country Programme, which has produced a framework for coastal and marine conservation work conducted in the country. Through his research work, George has played a pivotal role in providing evidence-based policy recommendations on environmental conservation for the government of Liberia. This has influenced the expansion of Liberia's Protected Area Network and the establishment of the Liberia Conservation Fund Inc- a trust fund to support sustainable management of protected areas. George supported numerous critical national policy processes such as the Low Carbon Development Strategy, the National Interpretation of the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), REDD+ strategy, and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). He also contributed to building and strengthening the capacity of Liberian government staff to implement the transparency elements of the Paris Climate Agreement, including developing Liberia's Greenhouse Gas Inventory; Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV) system; and REDD+ Safeguards Information System.

## Collaborating with Stakeholders and Partners for Effective Planning and Delivery of Environmental Projects

George is a Commonwealth Alumnus who studied for a Master's degree in Forestry as a distance learner at Bangor University in Wales. While studying, he worked for BBC Media Action in Tanzania and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Uganda, his home country, as the Head of the Environment and Energy Unit.

**'At that time [while with UNHCR], there was a lot of refugee influx from South Sudan and land was allocated by the government to construct refugee camps. So, I conducted environmental screening and rapid environmental impact assessments for selected refugee settlements and developed mechanisms to ensure mitigation measures were put in place on identified sites to minimise environmental impacts.'**

Following his Scholarship, which George identified as having opened up vast new opportunities, he was appointed as Liberia's Technical Director at Conservation International in Liberia, an international NGO that empowers societies to support nature conservation so as to enhance global biodiversity and human well-being.

**'If I had not got this Scholarship then chances are that I wouldn't have got this job, because the requirement was a Master's Degree. International jobs pay better, and then that translates to a better standard of living, not only for me, but also for my dependents and my extended family.'**

Guided by its Landscape Approach Framework<sup>1</sup>, Conservation International designs and implements nature conservation projects in partnership with local and international conservation organisations that are based in Liberia. As part of this work, George works very closely with key stakeholders including local communities, civil societies, local universities, and the government. These stakeholders participate in delivering co-created nature conservation projects and activities.

**'Most of our projects are co-created and co-designed with our partners and all the stakeholders concerned.'**

George spoke proudly of the value of applying the skills gained from the Scholarship in one of his key tasks, which is bringing all relevant stakeholders and partners on board to collectively plan and deliver nature conservation activities.

He works collaboratively with implementing partners to form governance structures, organise communities into groups and to develop action plans in line with the Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) of Conservation International.

**'The different partners bring to the table different capacities. Also, working collaboratively with partners has helped us [Conservation International] to overcome some of the challenges, particularly in cases where we have different funding streams. According to the stakeholder approach that I learnt during my Master's studies, to achieve a critical mass we need to collaborate, and build a consensus in the design and implementation of biodiversity initiatives. This has been key in my current work.'**

George has been instrumental in leading on the design and implementation of a range of projects and programmes, particularly in North-West Liberia landscape, a biodiversity hotspot- rich in irreplaceable ecosystems and a priority landscape for his organisation. He has been actively involved in projects aimed at tackling deforestation emanating from palm oil and cocoa production in this landscape and improving the sustainability of mangrove forests along the coast of Liberia.

**'I ensure that environmental and social safeguards are developed and implemented for all projects. This includes gender mainstreaming, stakeholder engagement, accountability, risk mitigation and management, and process frameworks for restriction of access to natural resources. The implementation of these environmental and social safeguards has led to successful implementation of projects. There has been over 80% success rate in the achievement of project objectives on improving sustainable management of natural resources and improved household food and income security.'**

## The Blue Oceans Programme: Conservation and Restoration of Marine and Coastal Ecosystem Services in Liberia

Marine pollution, over-fishing and deforestation are some of the key issues contributing to climate change and the degradation of biodiversity in Liberia. Meanwhile, more than half of the Liberian population lives along the country's 565 km coastline, and their survival and well-being are dependent on the mangroves and ocean. In addition, the situation is compounded by barriers including inadequate legislation and gaps in national policy, limited institutional capacity and coordination in government ministries, limited awareness and knowledge among decision makers and resource users, and insufficient public and private financing.

Therefore, rapid and effective interventions are required to mitigate the impacts of climate change and to ensure conservation and restoration of marine and coastal ecosystem services, as well as to alleviate poverty.

1. Landscape Approach Framework ensures that land use systems are holistically managed and the needs of the relevant stakeholders are considered while simultaneously addressing multiple objectives, identifying synergies, and minimising trade-offs.



To address these issues, George spearheaded the establishment of Conservation International Liberia's Blue Oceans Programme (BOP) with the aim to conserve and restore marine and coastal ecosystem services to alleviate poverty, protect biodiversity, and mitigate and adapt to climate change.

**'I led the brainstorming sessions for designing and establishing a Blue Oceans Programme at Conservation International Liberia.'**

The Blue Oceans Programme was developed following the Blue Oceans Conference held in Liberia in 2019. The programme advocates for new and innovative policies to be put in place in Liberia to protect coastal and marine resources, and in other African countries to improve the health of oceans and ecosystems and enhance their capacity to sustain life. Therefore, the BOP has four focal areas which include marine pollution, blue economy, sustainable fisheries, and climate change.

In partnership with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Conservation International Liberia is implementing a USD 6 million project focused on reducing marine pollution and promoting sustainable management of Liberia's coastal and marine ecosystems through: (a) education, creating awareness and training of stakeholders to enhance local participation in ocean governance; (b) establishing legal and regulatory frameworks for sustainable management of coastal and marine ecosystems; (c) establishing and strengthening inter-agency coordination and collaboration; (d) establishing sustainable financing mechanisms including development

of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to drive socio-economic growth and conservation of coastal and marine ecosystems; and (e) development of knowledge management systems.

**'I have applied communication and research skills [sharpened during the Scholarship] in writing successful project proposals to donors, and in engaging project partners and facilitating multi-stakeholder processes and events.'**

As part of this work, George has led outreach programmes to promote education and awareness targeted at reducing plastic pollution and beach clean-up activities in Monrovia.

**'I led a team to conduct beach clean-ups in Monrovia which has led to improved awareness on the dangers of plastic pollution. This has led to increased rates of reuse and recycling of problematic single use plastics and relatively cleaner beaches. As a result, all the owners of the beaches in Monrovia have containers for collection of plastics.'**

George has also been part of a research team tasked to collect and analyse scientific data on plastic pollution in the ocean and along the coastline. In addition, consultations and surveys were conducted to identify the most common forms of plastic waste found in the marine environment to inform strategies on prevention and mitigation of pollution.

The findings informed Liberian policy makers, and other stakeholders and partners, of the intent to promote collaborative work towards identifying alternatives and promoting practices for reuse and recycling of plastic waste.



Plastic pollution in mangroves of Liberia.



According to George, these results were also instrumental to Liberia signing the historic resolution to combat plastic pollution during the United Nations Environment Assembly held in March 2022 in Nairobi, Kenya.

Alongside activities focused on tackling marine pollution, George and colleagues are currently working on improving enabling conditions for the establishment and sustainable management of Coastal and Marine Protected Areas and tackling illegal and unreported fishing along the Liberian coast.

## Tackling Deforestation Emanating from Palm Oil and Cocoa Production in Liberia

While the production of cocoa and palm oil in Liberia contributes to improved livelihoods, it is also a significant driver of deforestation as its production involves forest clearing, leading to loss of habitats for globally important biodiversity. Additionally, it causes pollution from runoff of fertilizers and pesticides, particularly in the North-West Liberia Landscape where its production is continually increasing to meet market demands. There have also been ongoing conflicts over land rights and resources, pitching communities against palm oil companies in Western Liberia.

Conservation International is one of the key stakeholders of the Good Growth Partnership. Launched in 2017 by the United Nations Development Programme, this partnership convenes a wide range of stakeholders, including the International Finance Corporation, UN Environment and World Wildlife Fund. The Partnership oversees initiatives targeted at reducing deforestation and enabling sustainable development in three global commodity supply chains: soy, beef, and palm oil.

In line with these aims, the Partnership promotes sustainable production practices to ensure long-term social, economic, and ecological benefits to the people of Liberia. It also supports the government of Liberia through the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry Development Authority and the Environmental Protection Agency, to engage local communities in decision-making and in resolving land-use conflicts through Conservation Agreements. These are deals signed by community leaders and the representatives from the Forest Development Authority, Conservation International, civil society, and trading companies to protect community forests and surrounding forest areas. The Conservation Agreements seek to protect forests by providing sustainable and improved livelihood options for communities, in return for conservation actions and strengthened capacity for local communities on sustainable forest management and governance.

As the Technical Director, George provides technical oversight, scientific leadership, quality control and assurance. He also supports stakeholder engagement, coordinates with project partners, and liaises with Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies.

**'I have applied negotiating skills [honed during the scholarship] to build and manage relationships with stakeholders and partners at various levels, and to resolve conflicts at work.'**

To that end, George establishes and manages partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisations, civil society, research, academic and financial institutions to leverage resources and traction for biodiversity conservation in Liberia.

In addition, George has played a pivotal role in implementing projects targeted at improving the sustainability of Mangrove Forests and Coastal Mangrove Areas in Liberia to protect the forests while at the same time improving livelihoods. In collaboration with partners such as the Environmental Protection Agency in Liberia, George supervised and supported the Project Managers to ensure timely and effective implementation of project activities, reporting, and monitoring and evaluation.

**'I applied the knowledge that I gained from my MSc Forestry studies, especially on social issues in forest management, research methods, and agroforestry systems and practices.'**

This has led to effective participatory land-use planning and the establishment of community mangrove management plans in coastal areas of Liberia. It has also provided evidence on the value and the benefits that the mangroves bring to economies and livelihoods through establishment of a mangrove ecosystem account that is incorporated into the National Development Plan.



Deforestation in Nimba landscape in Liberia.

Land use plans were developed for **10** project communities that include Bleewein, Sarwein, Bomboja, Bendu, Falie, Mandoe, Ben's Town, Snafu Dock, Nyangba and Edina. Using survey123 for ArcGIS, a mangrove monitoring plan was developed and a total of **88** Frontline Conservationists have been trained in forest monitoring using this software. **Eighty (80)** community meetings and **9** workshops were conducted to create awareness, plan, and deliver projects on conservation of mangroves. A total of **514** government officials have been trained to increase awareness and support for new coastal protected areas within government agencies and ministries. In addition, **4,058** community members (**997** women and **3,061** men), **101** county and community leaders (**37** women and **64** men), **4** Civil Society Organisation representatives (**1** woman and **3** men), and **10** Non-Governmental Organisation representatives (**3** women and **7** men) were trained on awareness of threats and benefits of mangroves amongst people in local communities (Conservation International Report, 2020)

In line with this work, George leads the development of monitoring and evaluation systems for all the projects implemented by Conservation International, an area in which he frequently draws from the expertise gained through his Scholarship to effectively deliver.

'I learnt [while on Scholarship] that one needs to evaluate the contribution and impact of initiatives on the beneficiaries, especially the local communities.'

## Getting Communities On-Board: Transforming Hunters into Conservationists

Getting communities on-board and winning their support and participation in planning and implementing climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies is one of the key aspects of George's work in Liberia. Over the years, he has successfully sensitised communities on the impact of their activities on the environment, built key relationships and gained community trust. His approach involves encouraging behaviour change while also discussing achievable and sustainable alternatives.

'We need to understand why and how they [the community] are doing certain things, some of which negatively affect the environment. There's a lot of local knowledge, indigenous knowledge that they have, and just adding the science to it becomes very useful.'

George has worked with local leaders and cultural institutions to champion community activities that influence behaviour change and promote environmental conservation.

'We work with former hunters, who have been turned into conservationists, because we have a community-based approach to natural resources management. We empower and educate them on nature conservation, and now they volunteer to collect data for us. This has helped reduce the instances of poaching and bush meat hunting in these areas. Of course, for bush meat we have worked with communities to provide alternative sources of protein. We had goat-keeping, piggy projects, and vegetable production.'

George has also been actively involved in supporting sustainable agricultural activities in the rural communities of Liberia, particularly in 14 communities surrounding the East Nimba Nature Reserve (ENNR) in Nimba County.

'I led a team that organised local communities to form agricultural cooperatives focused on responsible agricultural production. This enabled the communities to reduce dependence on middlemen and they bargain for a premium price for their produce and this increased their income by 30%. They [the farming communities] used to supply one locality, now they are supplying almost the entire county'

In addition, Conservation International has offered financial support in the form of loans and savings associations that primarily target women in rural communities in Liberia. A total of 327 people (120 men and 207 women) have received financial support to start small businesses. This has enabled them to generate income to support their daily needs, educate their children, build houses and receive medical care, which has improved their overall livelihoods.

## Fundraising for Nature Conservation Projects

Acquiring funds from donor organisations is one of the key elements that determines the successful implementation of Conservation International's projects in Liberia. Apart from leading the development of the conservation strategy for the country programme, the country model and evaluation system, George has also contributed to improving the financial resourcing of nature conservation activities in Liberia.

'I have been instrumental in raising funds through proposal development to support the work of Conservation International in supporting the Government of Liberia and local communities to manage natural resources for the benefit of the planet and people. For instance, I successfully secured USD 10.32 million from Global Environment Facility (GEF) and USD 6 million from SIDA.'



George added that since he joined the organisation, his fundraising efforts have contributed to tripling the budget for nature conservation projects conducted by Conservation International in Liberia.

**'When I joined Conservation International-Liberia, it had funding for about USD 3 million. For the time I've been here, I've done a lot of fundraising, both through public and private donors. And our budget has tripled. The writing and research skills enhanced while on Scholarship award helped me to conduct research (context analysis) and develop robust logical frameworks.'**

Nonetheless, ensuring continuity and sustainability of donor-funded nature conservation activities beyond the end of project funding is one of the biggest challenges facing Conservation International. In search of sources of funding for ecosystem services, Conservation International launched a Conservation Fund [revolving funds] in 2018 which is supported by the Global Conservation Fund. Change in management, especially in government institutions where new directors sometimes have different priorities, is yet another challenge faced by Conservation International which has slowed down progress in collaborative nature conservation projects.

## Influencing Local and International Nature Conservation Policies

George's work with Conservation International has not only been targeted at supporting nature conservation activities at grassroot levels, but it has also been crucial in influencing environmental policy decisions at national and international level.

**'I have also been able to influence the environmental policy agenda at national and the international level based on the work I do with Conservation International on climate change and biodiversity conservation. I receive a lot of requests for technical support from the government, for example, to review the Liberia programme document for the Green Climate Fund.'**

George provides technical advice on scientific research projects [on nature conservation] conducted by Conservation International, and findings from these projects are shared with local government to support evidence-based policy decisions related to the environment.

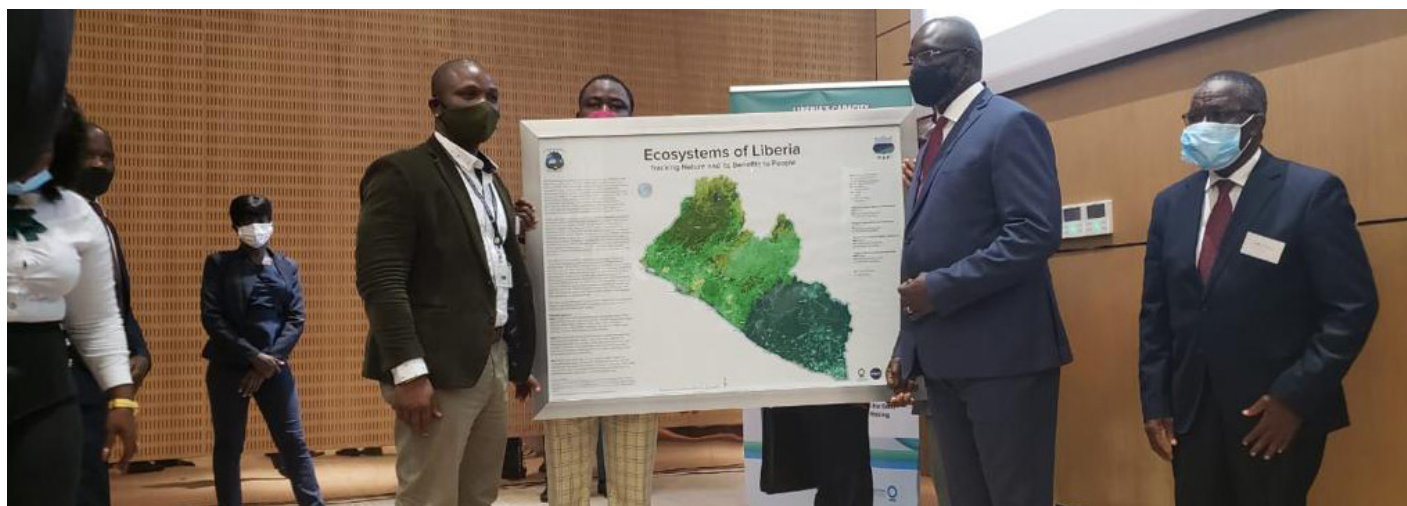
**'I have supported critical national policy processes such as Liberia's Low Carbon Development Strategy, the National Interpretation of the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil, REDD+ strategy, and revising Liberia's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). In addition, I have contributed greatly to the strengthening of Liberia's national capacity to implement the transparency elements of the Paris Climate Agreement including developing Liberia's Greenhouse Gas Inventory; Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV) system, and REDD+ Safeguards Information System.'**

In line with this, a joint initiative between Conservation International, NASA and the Government of Liberia has led to the development of Liberia's land cover and ecosystem extent map. This innovative and crucial tool in land-use planning maps ecosystems in Liberia and informs national planning related to nature conservation, biodiversity management and human well-being.

Conservation International in collaboration with the Government of Liberia held a National Climate Change and Environment Conference in June 2021 where the Ecosystem Extent Map and MRV system were officially launched by the President of Liberia.

At this conference, the Commonwealth Alumnus, gave a keynote speech on behalf of his organisation-Conservation International.

George has been instrumental in supporting the Liberia government when it comes to reporting on progress made on the environmental agenda to other multilateral environmental agreements including the CBD, UNCCD, UNFCCC, Abidjan Convention, Ramsar Convention and CITES.



President of Liberia (second from the right) launching the ecosystem extent map.

'Whenever they [the government] have international presentations, I provide input as well as fine-tune some of their speeches and help prepare some of the presentations. Internationally, as an institution we support organisations by giving them policy briefs for policy statements to make during the Conference of Parties<sup>2</sup>.'

Moreover, the rights-based approach used by Conservation International, where environmental and social safeguards are developed and implemented for all projects, has been adopted by the Liberian government.

'It is now a government policy that all projects have environmental and social aspects considered in their work. That involves the general mainstreaming of environmental and social impact assessments and having the rights of indigenous people taken care of. We also provided feedback [to the government] on the Land Rights Act, and that helped to change the ownership of some of the areas to the communities. This has given communities power over their land, which they didn't have before.'

Despite the country having a coastline of 656 km, it does not have a designated marine protected area, yet if sustainably used and managed it can improve the livelihoods of many Liberians. George is currently working on providing more compelling evidence to inform and empower the government of Liberia to declare some nature conservation areas as marine protected areas.

## Empowering the Youth with Research Skills and Career Guidance

In addition to his formal employment with Conservation International, George has taken up teaching and mentoring graduates in his community with a focus on research skills.

'In my spare time I do teach on research methods. With two other colleagues, we established an Impact Evaluation Consultancy Firm called Devres Consultants Ltd. So, we work with young graduates to pass on some of the research skills [developed during the Scholarship] that we need them to have.'

He intends to take up part-time lecturing at a local university soon. In addition, George is a motivational speaker and has participated in public speaking events organised for young community members.

'I have a passion for motivating young people, and using my life as an example, I share my experiences with them including the mistakes I have made, and my successes through my challenging work. I am looking into doing more work in this area [of public speaking].'

To further enhance his knowledge and skills and to continue contributing to environmental conservation and biodiversity management in Liberia and beyond, George is currently studying (part-time) for a PhD in Project Planning and Management. His study focuses on investigating the factors that have contributed to the failures of conservation projects in Uganda and Liberia to achieve environmental, social, and economic outcomes.

Looking ahead, George also hopes to take up more developmental-oriented tasks, focusing on impact evaluations for environment management initiatives to inform policy and decision making.

### More about George's work

<https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/4836>

<https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2021/economics-of-nature-mapping-liberia-s-ecosystems-to-understand-their-value>

<https://www.epa.gov/lr/sites/default/files/Report%20South%20South%20Exchange%20Visit%20Uganda.pdf>

<https://www.lr.undp.org/content/liberia/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/agreement-signed-with-concession-communities-in-cape-mount-to-pr.html>

<https://www.greencommodities.org/content/gcp/en/home/media-centre/conservation-agreements-signed-with-concession-communities-in-li.html#:~:text=With%20this%20goal%20in%20mind.Forests%20and%20surrounding%20forest%20areas.>

[https://www.daikin.com/-/media/Project/Daikin\\_daikin\\_com/csr/forests/project/pdf/14\\_report\\_liberia\\_e\\_201802-pdf.pdf?rev=-1&hash=58DAEB2B85C25B23E16C592AF58F6AD2](https://www.daikin.com/-/media/Project/Daikin_daikin_com/csr/forests/project/pdf/14_report_liberia_e_201802-pdf.pdf?rev=-1&hash=58DAEB2B85C25B23E16C592AF58F6AD2)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328368512\\_Rapid\\_woodfuel\\_assessment\\_2017\\_baseline\\_for\\_the\\_Bidibidi\\_settlement\\_Uganda](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328368512_Rapid_woodfuel_assessment_2017_baseline_for_the_Bidibidi_settlement_Uganda)

2. A decision-making body responsible for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change.

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