

# Learning to Survive

Helen Fallon writes about her first-hand experience of a community in Sierra Leone who are gradually becoming aware of the urgent need to protect their threatened environment.

Each morning I wake at five to the sound of lorries trundling along the nearby road. All day they go back and forth between Freetown and Lakka village; arriving empty, leaving piled high with sand from a beach that was once a major beauty spot.

The men and boys from Lakka spend their days digging up the beach and loading the lorries. The sand is needed to feed the post-war construction boom in Freetown. They are building a new American Embassy. The office of the Vice-President and the law courts – both damaged during the 1991-2001 civil war – are being rebuilt.

“Sand mining is the only way to make some money, now that the tourists no longer come,” Assan, a local man, tells me as we watch people digging into an ever expanding crater on the beach. Before the war, Assan worked at the French-owned St Michael’s Hotel, a little further down the beach. The French were gone before the rebels – the name given to the anti-government force that wrecked havoc on an already fragile economy – arrived at Lakka.

Now the badly damaged hotel is a rehabilitation centre, run by Italian priests, for former child soldiers, children who were forced into their ‘army’ by the rebels when they attacked a village.

“Maybe now that the war is over the tourists will come back. People from Freetown still come at the weekend,” Assan says hopefully.

## A THREATENED COMMUNITY

I’m not that optimistic. It’s May and the rains have started. Now it rains most nights, great thumping blows on the zinc roof of my house at the nearby Environmental Foundation for Africa (EFA). Soon it will rain throughout the day. Then the beach will be deserted, except for local children and the sand miners.

I’m here for one month to establish a library for EFA. This Sierra Leonean non-governmental organisation addresses environmental awareness, education and



**"Thousands of people in refugee camps cut down trees to fuel their three-stone cooking fires..."**  
(Photos: H Fallon)



**Erosion, due to sand mining, may destroy this beautiful beach a few miles from Freetown, Sierra Leone.**

training and the rehabilitation of lands destroyed by mining, deforestation and other activities. I ask Momoh Turay, one of the EFA administrators, about the sand mining.

This practice, he explains, is causing massive environmental damage to the coastline. The miners are digging deep into the seabed, altering the normal flow of waves and currents. The sea is, therefore, moving further inland. If the sand mining continues it will not only be the tourist potential that is destroyed. There is a very real threat to Lakka village.

Momoh, also, explains how, during the ten-year civil war, thousands of people in refugee and displaced persons camps cut down trees to fuel their three-stone cooking fires. In the process they destroyed large tracts of forest. EFA have planted over one million trees to help counteract the effects of that deforestation.

“We’re giving training on the use of eco-stoves in the refugee camps,” Momoh explains. “These can be made cheaply from locally produced materials and they use much less fuel than the traditional three-stone fire.”

“A number of the camps are now settlements and communities have grown up. We have to look at the impact of a new community – perhaps ten or twenty thousand people or more – will have on villages and towns near the camps. We have to think of both the social and the environmental consequences.”

#### A PROGRAMME, A LIBRARY, A FUTURE

Without education and information the much needed initiatives of EFA will have little impact. Momoh and his colleagues are designing and providing environmental awareness programmes throughout the country and in neighbouring Liberia. They are targeting teachers,

leaders in communities and various governmental and non-governmental organisations.

And to achieve what they intend, EFA itself needs high quality information. “We have the practice. Now we need the theory,” Momoh explains.

Apart from a shop specialising in religious tracts and an eclectic collection of second-hand books available from street stalls, there are no bookshops in Freetown. A grant of €10,000 from the Irish Combined Services Third World Fund was used towards the purchase of a laptop, books and maps. The laptop was purchased in the United States by the director of EFA, the books and maps I purchased in Dublin and London.

The books address topics such as the conservation of forest and woodland, alternative sources of energy, managing humanitarian assistance in wartime, land rehabilitation and the environmental and social impact of diamond mining and other extractive industries. Also addressed are organisation management, community education and the detail of writing project proposals.

When asked what he hopes the library will achieve, Momoh replies, “I would love to see books and articles that give causes, effects and possible solutions to environmental degradation. I want books that will educate ourselves and our people about the importance of conservation and biodiversity. I would like information which will foster alternative employment. When people are poor it is hard to think about preserving one’s environment for the future.” ■

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