
Forest Scenes

Farasuto Forest in The Gambia: a relict forest patch in West Africa



After six months of the dry season the forest canopy struggles to keep the sun from the lower levels of vegetation and from the ground but greenery persists, unlike on the surrounding bush.

Early writers describing what is now The Gambia, on the northern edge of West Africa's forest belt, tell of trekking eastwards to the interior beneath continuous woodland or forest cover. The experience is very different now for tourists who flock to the country for an inexpensive package holiday in the sun. Those who do venture away from the coastal resorts and beaches will now see scattered, isolated giant trees which attained their size, shape and grandeur while growing among others now long-gone. These relicts are hints of the forest once there, much of which was lost only decades ago.

A common tourist excursion from the coast is to Abuko, a relict gallery-forest or Guinea-Congo forest; now isolated among townships it is one of the most visited forests in West Africa. Abuko, like all the country's five known relict Guinea-Congo forest patches which total around 104ha (Tucker, 2009), suffers the ongoing stress of rainfall decline from around 1,300cm/y six decades ago to around 800cm/y recently (*ibid.*). Tree removal is prevented at Abuko by its 3m high fence but other forest patches have no such security from felling, stock grazing or fire.

Farasuto is also isolated Guinea-Congo forest and a former ritual site undiscovered by 'science' until this century. The guides of Kuloro and Tunjina realised that what they had on their doorstep would be significant to their business and began taking visiting bird-watchers there to see rare forest bird species.

The villages of Kuloro and Tunjina own the forest to which I was taken by one of the guides in January 2009 and I was captivated by it. Despite its small size it was evident that Farasuto needed protection and I developed the idea of a Management Plan to establish its rightful place in The Gambia's forest ecosystem. A Management Plan would be a requirement

as the bidding document for any grant application and conservation work. With my experience writing plans for UK sites I decided I should prepare one for Farasuto.



In the depths of a bustling township a cobbler works beneath a tree showing signs of its forest origin.

Farasuto forest (FF), a mere 2.8ha in area and 300m long, is the second smallest of the five known remaining Guinea-Congo patches (Tucker, 2009), all five within 25km of the coast. FF sits on the edge of and marginally above the mangrove zone on the south bank of the River Gambia some 20km from the Atlantic coast where the river is tidal and the water table is related to it. Ironically it is after the May to October rains and during the dry season that the water table evidently rises. This is presumed to be the result of seepage from slightly higher ground to the south and away from the river (Tucker, unpublished).

There are 19 forest-adapted bird species in The Gambia (Barlow & Wacher, 1997; Tucker, 2009). Abuko, 45ha and sixteen times the area of FF, was shown to have records of 11 of these and Pirang, 49ha and 3km SE of Farasuto, has ten. Though it is equivalent in area to barely four football pitches FF has a total bird list of around 300 including records of eight forest-adapted birds one, the Leaflove, *Pyrrburus scandens*, currently known nowhere else in the country. The list includes for example the imposing African Goshawk, *Accipiter tachiro*, the diminutive Green Crombec, *Sylvietta virens*, and a single record of the rarely-encountered Buff-spotted Flufftail, *Sarothura pulchra*. Subsequent work (Shaw, *in litt.*) has added two forest adapted birds, Buff-spotted Woodpecker, *Campeothera nivosus*, and Spotted Honeyguide, *Indicator maculatus*, to the Farasuto list in 2009 and 2011, bringing its total now to a remarkable ten.

During a one-week follow-up visit to the villages the two Alcalos (head men), together with village committees, agreed the Management Plan approach and the declaration of the site as a Community Nature Reserve. I returned to the UK and successfully applied for a grant to cover the costs of writing the plan. The grant covered real costs in the UK and The Gambia while my brother Peter, for website and plan design, and I gave our time *gratis*. The preparation of the Plan took a year during which contracts were awarded in The Gambia for several of the species lists, some very productive though others were a waste of resources. However The Gambia has very few specialist biologists and I had to use those I could find and keep in contact with. The botany of FF is not fully known but there is a good plant list compiled by a UK volunteer after a January visit. Lists of fauna other than birds are woefully inadequate.

The Plan (Tucker, 2009) was printed in March 2010 and I took copies out to The Gambia for presentation to everyone I thought potentially able to help. We began with the Minister of State for the environment, the Rt. Hon. Jato Sillah on through levels of the administration to the local council, the Alcalos Demboring Touray and Salifu Saidy and the people of Kuloro and Tunjina (population about 2,000). The stock reply was of course 'thank you for the plan but we have no resources to implement it'. The village women were particularly helpful and came forward saying that few in the village would ever see the Plan or be able to read it so offered to create a dance with song containing the key messages. This they did and took it around the villages with the messages that the site was important and there should be no hunting, fires or cutting of trees there. The noisy and exuberant dance did seem to grab people's attention.

Farasuto stands in the care of the people of Kuloro and Tunjina. The forest has survived because it was historically used for traditional ceremonies and this may ensure its survival at least in the short to medium term. The forest's close proximity



Close to a main road on the coast a lone survivor of close forest cover, its buttressed trunk not visible here. With bulky Buffalo Weaver nests.

to the river may buffer it from the effects of reduced rainfall. Grazing by stock entering through incomplete fencing is probably the greatest threat to tree regeneration. Some local funding was obtained in 2012 and spent on an as yet incomplete gate-hut still without the planned composting toilets. The Management Plan remains a potential lever in grant aid applications and fencing against stock-grazing should remain the top priority. However the villagers probably do not appreciate this potential and will require experienced help to submit and subsequently manage a bid and project.

Footnote late January 2013. A group of visiting teachers and students from the Eco & Wildlife Studies department of Helicon MBO Geldermalsen in The Netherlands became enthused by Farasuto and have raised 900 Euros donating it towards fencing the forest. The project will be managed by Mamadou W Jallow my primary local contact while working on the Plan and the website will contain updates.

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<http://www.lanius.org.uk> <http://www.farasuto.org>

REFERENCES

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