

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Across West Africa, forest cover has been reduced to less than 30% of its potential extent (Bakarr 2001). The highly fragmented forest patches that remain continue to be degraded or completely lost at an alarming rate. Based on high levels of species endemism, coupled with intense and ongoing threats to their survival, the remaining West African forests have been designated as one of 34 global hotspots of biodiversity (Mittermeier et al. 2004).

Montane habitats are extremely restricted in extent within this region. Long-term geological erosion has turned West Africa into a mostly flat landscape with significant tracts of montane forest limited to the Upper Guinea Highlands. These montane forest areas constitute unique ecosystems with exceptional species richness and high levels of endemism (Bakarr et al. 2001, 2004). Between the Upper Guinea and Cameroon Highlands, only the Atewa Range in Ghana, the Volta Highlands between Ghana and Togo, and the Jos Plateau in Nigeria harbor significant upland forest patches. Among these three, Upland Evergreen Forest is found only in the Atewa Range. The Atewa Range Forest Reserve (hereafter referred to as 'Atewa') is one of only two forest reserves in Ghana where Upland Evergreen Forest occurs (Hall and Swaine 1981, Abu-Juam et al. 2003), the other being the Tano Ofin Forest Reserve, which is already highly degraded.

Ghana has lost roughly 80% of its forest habitat since the 1920s (Cleaver 1992) and Atewa represents one-third of the remaining closed forest in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Mayaux et al. 2004, Chapter 11). Atewa is known to hold numerous endemic and rare species, in part due to the unique floristic composition of its Upland Evergreen forest generated by the misty conditions on top of the plateaus (Swaine and Hall 1977). In addition, several butterfly species are strictly endemic to the Atewa Range (Larsen 2006). Seasonal marshy grasslands, swamps and thickets on the tops of Atewa's plateaus are also thought to be nationally unique (Hall and Swaine 1981).

Atewa has been officially classified in various ways over the past 90 years, with changes due mainly to new programs and designations assigned by the Government of Ghana and not to any changes in Atewa's biodiversity or ecological values. Atewa was declared a national forest reserve in 1925, then was classified as a Special Biological Protection Area in 1994, as a Hill Sanctuary in 1995 and, finally in 1999, as one of Ghana's 30 Globally Significant Biodiversity Areas (GSBAs) (Abu-Juam et al. 2003) based on its high botanical diversity. Designation as a GSBA is equivalent to IUCN's Category IV designation: a protected area designated mainly for conservation through management intervention (IUCN 1994). In 2001, Atewa was listed as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International, one of 36 such areas in Ghana (Ntiemoa-Baidu et al. 2001).

Historically, Atewa has been recognized as a nationally important reserve because the Atewa Range provides the headwaters of three river systems, the Ayensu River, the Densu River and the Birim River. These three rivers are the most important source of domestic and industrial water for local communities as well as for many of Ghana's major population centers, including Accra. Thus, the Atewa forests protect and provide a clean water source for much of Ghana's human population and for key elements of the country's biodiversity.