

TIWAI ISLAND, Sierra Leone: Building Tourism on Traditional Knowledge

Tourism is a potential engine for development. It can help local communities to increase their incomes, even in regions where the economic infrastructure remains underdeveloped. However, it may also disrupt traditional livelihoods. For instance, craft tourism can substitute for other economic activities, leading locals to give up other livelihood activities and income sources. Communities must often confront the question: how is it possible to reconcile tourism expansion with the preservation of local culture?

The Health and Fitness Village project in Southern Sierra Leone illustrates ways to reach a compromise on this question. For more than three decades, the people of the Koya and Barrie Chiefdoms have agreed to preserve Tiwai Island from farming, logging, hunting, and mining. Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary has gained widespread recognition for its contributions to ecological research, training, ecotourism, and participatory conservation. The island in the Moa River has one of the highest densities of primate species left on the planet and was a major haven for research on primate ecology, behaviour and population dynamics between the inception of such activities in 1982 and the outbreak of civil conflict later in the decade.

Starting from scratch

A Management Plan, completed in 1988, was never implemented due to the interruption of all research and conservation programmes. At the end of the civil conflict in 2002, conservation and protection of environmentally sensitive areas was a high priority of local environmental NGOs. The large numbers of refugees encamped near high biodiversity

forest areas threatened wildlife populations as hunting for bush meat intensified. Funded by a US\$300,000 investment made by the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund (CEPF), a partnership between the Environmental Foundation for Africa (EFA), Njala University, and the local communities carried out reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Island's research and ecotourism facilities, formally re-opening the sanctuary in April 2006. The Tiwai initiative has therefore survived as the country's most successful model of community-

led conservation management, offering ecotourism access and creating opportunities for returning benefits to local communities. Along with the university, the Government Forestry Department, and a local NGO, these communities actively participate in a Tiwai Island Administrative Committee (TIAC).

However, the small size and inaccessibility of the central attraction – the Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary – remains the biggest challenge to project sustainability. The island cannot support a high enough tourist traffic to ensure adequate revenues to deter landowners from exploiting the island for farming, hunting, mining and logging.

A need assessment survey of the eight surrounding communities carried out by TIAC identified an urgent need for improvements to local health and educational infrastructure. Giving tourists reasons to stay longer and interact with the economy

of the region was seen as a possible solution that could increase revenues, improve local perception of the benefits of conservation, while satisfying the local needs for education and health.

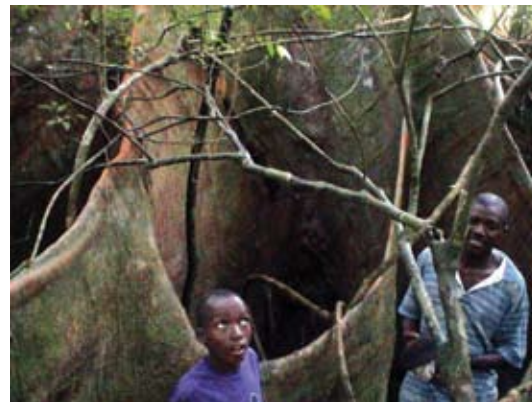


Photo:Tiwai Health & Fitness Villages/Eluemuno Blyden

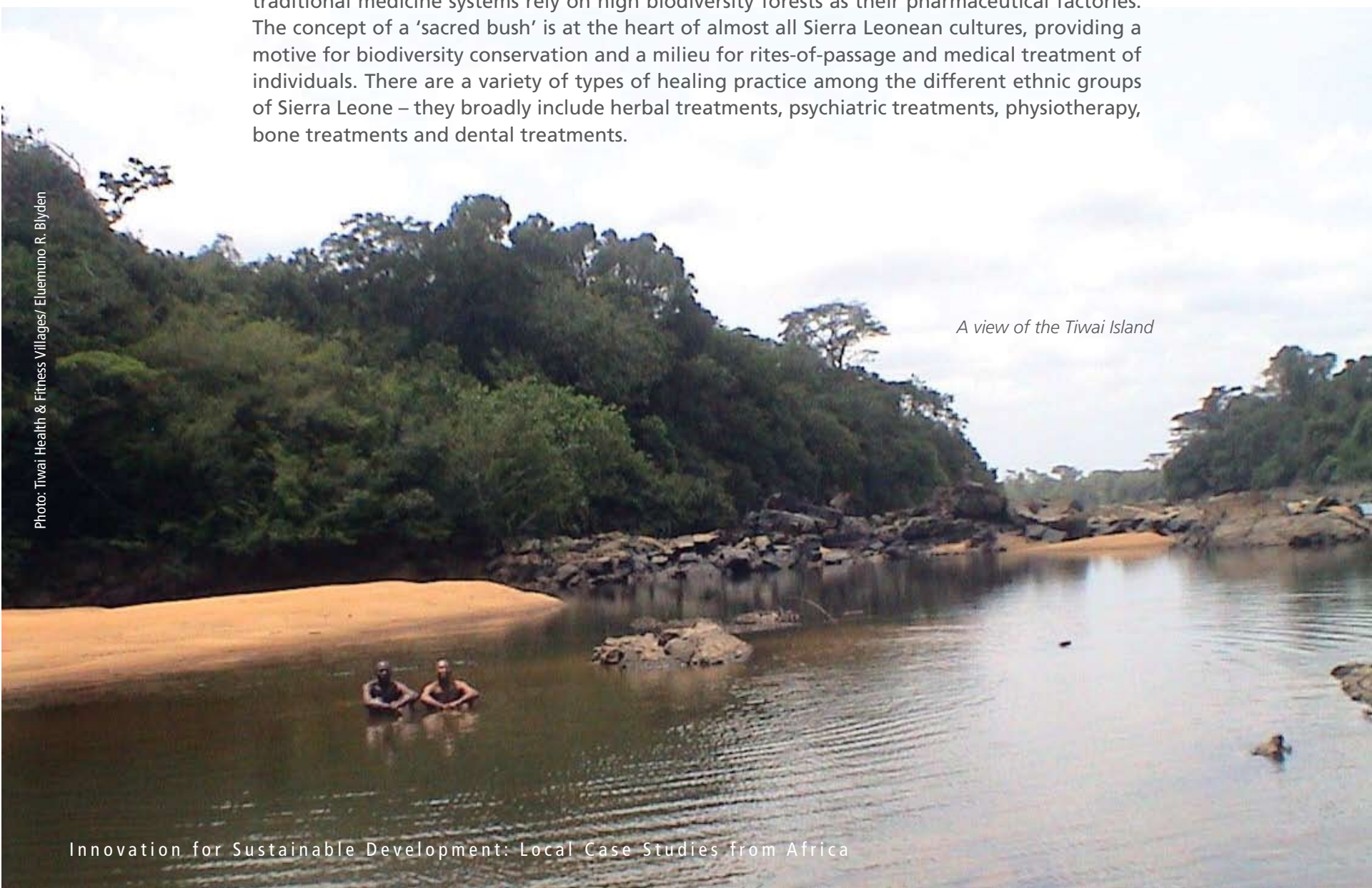


The innovation of this project is to link the growing travel-for-health and travel-for-history trend in international tourism to the sustainable conservation of a high biodiversity region of Sierra Leone. Implementation of the project requires that the community mobilise its skills and creativity, and invest its own resources in the development of an international standard tourism complex.

Leveraging the ‘forest-as-healer’ for green gain

The ‘forest-as-healer’ provides the overarching framework for designing the project. African traditional medicine systems rely on high biodiversity forests as their pharmaceutical factories. The concept of a ‘sacred bush’ is at the heart of almost all Sierra Leonean cultures, providing a motive for biodiversity conservation and a milieu for rites-of-passage and medical treatment of individuals. There are a variety of types of healing practice among the different ethnic groups of Sierra Leone – they broadly include herbal treatments, psychiatric treatments, physiotherapy, bone treatments and dental treatments.

A view of the Tiwai Island



The Health and Fitness Village will provide a centre at which the very best practitioners will be paid to provide (i) services to the community; (ii) services to visiting residents of the health and fitness village; (iii) formal training to medical students and traditional medicine students. The centre will initially offer services based on rigorous qualification by a joint committee consisting of the Sierra Leone Traditional Healers Association and the relevant Paramount Chief, which grants licenses for traditional practitioners under indigenous law and custom. The Centre will build up its services with a medium/long-term goal of offering the full medical and dental services available within Sierra Leone's indigenous healing arts.

A complex of villages including a Village Life Hotel, Integrated Traditional Medicine/Western Medicine Village, an Arts and Crafts Market Village, and horticultural gardens for traditional medicine plants and biofuels production, will be built among the eight communities surrounding the Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary in south eastern Sierra Leone.

The complex will offer tourists unique healing and fitness services based on both Sierra Leonean ethno-medical practices and allopathic medicine. The Village Life Hotel will provide accom-

modation in authentic adobe and thatch houses and guided tours of ancient trails, the Moya River, farming, fishing and local market days. The Villages will incorporate university outreach programs for ecotourism hospitality training; indigenous knowledge research; and biodiversity monitoring. An integrated Traditional Medicine/Allopathic facility will offer cross-training internship opportunities for national and international trainee doctors, nurses and public health workers. It will offer jobs and career opportunities to local youth and, after a setup period, the Village would be run as a private enterprise, owned by all partners.

Primary beneficiaries would be local communities who are currently on the periphery of an over-burdened national allopathic healthcare system. They will benefit from the creation of alternative careers in healthcare and tourism that are less environmentally degrading, and that add value to the skills, knowledge and assets that they already possess. Another beneficiary type will be the traveller-for-health who will gain access to high-quality indigenous healing practices in a naturally beautiful and culturally authentic setting.



Photo: Tiwai Health & Fitness Villages/ Etemuno R. Blyden

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It is envisioned that the project will be transformed into a private venture once it is operating in a sustainable manner. This private entity should be able to undertake similar development projects in Sierra Leone and the region. Investment for such an entity could be raised by an issue of stock following the current laws of the country. A private entity would also provide access to the National Social Security Insurance Scheme (NASSIT) for employed members of the community and their families.



Photo: Tiwai Health & Fitness Villages/ Eluemuno R. Blyden