

Can't see the forest for the farms

Perspectives, practices and power driving landscape change in Pepease, Ghana

A Research Collaboration between the University of Cambridge¹ and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds² (RSPB)

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Research Summary

The RSPB is concerned with declines in the populations of migratory birds that winter in West Africa. They hypothesise that changes to tree cover within the transitional forest zone of Ghana is a contributing factor (Vickery et al 2014, Mallord et al 2016). Tree loss is often explained by simplified narratives of human population growth, intensified farming practices and illegal logging (Fairhead and Leach 1996). There are misconceptions and gaps in the conservationists' understanding of the local systems and the political, economic and cultural factors which influence how people manage trees on their land (Mortimore and Adams 1999).

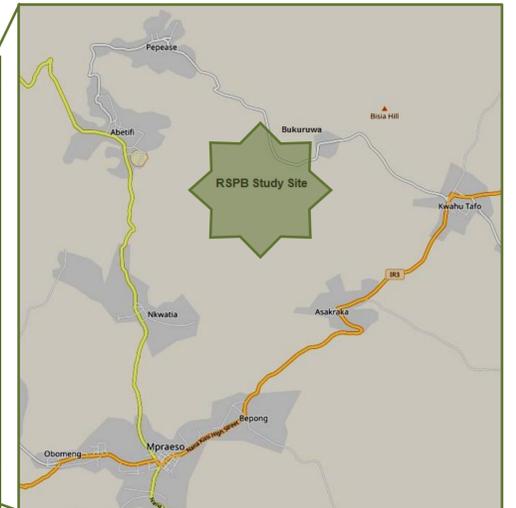
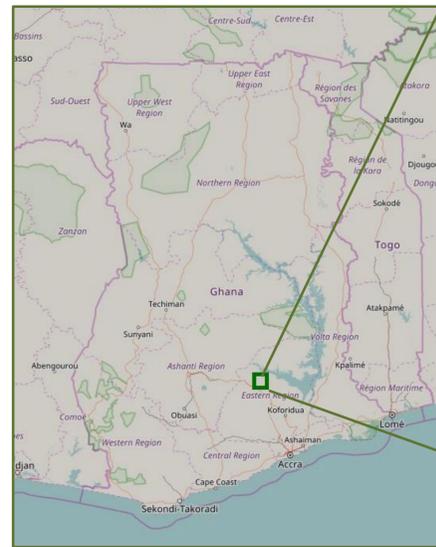
This research will uncover the complex interaction between people, power and perspectives influencing the relationships of a rural community with their forest-farm ecosystem.

The research aims to:

- establish what people do with trees on farmland;
- understand the social, political, economic and cultural factors which influence how people make livelihood decisions;
- explore the perspectives and influence of key agents who make decisions about how trees are managed.



Location



Map showing the RSPB Field site at Pepease, Kwahu East, in relation to Ghana
Credit: OpenStreetMap.org

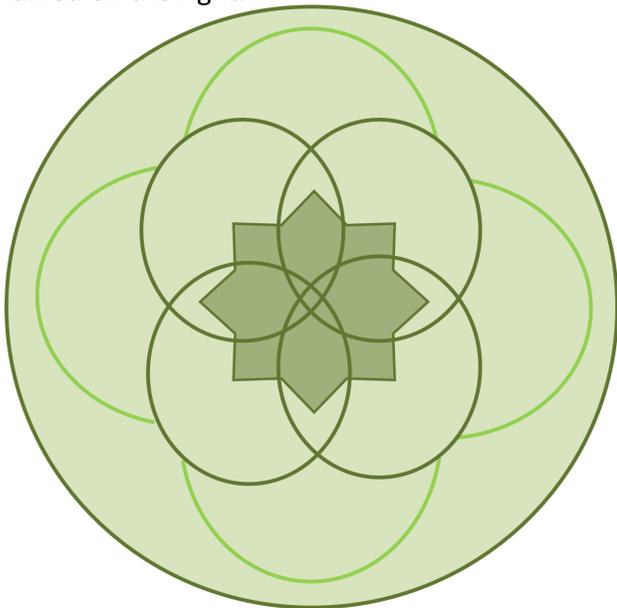
Methodology

The research will use a model of 'rooted networks and relational webs' (Rocheleau 2016). The main method will be participant observation, carrying out a multispecies ethnography of Burukuwa village, the forest-farm ecosystem, and two stakeholder NGOs. Other methods include: interviews, community and resource mapping, documenting practice, oral histories, and CDA/PRA focus groups. The fieldwork will take place between September 2017 and September 2018.

A Model of 'Rooted Networks and Relational Webs'

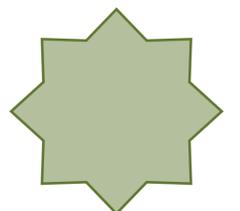
In order to provide an original perspective at the RSPB fieldsite, a model (illustrated below) has been developed based on Rocheleau's (2016) work. Her theory of 'rooted networks and relational webs' views the ecosystem and people within it as entanglements of interdependent relationships, involving complex power, ecological and cultural dynamics.

The centre star represents the assemblage being studied. The three layers of interconnected circles denote the relational webs used for studying the assemblage. The constituent parts of the model are explained on the right.



The Assemblage of Rooted Networks

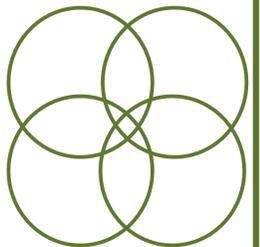
The Pepease assemblage includes the forest-farm ecosystem, local village communities, influencing power structures and organisations, and the physical elements of the surroundings.



Layers of Relational Webs

Practices

The micro-level interactions between people, resources and the wider environment can be understood by studying the 'ecologies of practice' (Nyerges 1997). This "focus[es] on specific activities [and then] traces the causes and effects of these activities onward" (Vayda 1983:266). For example, in Pepease, swidden agriculture is a local practice.



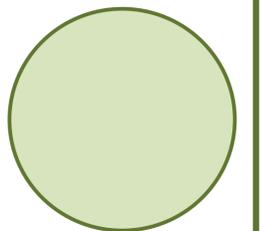
Perspectives

People see landscapes through different lenses based on their worldviews, which are informed by culture, social position and values. This layer investigates how multiple actors perceive practices within the assemblage, and how knowledge is constructed. In this case study, conservationists view the forest differently than farmers do.



Power

This layer investigates the overarching social, economic and political factors that permeate all other aspects of the model. This includes both macro and micro level influences. Examples in Pepease would be local power structures, gender roles, and policy-driven land appropriation.



References

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