

## Field trip to Gambia

*By Daniel Morris, September 2014.*



Dan Morris with a relatively small baobab, in Bijilo forest park, Gambia.

During the second year of my BSc in forestry and woodland conservation at the University of Cumbria, I had the option of going to The Gambia as one of the token end-of-year field trips. The excursion's aim was to experience and learn about eco-tourism and tropical forestry; as these are two fields I am passionate about and would love to develop a career in, I knew this trip was perfect.

During the aeroplane journey I was so excited, imagining all the ecological treats that were in store. Yet, with a total closed-canopy forest land cover of 0.7% and a history of severe deforestation and desertification - much like the rest of Africa – initially, The Gambia didn't seem the kind of place a tree enthusiast would enjoy.

In the taxi to the hotel, I stared out of the window: it was amazing! I noticed the streets were lined with wood workshops, craft markets, firewood stalls and sawmills processing enormous tropical hardwoods. Though there was a distinct lack of woodland in sight, it was clear the important role trees play in The Gambians' lives.

Although many of the trees had been cut down, the magnificent baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) was everywhere. With their gigantic silver trunks up to 10m in diameter and their enormous, gnarly crowns, they were surely a dominating feature in the landscape. Once part of an extensive tropical forest, they now stand alone, surrounded only by scrub, shops and streets. But why were all these trees that were clearly hundreds, if not thousands, of years old kept from the perils of an axe and saw?

The second we arrived at our hotel this question was answered. As we walked through the door we were approached by the bar staff offering us complimentary 'baobab juice'. The milky white drink, which was delicious, is concocted from the baobab tree sap. We were told it is a traditional health tonic and those that drink it were to become as large and strong as the tree itself. So, naturally, I had my fair share.

Throughout the trip, we were constantly reminded of the local folklore and respect given to the baobabs. This is why roads, shops and indeed entire villages make way for these outstanding trees.

Though, however beautifully colossal the baobabs are, they are a stark reminder of the huge tropical forests that once surrounded them. The unprecedented rate of deforestation and biodiversity loss in The Gambia over the previous century has been fuelled by its economic growth, as in most developing nations around the world.

Travelling through The Gambia, I found this distinct lack of woodland extremely disheartening. It is very easy to become cynical and judgmental of their unsustainable forestry practices, as we look down on them from our 'civilised' and 'developed' high-horse. Yet, they are doing exactly what we were up until the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, exploiting the ecological assets in order to gain economic wealth and a better standard of living. It is debatable whether we are still in that developmental stage or not, though that argument can be for another day.

However depressing the current situation in The Gambia is, there were many points during the trip that revived my faith in the recovery of the tropical forests and its wildlife. From visiting many of the country's nature reserves, we met first-hand the extremely passionate and dedicated naturalists who are gradually turning the tide of environmental exploitation. These guides and rangers are actively conserving some of West Africa's rarest wildlife and habitats, as well as transforming the way local Gambians respect them through education and participation. Although there are currently only seven recognised nature reserves managed by The

Department for Parks and Wildlife, there are many examples of grass-roots conservation work. The Bolong Fenyo Community Nature Reserve, for example, with its community tree planting programmes and local firewood schemes, provided a truly inspiring and educational visit.

It is initiatives like this that are creating a more sustainable future for Africa's biodiversity and that prove there is a growing consciousness that conservation and ecological sustainability is vital. Although the road is long and there are many large barriers to overcome, I truly believe that the tropics will once again flourish and man and nature will live in harmony.

My trip to The Gambia was truly awe-inspiring and I feel extremely humbled to have been able to experience a country as lovely and to have met so many kind people; I would like to thank the fund for enabling me to have this amazing opportunity.