

## The monkeys of Tiwai Island in Sierra Leone

Before the war, beautiful Tiwai Island was rich in forest. The rare Diana monkeys played in the trees, the birds sang their songs and the people lived in harmony with nature.

Then the war came. In the nineteen nineties Tiwai Island in Sierra Leone did not escape the bloody civil war that cost so many lives. Even the famous Diana monkeys in the beautiful island forest reserve were quickly decimated by the warring parties. The monkeys ended up on markets in neighbouring Liberia. In Tiwai Island no one ever ate monkeys, but in Liberia it is a delicacy: much money to be made.

After the war clearing of the forest started. Selling out threatened all natural resources (to become the scenario for the future) as some people in the communities proposed to start large scale modern agriculture: *“Why bother about nature? Our idyllic self sufficient island is anyway damaged, let’s change the whole economy once and for all.”*

This was the situation when Tommy arrived. *“The environment is us and our surroundings”,* he told the communities. *“In nature we all need one another. When we stop logging and start beautifying our surroundings, our lives will be much better than when we become dependent on selling the products of our environment to far away markets. When we protect the forest and our traditional lifestyle, future generations can live as happily as our parents and grandparents used to do before the war. If we harm our environment, we will actually harm ourselves.”*

Tommy was at that time working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Liberia. His job was to minimize the environmental damage of the large refugee camps. Seeing what was happening on Tiwai Island, he asked permission from his bosses to use the UNCHR tools and equipment to also counter the environmental degradation there. Slowly people started to appreciate the message of his awareness campaigns aimed at community leaders, women groups, and schoolchildren. Local artists illustrated and spread his message. Communities became willing to give it a try. And when the material help from UNHCR and other international organizations arrived, things really changed and with joint effort the communities were rebuilt in a sustainable way.

Now the nature reserve is managed by the communities. The clearing of the forest has stopped. Wildlife blooms again. The sea, the forests, the streams, and the fields of each family provide everything the people need: fish, timber and firewood, clean water and rice. Latrines, smart cooking stoves and composting are introduced. Villages are beautified with gardens and fruit trees. New business opportunities emerge as the Diana monkeys and the diversity of nature on the island attract scientists and tourists from all over the country and even from abroad. The Diana monkeys play in the forests again.