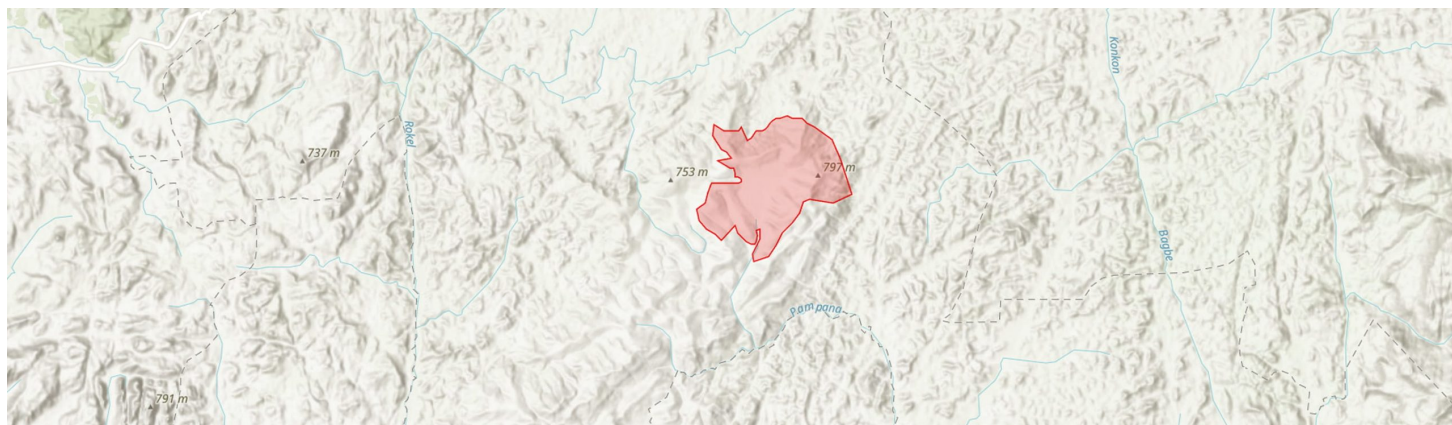


Lake Sonfon and Hills

SIETIPA22



Country: **Sierra Leone**

Administrative region: **Northern (Province)**

Central co-ordinates: **9.25000 N, -11.52000 E**

Area: **45.8km²**

Qualifying IPA criteria

A(i), C(iii)

IPA assessment rationale

The Lake Sonfon IPA meets criterion A(i) by hosting three globally threatened taxa: the endangered *Eremospatha dransfieldii* and *Pterocarpus erinaceus*, and the vulnerable *Pseudovigna sulanensis*. Additionally, it triggers criterion C(iii) as it is nationally recognized as the best inland freshwater lake site in Sierra Leone, representing the most significant and the most threatened inland habitat in the country.

Lake Sonfon Sanctuary and surrounding areas. The lake is located in the northern region of Sierra Leone, with the nearest large town, Kabala, roughly 60 km to the north (Sesay et al., 2017). It lies within the Diang Chiefdom, Koinadugu District, Northern Province, about 350 km northeast of Freetown (KBA, 2021).

Surrounded by hills, the lake features a landscape of open grassland and wooded savanna, mixed with fringing forest and, in some areas, agricultural farm bush. It is designated as an Important Bird Area in Sierra Leone. The lake has a maximum depth of 8 m and covers an area of about 5 km², collecting water from seven small streams that drain into the lake, serving as the main water source for nearby local communities (KBA, 2021). Lake Sonfon discharges from its southern end, which forms the start of the Pampuna River, while being replenished by the small streams. The water level of Lake Sonfon fluctuates considerably during the year, inundating a larger area in the rainy season (CSSL, 2021; Warnsloh, 2011). Lake Sonfon represents a symbol of traditional belief and a site for cultural ceremonies of the local people in this region (TSL, 2021).

Site description

Lake Sonfon IPA is one of the largest and most significant inland lakes in Sierra Leone. It consists of fresh water and is situated at an elevation of about 550 m above sea level (TSL). The IPA comprises

Botanical significance

The several diverse mosaic habitats within this IPA make the range of this inland lake of considerable botanical significance. The IPA is one of the best sites for vulnerable *Pseudovigna sulanensis*, known only from the Sula Mountains and the Mts Béro in Guinea, and

contains populations of endangered *Eremospatha dransfieldii* and *Pterocarpus erinaceus*. The two former species are found in the gallery forest, while the latter thrives in the savanna region of the IPA. The IPA has only undergone a survey for its habitat characterization and bird species but less so for its flora (CSSL, 2021), highlighting the need for further botanical research.

Habitat and geology

Nationally, wetlands in Sierra Leone face severe threats of degradation due to habitat modifications. Lake Sonfon, surrounded by hilly terrain, is a mosaic of savannah and grassland habitats, as well as gallery forest, and freshwater habitats. This IPA consists of grassland, wooded savanna, and fringing forest mixed with occasional farm bush for agricultural purposes, such as cultivating groundnuts and vegetables, engaging in apiculture, and fishing in the lake and nearby river.

The geology of this lake is comprised of steeply dipping quartz and pegmatite veins showing sulfides mineralization, with gold assay values of up to 0.67 oz/t, forming part of the larger greenstone belts of the Sula Mountains. The Lake Sonfon area, according to Warnsloh in 2011, has significant gold deposits. Annual rainfall in this region ranges from 2286 mm to 2540 mm. Mean diurnal temperatures range from 15-33 °C during the dry season and 20-27 °C during the rainy seasons, respectively. Relative humidity at 1500 hours varies annually from 40% to 70% (TSL, 2021).

Conservation issues

The Lake Sonfon IPA is a proposed protected national park but currently lacks management plans or formal protection. The site is recognized as an important bird area and a key biodiversity area, providing excellent habitats for many waterfowl and waders as well as mammal species (Sesay et al., 2017).

Lake Sonfon IPA faces severe anthropogenic threats that, if not addressed, could result in severe damage to this vital national resource. The main threats include gold mining in the vicinity of the lake (potentially the most significant long-term threat to its ecology), deforestation and land clearing around the lake for agriculture, and high hunting pressure, especially in the surrounding forest patches (KBA, 2021).

To investigate the biodiversity and threats to the Lake Sonfon ecosystem, the CSSL provides insights into the rich biodiversity of the area, excluding flora, and the current issues on the ground. In their report, the local head of Diang Chiefdom indicated that the local community is somewhat committed to protecting parts of the lake through cultural practices. However, this commitment has had limited impact due to a lack of official governmental protection especially against mining companies (CSSL, 2021). Community members demarcate parts of the lake such as an area called Daldala, using traditional tools called "nomolie" to ward off people

from mining companies and other trespassers. The chief expressed concern that the cultural preservation of Lake Sonfon has been compromised and that its cultural value may soon be lost. Additionally, activities such as slash-and-burn, timber logging, and hunting activities have also been recorded within the IPA.

The destruction of Lake Sonfon represents not only an environmental crisis but also a cultural concern and economic loss for Sierra Leone. Urgent protection of Lake Sonfon IPA is needed to safeguard its significance for heritage and to generate tourism revenue generation (through bird watching).

Site assessor(s)

Fanny Massally, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Date of first assessment:

9th Mar 2026

Reviewed by:

Xander van der Burgt, The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

IPA criterion A species

SPECIES	QUALIFYING SUB-CRITERION	≥ 1% OF GLOBAL POPULATION	≥ 5% OF NATIONAL POPULATION	1 OF 5 BEST SITES NATIONALLY	ENTIRE GLOBAL POPULATION	SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY IMPORTANT	ABUNDANCE AT SITE
<i>Eremospatha dransfieldii</i> Sunderl.	A(i)	—	—	—	—	—	Scarce
<i>Pterocarpus erinaceus</i> Poir.	A(i)	—	—	—	—	—	Frequent
<i>Pseudovigna sulaensis</i> R.Clark & Burgt	A(i)	—	—	✓	—	—	Scarce
<i>Habenaria jacobii</i> Summerh.	A(i)	—	—	—	—	—	Scarce

IPA criterion C qualifying habitats

HABITAT	QUALIFYING SUB-CRITERION	≥ 5% OF NATIONAL RESOURCE	≥ 10% OF NATIONAL RESOURCE	1 OF 5 BEST SITES NATIONALLY	AREAL COVERAGE AT SITE
Freshwater inland lake	C(iii)	—	—	✓	

General site habitats

GENERAL SITE HABITAT	PERCENT COVERAGE	IMPORTANCE
Wetlands (inland)	70	Major
Artificial - Terrestrial	10	Minor
Savana	20	Minor

Land use types

LAND USE TYPE	PERCENT COVERAGE	IMPORTANCE
Nature conservation	—	Minor
Agriculture (pastoral)	—	Major
Agriculture (aquatic)	—	Major
Extractive industry	—	Major
Residential / urban development	—	Minor

Threats

THREAT	SEVERITY	TIMING
Residential & commercial development - Housing & urban areas	Medium	Ongoing - stable
Agriculture & aquaculture - Annual & perennial non-timber crops - Small-holder farming	High	Ongoing - increasing
Energy production & mining - Mining & quarrying	High	Ongoing - increasing
Biological resource use - Logging & wood harvesting - Motivation Unknown/Unrecorded	High	Ongoing - stable
Biological resource use - Hunting & collecting terrestrial animals - Motivation Unknown/Unrecorded	High	Ongoing - stable

Protected areas

PROTECTED AREA NAME	PROTECTED AREA TYPE	RELATIONSHIP WITH IPA	AREAL OVERLAP
Lake Sonfon	National Park	IPA encompasses protected/conservation area	—
Lake Sonfon Sanctuary	Forest Reserve (conservation)	IPA encompasses protected/conservation area	—

Conservation designation

DESIGNATION NAME	PROTECTED AREA	RELATIONSHIP WITH IPA	AREAL OVERLAP
Lake Sonfon and environs	Important Bird Area	IPA encompasses protected/conservation area	27

Management type

MANAGEMENT TYPE	DESCRIPTION	YEAR STARTED	YEAR FINISHED
No management plan in place	Even though it has been proposed as a National Park and an important Bird area, there is currently no management plan for this area.	—	—

Bibliography

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Visit Sierra Leone(VSL) . **Lake Sonfon and Environs.**