

# News for nature: Communicating biodiversity importance and conservation challenges in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa, through local media and online platforms

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## Abstract

Guinea-Bissau, an important regional biodiversity hotspot in West Africa, faces the challenge of raising awareness among the general public about the significance of natural resources for rural communities' survival and the need for biodiversity conservation. This knowledge gap hinders conservation efforts as initiatives are deemed irrelevant or unnecessary. A climate of political vulnerability, financial uncertainty and threats to media freedom are further obstacles to conservation biology. Researchers lack established communication platforms for academic dissemination. In this paper, we introduce the initiative News for Nature/PRIMACTION (2020–2022), which aimed to establish a communication channel between researchers and media agents. The project had two primary objectives: firstly, to raise awareness among the Guinea-Bissau society about the importance of national biodiversity and conservation challenges; and secondly, to enhance the capacity of specific communicators and opinion makers. The project had several important outputs, including: i) a bi-monthly newspaper section focused on “biodiversity conservation in Guinea-Bissau”, ii) three radio-theatre episodes performed by a well-known group and broadcasted nationally, iii) one song composed and sung by famous musicians, with an introduction by Jane Goodall, and iv) a website providing technical resources for journalists covering biodiversity and conservation news. Collaborators mentioned the lack of logistical conditions for traveling in the country as a major impediment in reporting conservation-related news. We emphasize the significance of establishing direct contact and articulation between researchers and local media to promote conservation research in West African countries. In countries where science communication and environmental education outreach are not well-established, it is crucial to bridge the challenges faced by the communities in different regions of the same country. This is especially urgent in cases where such challenges are significant.

## KEYWORDS

environmental journalism, protected areas, radio theater, song

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Guinea-Bissau (GB) (36,125 km<sup>2</sup>, 1.8 million) in West Africa is an important regional biodiversity hotspot. GB has a broad forested area and many emblematic and threatened species, including over 374 species of birds and 85 reptiles, and a high number of emblematic and threatened mammals (leopard, *Panthera pardus*, lion, *Panthera leo*, and elephant, *Loxodonta africana*) (e.g., Brugiere et al., 2005). In particular, the country is a priority area for primate conservation, including the critically endangered Western chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes verus*), a flagship for forest conservation, as well as for other nine species (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2020). Biodiversity conservation and ecotourism are nationally acknowledged as drivers for human and economic development (World Bank, 2015). However, several commercial illegal activities are threatening biodiversity in GB, such as the logging from CITES-listed trees and the trade of meat, body parts and live individuals of threatened animals (Minhós et al., 2013). There is a general lack of information by the general public on the importance of natural resources for rural communities' survival and the challenges of biodiversity conservation in the country (for instance, lacking the notion of fauna and flora extinction, Casanova et al., 2014). This knowledge gap is an obstacle to implementing conservation actions, for instance, to reduce the demand for bushmeat consumption in the country, since initiatives are perceived as irrelevant or unnecessary.

In GB, news on conservation biology is rare. Journalists, opinion makers, or celebrities could be good interlocutors to bring awareness of biodiversity and its conservation challenges to the general public. However, political vulnerability, linked with the country's problematic and unaccounted connection with drug trafficking (Green & Chabal, 2016) have contributed to a hostile scenario for journalism and media freedom. Journalists are often attacked and intimidated, sustaining a climate of fear and self-censorship (Sampaio-Dias & Nhaga, 2020). The practice of journalism is tainted by financial uncertainty, poor resources and insubstantial salaries, and journalists are over-dependent on per diem fees paid by event organizers and news sources in exchange for coverage. These payments supplement their low salaries, resulting in biased coverage and an implicit compromise with the sources, and forms of investigative reporting are inexistent (Sampaio-Dias, 2019). As for academic dissemination, except *Sintidus*,<sup>1</sup> which is currently the only national peer-revised scientific journal that allows regular contact between the public and reliable sources of scientific information, media agents and researchers lack established communication platforms.

Here, we describe the project News for Nature/PRIMACTION (2020–2022), an initiative to establish

a communication channel between researchers and media agents, which, to the best of our knowledge, was implemented in GB for the first time. We depict the activities, main outputs and lessons learned during the project to encourage the development of dissemination programs of conservation biology information in West African countries.

*News for Nature* was initiated by journalism and conservation biology researchers currently based in Portugal and the UK institutions and who have been working in GB since 2006. The Born Free Foundation funded the project<sup>2</sup> since its inception. The main goals were (1) to contribute to awareness-raising of the Guinea-Bissau society on the importance of national biodiversity and conservation challenges, and (2) to build the capacity of specific communicators and opinion makers identified in past projects (e.g., Sampaio-Dias, 2019). The selected stakeholders included newspaper and radio professionals and renowned musicians and conservationists, well-known and respected by the public. These collaborators were already interested in promoting conservation biology news reporting but lacked the financial means or access to the appropriate communication channel(s). The project also held a strong educational component by involving media and journalism students from Guinea-Bissau and the UK.

We implemented four multi-disciplinary activities between 2019 and 2022 with stakeholders (please see on specific stakeholders and links to outputs in [supporting information](#))

1. We have implemented a temporary financial support plan for journalists at *O Democrata*<sup>3</sup> newspaper producing environmental investigation pieces. The themes were decided by the journalists. Eight investigative journalistic one-page pieces were published bi-monthly on environmental-related issues of national dimension, including articles about protected areas (Figure S1; supporting information).
2. We commissioned the writing, production, and broadcasting of radio-theater episodes at *Radio Sol Mansi*,<sup>4</sup> one of the few radios with national outreach. Each piece told a story about the environment and was recorded by the notorious local theater community group *Netos do Bandim*<sup>5</sup> (Figure S2; supporting information). The episodes played multiple times on the radio.
3. We created an online platform<sup>6</sup> to support and connect journalists interested in environmental issues. This website aims to provide educational tools for environmental journalists and journalism students, including relevant content on conservation biology research. For designing this website and the project logo, we promoted a student competition at the Faculty of the Creative Industries at the University of

Portsmouth, UK, creating an opportunity for professional experience and student engagement (Figure S3; supporting information).

4. We commissioned the recording of one original song about Guinea-Bissau's forests, whose lyrics highlighted the importance of the Western chimpanzees to maintaining ecosystem services. The song in Guinea-Bissau's Kriol was written and interpreted by the popular Guinea-Bissauan singer-songwriter Karyna Gomes<sup>7</sup> and other national musicians. The song was entitled "Mato i bida" (in English, *the forest is life*) and opens with a spoken word exert in English by Dame Jane Goodall,<sup>8</sup> funder of the Jane Goodall Institute,<sup>9</sup> who generously recorded it to help increase the international projection for the song.

The project suffered significant alterations and delays to its original proposal in 2019 because of successive Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and disruption of services in the three countries involved (United Kingdom, Guinea-Bissau, and Portugal) and political instability in GB (including an attempted coup in January 2020 and February 2022) (please see section C on challenges and lessons learned in supporting information). Consequently, most of the activities initially planned to be carried out in the country had to be implemented remotely, which, in turn, limited our ability to measure the success of the project quantitatively in GB. A posterior trip to GB allowed us to assess the perceived impact of the initiatives. We interviewed our collaborators in GB—journalists at *O Democrata* and the director at *Sol Mansi Radio*, who reflected on how the public and other media colleagues received the project's outputs and challenges faced.

The journalists at *O Democrata* mentioned that the public received the news pieces with interest and that colleagues and regular readers noticed a shift in the news agenda and editorial choices, with increased emphasis on environmental news. Additionally, the journalists were invited to build a team for an environment-themed radio program at Radio Sol Mansi. As the main challenges faced, our collaborators mentioned that the pandemic restrictions and poor traveling conditions (e.g., lack of paved roads) hindered more frequent and broader geographic coverage. This encouraged that most of the investigative work would be conducted in the capital city of Bissau, where journalists are based. Regarding the audiences' engagement with environmental news, the participants mentioned a mismatch between the capital inhabitant's "typical" perception that "GB nature is still well-conserved" and the reality of degraded ecosystems and resources overexploitation found by the professionals traveling to remote areas. As a way forward, they recognized the importance of formally establishing a national

network of "environment-dedicated correspondents." This network would allow consistent liaison with local media interested in publishing environmental news, including international research findings on GB's biodiversity conservation themes.

Our main lessons learned were that, in parallel with environmental awareness, scientific education seems perceived by GB media agents as necessary to value biodiversity and local livelihoods. Scientific outreach activities could play a role in facilitating the implementation of conservation actions. Thus, we highlight the importance of direct contact and articulation between researchers and local media in disseminating conservation research in West African countries. This is of particular significance in countries where science communication/environmental education outreach is not extensively developed and where there is an urgent need to bridge the challenges faced by the communities in the different regions of the same country.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <http://sintidus.blogspot.com/>.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/>.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.odemocratagb.com>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.radiosolmansinet/>.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://netosdebandim.org/>.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://primactionproject.wixsite.com/my-site-2>.
- <sup>7</sup> [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karyna\\_Gomes](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karyna_Gomes).
- <sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Goodall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Goodall).
- <sup>9</sup> <https://janegoodall.org/>.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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