



Only few miles from the centre of Freetown, the Western Area Forest Reserve, a tropical rain forest covers towering mountains, gives space to a sanctuary, conceived as a response to human oppression and cruelty. A short distance from the forest reserve, savannah covers another part of the same mountain range, and is dotted with small communities, whose heritage is also a testimony to an inglorious piece of human history, the transatlantic slave trade. In being able to visit both communities within a few hours, it is difficult to avoid asking the question, why have we been and continue to be, so stupid? There may be no simple answer but thankfully there are a small number of people involved in the task of addressing our stupid behaviour.

The genesis of the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary lies



in the simple act of Bala and Sharmila Amarasekavan rescuing a chimpanzee from captivity some 150 miles north of Freetown. At the time, 1988, it was thought there were only 2,000 chimpanzees in Sierra Leone. That each one of them could live for more than six decades and would become five times as strong as its captor did not stop people from imagining that a primate which could be imprisoned as a pet!



The life of Charlotte village was conceived in 1807, when, due in no small measure to the Clapham Sect, it became possible for the British navy to intercept foreign slave ships and rescue their cargo. At the time, it was not known that the transatlantic slave trade had involved in excess of ten million people being taken captive along the west coast of Africa, and that history would be forever trying to comprehend such human barbarity.

There are close on one hundred chimpanzees in residence at Tacaguma



Chimpanzee Sanctuary, where, since 1995, they have been cared for in their own age-based social groupings. Each chimp is called by its original name, which reflects their Russian, Belgian, French American or British captor's choice of names. Each of the four groups, of approximately 25 chimps, are housed in the type of habitat that provides for rearing, socialization and independence in preparation for their release, when and where appropriate. The exact location is kept secret, but thanks to the work of the sanctuary, its trans African network of conservation groups, and newly enforced legislation, it is now estimated that there are 5,500 chimpanzees in Sierra Leone.



Krio villages including Charlotte, Gloucester and Bathurst, were established early in the 19th century as vibrant communities consisting of liberated slaves who built schools and introduced small scale farming, and where Quakers and Anglican influence was well represented. The early influence of the Church Missionary Society in governmental decisions, which shaped the 'Province of Freedom' at the time, continues in the life of St John's Church, Charlotte, today and where the parish priest, Rev Prince Leigh is keen to share the history of the church and community. Prince, a graduate of the college where we work, stresses how demographic changes, natural disasters and the civil war have reduced the population of the Charlotte village to less than sixty people, one fifth of what it once was. However he speaks with pride on how a threat to the church's existence was overcome, when the National Power Authority, began to insist that the siting of a high voltage pylon would require the demolition of the church building. The pylon was erected and the church continues to stand but the village still has no electricity!

The enthusiasm and dedication of the sanctuary staff is exemplified by Willie Tucker, who



gained an international scholarship and trained in conservation work in East Africa before returning to work with the sanctuary for the last two

decades. Like Prince he knows from personal experience the effects of war and the actions of soldiers (soldier turned rebels) who are violent and hungry. The physical and psychological damage inflicted upon both the entire Tacugama chimpanzee community and Charlotte villagers is very similar. The similarity of trauma caused to both types of residents underlines more than just the sharing of 98.6% of DNA between humans and chimpanzees. Sanctuary staff are keen to



explain that their work in protecting species largely threatened by hunters of ‘cheap bush meat’, represents but a “tip of the iceberg”, in the challenges faced in protecting Sierra Leone’s natural habitat. The educational work of environmental sensitisation conducted by the sanctuary is a vital part of that process. Resilience is also a shared feature of our DNA.



Simple questions about our human stupidity are relatively easy to ask. The answers are rather harder to find. The opportunity to stand on a raised tower in the sanctuary and view the forest and its habitat, or to gaze at the drama of Charlotte waterfall even in the dry season are invitations to contemplate the bigger questions, not just of the past but of future.

We do not need to be located in the tropical rain forests of a country emerging from civil war, to be able to identify our failures and mistakes of the recent past. It is likely that wherever we are we too live in the midst of imbalances of good and evil.



In searching for appropriate wisdom, the thoughts of contemplative masters are helpful. Thomas Merton, in recognising that we are often captive to self acquired attachments, offers his thought on freedom and liberty:

“The mere ability to choose between good and evil is the lowest form of freedom” ... “Freedom is not an equal balance between good and evil choices but in the perfect love and acceptance of what is really good and the perfect hatred and rejection of what is evil.

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