

Mining Threats to the Mount Nimba World Heritage Site in Guinea



The IUCN ARRC Task Force

Straddling the borders between the Republic of Guinea (hereafter Guinea), Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, the Nimba mountain range includes some of the highest peaks in West Africa. It holds a wide variety of vegetation types due to its diverse geomorphology, and an exceptional biodiversity (Fig. 1), including high levels of floral and faunal endemism. It is also known as the 'tower' of West Africa, where more than 50 watercourses originate, supplying water for numerous local communities (Fig. 2). The Nimba Mountains also play an important regional role in both climate regulation and carbon sequestration.

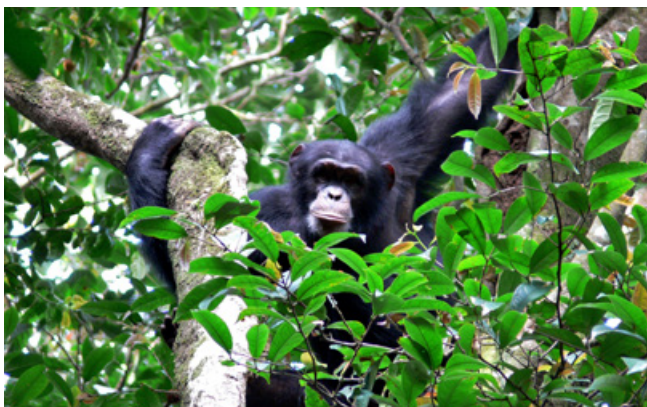


Figure 1: The Nimba Strict Nature Reserve harbors many endemic and threatened species, such as the Critically Endangered Western Chimpanzee. Photo: Kathelijne Koops



Fig. 2: The Nimba Mountains are also considered the water tower of West Africa. Photo: Maegan Fitzgerald

For these reasons, the Nimba mountain range in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire was designated a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 1981–1982, in addition to being a Strict Nature Reserve and

a Biosphere Reserve. It is also recognised as an Important Bird Area (IBA), Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), and Alliance for Zero Extinction (AZE), further highlighting its importance for biodiversity conservation globally.

At the same time, this transboundary massif also holds a significant iron ore reserve that has undergone exploitation on its Liberian side, leaving permanent scars visible from space. In Guinea, part of the WHS was de-gazetted in 1992 to allow for mining activities, a permit currently owned by Ivanhoe Atlantic - Société des Mines de Fer de Guinée (SMFG) (Fig. 3). The site has since then been added to UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger, notably given the threats of mining to the site's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). Several other mining permits have been granted within the Nimba landscape in recent years, including another mining permit abutting the WHS currently owned by the Nimba Development Company (NDC).

The most sensitive mining permit is the one being developed by SMFG, given that there will be unavoidable impacts to the OUV of the WHS property. The permit owned by NDC could also have major environmental and biodiversity impacts, but if the project applies best practice standards, these impacts could be significantly reduced. NDC has not yet submitted its ESIA, so we cannot currently judge and comment on its mitigation strategy.

Potential mining impacts on the WHS

The proposed mining activities by SMFG will have both direct and indirect environmental and biodiversity impacts, with the indirect impacts potentially extending far beyond the permit boundaries. Direct impacts include habitat loss, disturbance, degradation, and fragmentation, as well as potential soil, water, and air pollution. Indirect impacts include improved access to the area, an influx of people looking for work and to conduct business in the area, which will in turn exert pressure on natural resources through hunting, farming, etc. These impacts have been recorded for all other mining projects in Guinea.

Current status of mining permits

The two mining companies (i.e., NDC and SMFG) have submitted the Terms of Reference (ToR) for their Environmental

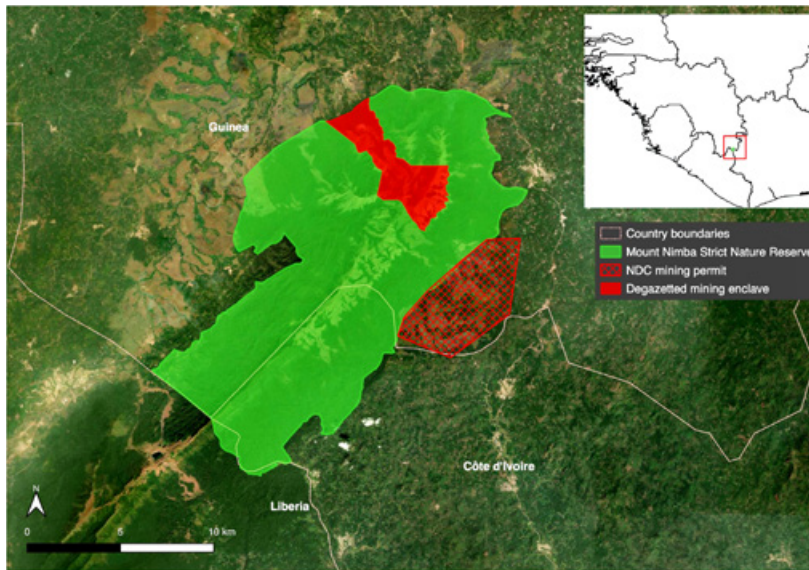


Fig. 3: The Mount Nimba Strict Nature Reserve, the only WHS in Guinea. Highlighted in solid red is the area that was degazetted in 1992 to allow for mining activities and currently owned by SMFG. Also shown (hatched red) is the other closest mining permit abutting the WHS, which is owned by NDC. Map: ARRC

and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) to the government. These have also been reviewed by a third independent body, the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, which has published its comments on their website. Only SMFG has submitted its completed ESIA for phase 1 of their operations, which is equivalent economically to c.1% of the revenue of the neighboring Simandou iron ore project developed by Rio Tinto (ARRC Task Force & Sustain Value, 2025)¹.

Contrary to what was written in the latest State of Conservation by the State Parties, the ARRC Task Force was not approached to review or comment on the ToR for the ESIA for both companies. The ARRC Task Force has only provided comments to the AGEE (Agence Guinéenne d'Évaluations Environnementales) on the ESIA from SMFG. We focused our comments on the potential impacts of the proposed SMFG project on the Critically Endangered Western Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes verus*). UNESCO has not provided comments on the ToRs, and it remains unclear if they have received SMFG's ESIA.

We have seen the report of public consultations available online undertaken by the AGEE in the villages within the impacted area of the SMFG project. We were surprised by the high acceptability rate (c.96-100%) amongst the local population. We feel these results are inherently flawed given that the local population mainly receives information from the project, which is biased towards the positive aspects of the project (e.g., job creation), without a proper understanding of all potential social and environmental impacts on the affected communities.

The ARRC Task Force position and recommendations

The ARRC Task Force was first contacted by SMFG in 2020 to align with the International Finance Corporation's (IFC) Performance Standard 6. We declined to engage given the unavoidable impacts to the OUV of the property, with our reasoning provided here.² The phase 1 proposed by SMFG is of short duration

(c.10 years) so it is not economically sustainable for the area, while holding unavoidable and irreversible impacts to the OUV of the property (as highlighted in SMFG's ESIA). Therefore, in 2025, alongside six other NGOs, we submitted a request for a 5-year renewable moratorium on mining activities within the Nimba Biosphere Reserve. We suggested this period be used to:

- Conduct a Regional Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment (which has been solicited by UNESCO since 2010);
- Better understand the risk of epidemics and disease spillover linked with planned mining activities which would disturb the biodiversity equilibrium of the Nimba Mountains;
- Assess and secure alternative financing options for the long-term protection of the WHS; and
- Finalize and implement the Mount Nimba Biosphere Reserve Management Plan, including appropriate habitat protection and restoration measures for Endemic and Critically Endangered species.

More generally, we would also advise that the State of Conservation Reports be reviewed by an independent committee to ensure the accuracy of the information provided. Currently, this WHS also lacks consistent and robust population monitoring using the same methods and survey effort to accurately understand potential impacts and trends of fauna and flora. The 2025 State of Conservation Report mentions that the chimpanzee population fluctuates; however, firstly, the population estimate mentioned therein is inaccurate, and secondly, the population numbers given for the different years cannot be compared directly as not the same methods and survey effort are used.

The Nimba Strict Nature Reserve should remain on the 'In Danger' list as long as the mining threats persist. The ideal scenario favors nature over mining and values the ecosystem services the site provides not only for local communities and the sub-region, but for Guineans as a Nation. Given that Guinea has only one World Heritage site but many iron ore deposits, we feel this site should continue to be protected and used by other mining companies in Guinea to offset their impacts on biodiversity, as only a few offset options remain in the country.

Notes

- 1 ARRC Task Force and Sustain Value (2025). A World Heritage Site in Danger: Alternatives to Mining Mount Nimba. IUCN SSC PSG SGA, 51pp https://arrctaskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/NimbaReport_FINAL_EN.pdf
- 2 https://arrctaskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ARRCstatement_SMFG_September2020.pdf