

Sierra Leone

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Location and area

Sierra Leone is a republic in western Africa, bordered on the north-west, north, and north-east by Guinea, on the south-east by Liberia, and on the south-west and west by the Atlantic Ocean. The total area of the country is 71,740 km². (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

Topography

A low-lying coastal plain extends inland from the Atlantic Ocean for about 80 km. It is a largely swampy region. The Sierra Leone Peninsula, on which the capital Freetown is situated, is dominated by hills. To the east the land rises from the coastal plain to a plateau in the north and to hilly terrain in the south. Several small mountain ranges are located near the northern and eastern borders and reach a maximum elevation of 1,948 m at Bintimane in the Loma Mountains.

Of the numerous short rivers that drain the country, the most important are the Great Scarcies and the Kaba (Little Scarcies); others include the Rokel, Jong, Sewa, and Moa. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

Climate

Sierra Leone has a tropical climate with marked wet and dry seasons. The mean annual temperature is about 27° C. Annual rainfall averages more than 3,800 mm along the coast, diminishing to about 2,000 mm in the northern interior. The rainy season lasts from April to November, when humidity can be very high. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

Land use

A savannah vegetation dominates northern Sierra Leone. Forests are densest in the southeast and contain varieties of palm and, to a lesser extent, mahogany and teak.

Increasing demand by the growing population for farmland and fuel wood, along with pressure from the timber industry, has resulted in a 3 % (1990-1996) annual rate of deforestation. In 1995, 18 % of the country's total land area was forested. Overgrazing of livestock, slash-and-burn agriculture, and soil erosion caused by deforestation have led to soil degradation.

The economy is based on agriculture and mining. The bulk of the population is engaged in subsistence farming. Plantation agriculture is significant only in the coastal region.

The staple food crop of Sierra Leone is rice. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

Wetlands

Cole (1973) describes grass-herb swamps within closed forest and savanna regions, as in the middle reaches of the rivers Sewa, Taia and Rokel including the "bolilands" in the savanna regions, but these swamps do not have peat soils.

Peatlands

Markov et al. (1988) mention the existence of “forest-peatlands” and “open peatlands” with herbs and also mangroves.

According to the interpreted World Soil Map (Van Engelen & Huting 2002) 3 km² of histosols exist in Sierra Leone and 4,867 km² of gley soils.

Mire and peatland losses

According to Benneh et al. (1996) open peat mining takes place in littoral zones of Sierra Leone.