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Spatial Stories of Peace

The case of the Greater Gola Landscape

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Abstract

This thesis follows the interdisciplinary tradition that exists in global studies by performing a spatial analysis of the imaginary of peace(s) and conservation as a practice of peace(s) and thus contributing to the fields of environmental peacebuilding, peace- and conflict studies, and geography. The thesis has its theoretical starting point in environmental peacebuilding and is drawing and building on spatial theory as a way of understanding the construction of peace(s) in the context of the Greater Gola Landscape, straddling the border of Sierra Leone and Liberia. The thesis aims to investigate and analyze the spatial imaginary of peace(s) and trace its underpinning norms, ideas, and assumptions.

The thesis approaches the research problem though a case study design, utilizing a textual and visual thematic analysis performed on material produced by local newspapers and local NGOs.

The theoretical ideas of spatiality, drawn from the spatial turn in peace- and conflict studies, as well as geographers engaged in the question of peace(s), underpin the thesis. It utilizes the concept of spatial stories as analytically constituting spatial imaginaries.

The thesis finds that the dominating story, and thus imaginary, is that of conservation as peace, and bringer of inevitable development.

Key words: spatial theory, Liberia, Sierra Leone, environmental peacebuilding, conservation, case study

Word count: 20 405

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Table of contents

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

ACS – American Colonization Society

APC – All People's Congress

ARTP – Across The River - A Trans-boundary Peace Park for Sierra Leone and Liberia

CSSL – Conservation Society of Sierra Leone

ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States

EnPAx – Environmental Peacebuilding Association

EP – Environmental Peacebuilding

EU – European Union

FDA – Forestry Development Authority

GGL – Greater Gola Landscape

GTPP – Gola Transboundary Peace Park

GRNP – Gola Rainforest National Park of Sierra Leone

GNFP – Gola National Forest Park

GVL – Greater Virunga Landscape

IGO – Intergovernmental organization

MOU – Memorandum of Understanding

MRU – Mano River Union

NGO – Nongovernmental organization

NPFL – National Patriotic Front for Liberia

PAPFor – Support program for the preservation of forest ecosystems in West Africa

REDD+ - Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries

RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

RUF – Revolutionary United Front

SCSL – Special Court for Sierra Leone

SCNL – Society for the Conservation of Nature Liberia

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UN – United Nations

UNFCC – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

USAID – U.S Agency for International Development

WABiCC – West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change

WABiLED – West Africa Biodiversity and Low Emissions Development

1 Introduction

> *"We thank God because this has never happened for two countries to come together, Liberia and Sierra Leone to come to our village to build a peace park. I believe that if peace is amongst these two countries, it will be good for us and it will help us not to fight anymore, and I believe this is prosperity."*
> *Mende Foday Sama, Lalehun village resident (Reuters, 2009)*

On May 15th, 2009 in the village of Lalehun, Sierra Leone, the Gola Transboundary Peace Park was launched and inaugurated by the president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and the president of Sierra Leone, Ernst Bai Koroma. The park was to be made up of two not yet established national parks on each side of the border between the countries in the Greater Gola Landscape. In the inauguration address, President Johnson-Sirleaf told the audience how the establishment of the park was to be a symbol of the renewed commitment to peace for the people of Liberia and Sierra Leone. President Koroma was on the other hand concerned with the Gola forest's role in the global fight against climate change, as well as being a catalyst for eco-tourism in the region (Reuters, 2009).

The launch of the Gola Transboundary Peace Park in 2009 is an excellent example of how peace and conservation, in this case, the conservation of the forest, can and has been connected. As illustrated through the quote above as well as the two inauguration addresses, there is a notion that with the practice of conservation comes peace, and with peace comes prosperity. In this thesis, I am interested in how this peace is imagined and enacted from a spatial perspective.

Peace does not come by itself. It is practiced and manifested through the acts of people. In some regard, peace is *built*, and therefore the term *peacebuilding* is commonly used. What acts are available for the people building peace is not random nor haphazardly thought of in the moment. In many ways, it is governed by the norms, assumptions, and ideas that make up the complex web of how space, place, and people all interact with each other through the enactment and manifestation of these norms, assumptions, and ideas. Therefore, I am interested in the imaginary of

peace(s) and the stories being told of peace, peacebuilding, and conservation concerning the Greater Gola Landscape.

Through a spatial theoretical lens, I aim to unpack the spatial stories being told, and how they are used to make sense of conservation as peace, and peace as conservation and together make up a spatial imaginary of peace(s). Furthermore, I aim to unpack how these stories are being sustained, changed, and/or contested. I am doing so by analyzing their dissemination in local media and NGO newsletters.

In this thesis, I am making the argument that spatial imaginaries and spatial stories are intimately intertwined. Spatial stories are here engaged with and incorporated into spatial imaginaries as an analytical concept. By doing so I argue that we can better understand how the spatial imaginary is informed by the relationality between different types of spatial stories.

Research is not done in a theoretical or methodological vacuum. Research surrounding peace and environmental questions is not new but has recently gathered under the umbrella of environmental peacebuilding (EP). I situate this thesis within this field and therefore I warrant it necessary to briefly introduce this field as well as to present a definition of how I understand what environmental peacebuilding is, as well as the term conservation.

EP is both a research field and an approach to peace and peacebuilding. This warrants some untangling of concepts and clear definitions of certain key concepts before a more thorough presentation of the research aim and question, as well as a literature review.

Environmental peacebuilding is brought forward as a new, holistic, and integrative approach to peacebuilding (Brown and Nicolucci-Altman, 2022, p. 11). It aims to bring together the diverse yet connected fields of peace, environment, development, and security (Brown and Nicolucci-Altman, 2022, p. 50) with contributions from a wide array of academic disciplines. As such, EP can be viewed as a pluriverse of ideas and practices all connected to the environmental-peace nexus, that together form the approach of EP (Brown and Nicolucci-Altman, 2022, pp. 24–25).

While EP emerged as a critique of the environmental conflict and security literature where the focus was on investigating the casual links between conflict and natural resources (Dresse *et al.*, 2019, p. 100; Ide *et al.*, 2021, p. 4) conflict is not absent in EP research. What it does mean is that the focus broadened from a narrow focus on natural resources and scarcity to other environmental risks (Ide *et al.*, 2021, pp. 1–2). Examples of this are research on how peace agreements affect forest cover (Murillo-Sandoval, Clerici and Correa-Ayram, 2022) and how resource governance and peacebuilding connect (Krampe, Hegazi and VanDeveer, 2021). The acknowledgment that environmental factors can play an important role in both peace and conflict dynamics is, in a variety of different ways, an important notion underpinning the research within the field (Ide *et al.*, 2021, pp. 2–4).

With the understanding that EP constitutes a pluriverse of ideas and practices, it comes with an array of epistemological and theoretical concepts that sometimes contradict each other (Dresse *et al.*, 2019, p. 104). As well as different understandings of how EP can be conceptualized and defined.

As an approach to peacebuilding Dresse et al (2019) highlight the process at work through the definition of: "… the process through which environmental challenges shared by the (former) parties to a violent conflict are turned into opportunities to build lasting cooperation and peace." (Dresse *et al.*, 2019, p. 104). A broader definition is provided by the Environmental Peacebuilding Association (EnPAx): "Environmental peacebuilding integrates natural resource management in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery to build resilience in communities affected by conflict." (EnPAx, 2023). For this thesis, the latter definition is employed to underline the broad scope of EP as a peacebuilding practice.

It allows me to focus on a case where the parties engaged in the peacebuilding activities not necessarily have been directly engaged in conflict with each other, but rather lived through conflicts that in many aspects spatially and temporally overlap. The case of Sierra Leone and Liberia, and especially the border region of the Greater Gola Landscape, is an excellent example of this.

Part of natural resource management is nature conservation for the benefit of ecosystems and wildlife. In this thesis, the understanding of conservation follows the

definition put forward by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (ICUN): “The protection, care, management, and maintenance of ecosystems, habitats, wildlife species, and populations, within or outside of their natural environments, to safeguard the natural conditions for their long-term permanence.” (UNESCO, 2023a). Nature conservation is therefore about how to protect and manage ecosystems in the world. How this protection is framed and rationalized is in part what this thesis is about.

Another key term in this thesis and the field of EP is that of peace. A more thorough theoretical review of my understanding of peace will follow in chapter 4. As of now what is important to note is that I view peace(s) as a plural, heterogenous, and broad phenomenon. To underline the plurality, I prefer to add the suffix of (s) when appropriate.

A general critique of what is now an industry of peacebuilding is that within the peacebuilding field, the correct buzzwords and technical language are paramount to funding projects (Aggestam, 2015, p. 336). There is an argument that there is a real danger of EP becoming the latest in a range of catch-all buzzwords used to draw in international funds (Dresse *et al.*, 2019, p. 101) where the potential negative effects are ignored. Examples of such initiatives are provided by Ide (2020): Depoliticization of water issues in Israel and Palestine, displacement of the local population in favor of the establishment of a conservation area in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, and discrimination along socioeconomic lines within a local water supply project in Vietnam are some examples (Ide, 2020) being brought forward. This question lies outside the scope of this thesis but with that said I believe it is important to *critically* engage with each practice, concept, and definition one might encounter.

It is then imperative to critically engage with EP as a holistic practice, as well as the individual ideas and practices that make up the broader framework of EP and what peace(s) might come from it. This thesis is doing just that by posing questions about the practice of nature conservation as peacebuilding and the spatial imaginaries of peace(s), and how they mutually constitute each other.

The following section will present the research aim of the thesis.

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1.1 Aim, research question, and thesis outline

The thesis examines the production of spatial imaginaries of peace(s) through the practice of conservation as peacebuilding. Conservation has been brought forward by researchers (Ali, 2007b; Mackelworth, Holcer and Lazar, 2013; Roulin *et al.*, 2017) as well as NGOs (Shukla, 2022; Conservation International, 2023) and IGOs (UNEP, 2021) as a suitable way of promoting peace. Conservation is seen to be a natural inroad into more friendly and cooperative relations between former adversaries. Used as a steppingstone it is assumed to be able to lead towards deeper cooperation on other, more contentious issues and thus bring peace to conflict-affected areas (Refisch and Jenson, 2016).

Conservation as a practice sits neatly within the environment-peacebuilding nexus that is EP and comes with certain assumptions about its inner workings. By investigating the case of the Greater Gola Landscape in Liberia and Sierra Leone the thesis aims to investigate how the spatial imaginary gives meaning and makes sense of conservation as peace(s). It aims to unpack what stories are being told and enacted and how these stories are being sustained, changed, and or/contested. It does so through an analysis of local media as well as newsletters distributed by local NGOs:s. The analysis uses the establishment of the Gola Transboundary Peace Park in 2009 as its starting point and moves through time up until 2023.

The research question is as follows: *How is the spatial imaginary of peace(s) surrounding the Grater Gola Landscape in Liberia and Sierra Leone constructed?* Coupled with this overarching question I have two sub-questions to help guide my analysis: *How are conservation and peace(s) made sense of through the spatial stories being told? How is peace(s) sustained, changed, and/or contested?*

Having introduced the thesis and its aim and research question, chapter 2 of this thesis is concerned with the background and empirical context of the GGL as well as the historical context of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Chapter 3 introduces and reviews the previous research done within the context of EP as well as a brief introduction to the research done on the concept of peace.

Chapter 4 proceeds by introducing the theoretical framework of spatiality, peace, and imaginaries. In it, I show how my understanding of spatiality leads me to conceptually connect spatial imaginaries and spatial stories and how I argue for them to be intimately connected.

In chapter 5 the research design of the thesis is presented, and I account for how and why I made the methodological choice I did. In this chapter ethical considerations and the limitations of the thesis will also be discussed.

Chapter 6 consists of the analysis of the data and chapter 7 proceeds by discussing the findings in the analysis. Chapter 8 provides a conclusion of the thesis and presents an avenue for further research.

2 Background

2.1 Setting the stage

The establishment of the Gola Transboundary Peace Park (GTPP), and thus the starting point of the investigation of this thesis, happened in the context of two post-conflict societies. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia suffered from civil wars during 1991-2002 and 1989-2003 respectively. The wars did not only overlap in the temporal aspect but were indeed intertwined by factions supporting each other over the border between the countries (Beevers, 2019, p. 131).

The post-conflict narratives surrounding the cause of the civil wars have been the same with them being framed as resource-based and greed-driven wars (Beevers, 2019, pp. 65, 123–124). While an important aspect of both conflicts has been that of economic motives it is disingenuous to only view the conflicts through this lens. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia have a long history of political conflict, social grievances, and competition for power over their vast natural resources. As such the civil wars are best viewed as a continuation of these conflicts (Beevers, 2019, pp. 65–66, 124).

This section will begin with a brief account of Liberia's and Sierra Leone's historical context. I will then present a timeline for the establishment of the GTPP and a mapping of the key agents being involved. This is in turn contextualizing the environment where the spatial imaginary of peace(s) is being constructed.

2.1.1 Historical context in Liberia

What is today Liberia was 1822 inhabited by at least 14 indigenous ethnic groups that had traded and been part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade for more than 100 years

(Beevers, 2019, p. 66). In that year settlers arrived in the form of freed American slaves funded by the American Colonization Society (ACS). The ACS served as a way for slave owners to get rid of freed slaves, as well as for the antislavery movement to put colonization forward as a way of ending slavery. The perception that the struggle for both whites and blacks to live alongside each other as equals would only lead to conflict with the history of slavery present drove them towards the solution of resettlement of the black population (Guyatt, 2016).

The settlers did not enjoy any civil liberties and the ACS ruled in a paternalistic and authoritarian order (Beevers, 2019, p. 67). The establishment of the colony was the beginning of conflict over land and resources between the settlers and the indigenous population and carried over into the establishment of the Liberian Republic in 1848 and throughout history. A small elite of the settlers, the Americo-Liberians (descendants of freed slaves), gained power, and an oligarch was established (Beevers, 2019, p. 67).

While the one-party state ended with a military coup in 1980 led by Samuel Doe, the same kind of structures that held it up were in place for the next regime. Throughout history, Liberia's rulers have depended on the revenue from allowing foreign companies to extract natural resources such as iron ore, rubber, and timber to stay in power through a patronage network (Beevers, 2019, pp. 68–71). While at first having popular support, that quickly diminished as the brutality of the regime increased (Sawyer, 1992, pp. 293–294). With demands of the return to civil rule, a new constitution was drafted, but it was tailored to Doe's needs, and from 1984 the military regime continued its rule in a civil disguise (Sawyer, 1992, pp. 297–298). During the Doe regime, $300 million was diverted and put towards patronage and enrichment of the elite (Beevers, 2019, p. 71).

By 1989 Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front for Liberia (NPFL) started a violent rebellion that would become the Liberian Civil war lasting until 2003. By 1990 they controlled 90% of Liberia. A peacekeeping force from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) being present in Monrovia stopped them from entering the capital and coupled with Doe's assassination a political stalemate presented itself (Beevers, 2019, p. 71). By controlling the timber,

diamond, iron, and gold industry Taylor made $200 million that was used to fuel his military apparatus and support rebels in Sierra Leone. In fie short years between 1990 and 1995 2.5 million hectares of forest were cut down (Beevers, 2019, p. 71).

After years of violence, looting, rape, and killing a peace accord was signed in 1995. This was the fourteenth peace accord of the war. Through his economic advantage and perception that the war would continue unless he became president Taylor won the election in 1997 (Beevers, 2019, p. 73). The organized violence was at a relatively low until 1999 when the conflict escalated up until 2003. During this time, it was found that diamonds mined in Sierra Leone were used by Taylor to finance both the rebels there and his military. This led to a greater focus from the international community on the diamond trade and Liberia was sanctioned for selling them (Beevers, 2019, pp. 73–74). After increased pressure from the international community Taylor signed a peace agreement in 2003 and went into exile after being indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) the same year (Beevers, 2019, p. 74).

When the civil war ended upwards of 150,000 people had been killed and an already poor country saw its GDP fall by 90% as a result of the collapse of political, economic, and social systems (Beevers, 2019, p. 87). With timber extraction viewed as a driver of conflict international peacebuilders pushed to secure the Liberian forest through increased state authority and UN-enforced sanctions on Liberian timber exports. When poverty and lack of economic growth started to be viewed as a bigger threat to peace and security the focus shifted, and the marketization and commodification of Liberia's forests was to provide economic growth (Beevers, 2019, p. 88). It is argued that, despite some positive achievements, the timber sector reforms have not managed to bring the kind of benefits that were promised (Beevers, 2019, p. 88).

The civil war ended with the signing of the peace agreement, the establishment of a transitional government, and the deployment of a 15.000 member United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force (Beevers, 2019, p. 74). The post-conflict peacebuilding effort has been informed by the notion that natural resource exploitation was the main driver of the civil war. This explanation is in part true, but it is also argued that it was

a continuation of the conflicts between different groups for political power and access to land that drove the conflict (Beevers, 2019, pp. 82–83). By misreading the underlying causes of the conflict, it is argued that international peacebuilders have mirrored pre-war governance arrangements and thus are aggravating historical tensions (Beevers, 2019, p. 83).

2.1.2 Historical context of Sierra Leone

As in Liberia Sierra Leone's history is that of conflict surrounding the exploitation of land and natural resources by an international and national elite (Beevers, 2019, p. 124). In 1787 Sierra Leone was founded as a settlement for free slaves by British abolitionists. In 1808 it became a colony of the British crown and in 1896 it became a British Protectorate (Beevers, 2019, p. 125). The British used indigenous chiefs to rule the territory and rewarded the ones loyal to the colonial rule. As more and more European companies moved into the land the tensions grew between the colonial rule and the national elite over the control of the natural resources, especially the diamonds that the colonial rule took control over (Beevers, 2019, pp. 125–127).

To maintain their monopoly, the colonial rule made regular attempts at crack downs on illegal mining activities which in turn led to resentment from the local communities. To stifle unrest the diamond sector was reformed by 1950 and small-scale mining by other than the colonial monopoly was allowed. This in turn enriched the already rich since they had the resources to enter the mining business, and smuggling became rampant (Beevers, 2019, pp. 127–128).

In 1961 Sierra Leone gained its independence from British rule. The diamond industry underwent several reforms during the years and the political rule declined into authorianism and corruption. In 1968 the All People’s Congress (APC) took power, by using the revenue of the diamond trade. During their rule diamonds and other natural resources were used to sustain a patronage system and state institutions decayed and livelihood options became fewer and fewer (Beevers, 2019, p. 129).

Resentment towards the elite and local chiefs who enriched themselves in the mining industry and the marginalization of the rural communities, often victims of

state-sponsored violence, was fertile ground for the recruitment of fighters by rebel leaders (Beevers, 2019, p. 130). Supported by Taylor and NPFL a group calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) crossed the border from Liberia into Sierra Leone in 1991. This was the start of the civil war that would last until 2002. (Beevers, 2019, pp. 130–131).

The RUF's said motive was to liberate Sierra Leone from the one-party rule of APC, and Taylor viewed the sponsorship of the rebellion as a strategic wise move. (Beevers, 2019, p. 131). The army was expanded to fight the rebellion and a military coup started military rule in 1992. Until 1995 the war was characterized by brutality towards the civilian population and a common understanding between the army and RUF that they both gained could enrich themselves during an ongoing war (Beevers, 2019, p. 132).

The years between 1995 and 1999 were characterized by continued brutal violence, illicit mining, and several coups and elections (Beevers, 2019, p. 133). In 1999 a peace agreement was signed. And even though violence continued, it meant the involvement of UN peacekeepers, and in 2000 the involvement of the British military. The RUF's power was declining and by 2001 they were disarming and demobilizing and the civil war would end in 2002 (Beevers, 2019, p. 135).

It is estimated that between 20,000 and 200,000 people were killed during the war. Out of the five million people in Sierra Leone, nearly half were displaced, and 80% of the population was in a state of extreme poverty due to the war (Beevers, 2019, p. 145). International peacebuilders identified the diamond sector as a main driver of the conflict, and therefore it was a priority to regain state control over. The marketization of the diamond sector and the rebuilding of it was viewed as central to peace, security, and the rebuilding of the country (Beevers, 2019, p. 146).

As in Liberia, the economic greed of the fighters was perceived to be the main underlying factor for the war by international peacebuilders and not political or social grievances. And just as in Liberia, the aspects of Sierra Leone's history of patronage, and grievances and resentment surrounding the access to natural resources and land have been partly overlooked (Beevers, 2019, p. 142). How landownership and tenure were organized during colonial rule and how that conflicted with livelihood

aspirations can be argued to be a major grievance. As in Libera, pre-war governance structures are still in place and the misreading of the underlying causes of conflict is aggravating historical tensions (Beevers, 2019, p. 142).

2.1.3 Establishment of the Gola Transboundary Peace Park

The establishment of the Gola Transboundary Peace Park (GTPP) has not been a clear-cut process. In May 2009 it was declared that the Gola Rainforest National Park of Sierra Leone (GRNP) and the *proposed* Gola National Forest Park (GNFP) of Liberia would make up a transboundary peace park between the two countries (BirdLife International, 2016). By 2011 a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between the two countries on details dealing with the cooperation surrounding the management, protection, and conservation of the park. By this date, the GNFP had not yet been established and as such the process surrounding the GTPP was put on hold (Carr, 2015, p. 10). In 2016 the Liberian government passed a bill designating the proposed area as a National Park (UNESCO, 2023b) and by 2020 a second MOU[1] was signed between the two governments regarding the conservation and management cooperation (Karmo, 2020).

The total area of the GTPP ranges from 220.000 ha (BirdLife International, 2016) to 350.000 ha (Brief, 2023) depending on what areas are included. It varies depending on whether you only count the actual parks, the corridors connecting them, or a wider area. The GRNP consists of 71.000 ha (GRNP, 2023) and the GNFP 88.000 ha (UNESCO, 2023b) so in a strict account the GTPP is 159.000 ha. Figure 1 maps the area making up the transboundary landscape of the GGL and thus the area this thesis is interested in.

[1] I have tried gaining access to these two MOU since I believe they would be valuable for my paper. Unfortunately, I have been unable to retrieve them from any open sources or people that I have reached out to.

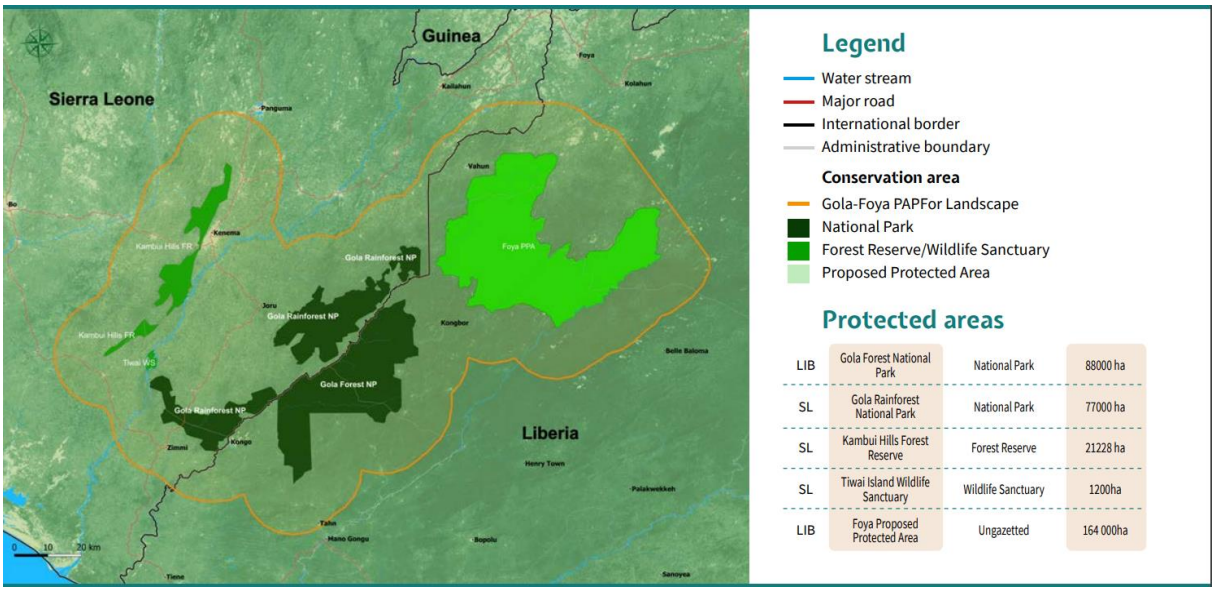


Figure 1: A map of the Greater Gola Landscape (PAPFor, 2022)

In an email conversation with a representative involved in the project GTPP, I received a brief document (Brief, 2023) detailing a timeline of activities that have been conducted (see Figure 2). As we can see a range of different agents and projects has been involved and I will now account for them and how they connect.

Timeline of Activities of the Coordination Committee of the Transboundary Peace Park Agreement between Liberia and Sierra Leone.
April 2009 : The European Commission (EC) launched the Project, Across The River Transboundary Project (ARTP) in Liberia and Sierra Leone with the overall objective - Upper Guinea Forest Estate in West Africa protected in critically threatened and important cross border areas and managed effectively by national institutions with the active collaboration of local communities
May 2009: Transboundary Peace Park Agreement formally signed by H.E Dr Ernest Bai Koroma, President of Sierra Leone and H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia in Lalehun in the Gaura Chiefdom of Kenema District, Sierra Leone
October 2011: In October 2011, an MoU on cross-border collaboration was signed by the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security of Sierra Leone and by the Managing Director of the FDA in Liberia, formalizing the cooperation between Sierra Leone and Liberia "in management, research, protection and conservation of the Greater Gola Transboundary Peace Park"
December 2011: the Gola Forest Reserve in Sierra Leone was upgraded to the Gola Rainforest National Park and officially launched by H.E. Dr Ernest Bai Koroma, President of the Republic Sierra Leone on the 3rd of December 2011.
September 2016: Liberia 54th National Legislature signed the establishment of the Gola Forest National Park into Law
May 2018 : FDA and SCNL organised the official Launch of the Gola Forest National Park (GFNP) in Liberia
2018: West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change Project (USAID- WABiCC) supported a meeting of the Technical Representatives to lay the groundwork for the first meeting of the Transboundary Coordination Committee which included the drafting of Work Plan
May 2019: USAID-WABiCC supported the first meeting of the Coordination Committee in Freetown Sierra Leone and later played a key role in the review of amendment of the Peace Park Agreement
February 2020: Signing of the amendment of the Transboundary MoU between Liberia and Sierra Leone.
January 2021: The EU Support to the Preservation of Forest Ecosystem in West Africa (PAPFor) Project was launched and recognised the importance of Transboundary collaboration as one of the major activities
April 2021 : PAPFor prepared a Roadmap for the implementation of the Transboundary Technical Sub committee to continue the initial efforts of the Coordination Committee
December 2021: PAPFor opened up consultation with FDA Liberia on the ToR of the Technical sub committee.
March 2022: PAPFor consulted with the NPAA on the ToR of the Technical sub committee and the plan for meeting of the Committee
May 2022: Gola Transboundary Technical sub- committee holds in Libasa Resort, Liberia

Figure 2: A timeline on the establishment of the GTPP (Brief, 2023).

The establishment of the GTPP has involved plenty of agents on different scales, ranging from the international to the local. How they connect and how they work is through international projects, grants, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. This means that the agents are diverse and work on different scales and at different times. On the international scale can we find agents such as the European Union (EU) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). They are funding overarching

programs that are being implemented by private corporations. The projects are in turn giving grants to a range of international NGOs that in turn are giving out grants to local partners. These partnerships are in turn partnering with national governments as well as international government organizations as well as specific projects, such as national parks. The programs are usually designed to reach the wider West African region. The focus of this thesis is not on the whole program, but on the parts that focus on the GGL.

In this case, it can look like this: USAID is funding the program West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change (WABiCC) that is being implemented by the company of Tetra Tech, a US company with a global presence. WABiCC is giving grants to the organization of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) that in turn are giving grants to their local partners of Society for the Conservation of Nature Liberia (SCNL) and Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) as well as other local partners. The intergovernmental regional organization of Mano River Union (MRU) and different entities of the governments of Sierra Leone and Liberia are at the same time being supported by WABiCC in facilitating meetings and agreements, as the signing of the second MOU illustrates (Brief, 2023).

As touched upon the work concerning the GGL is that of several different overarching programs. WABiCC and West Africa Biodiversity and Low Emissions Development (WABiLED) are two USAID-funded programs, Across The River – A Trans-boundary PeacePark for Sierra Leone and Liberia (ARTP) and Support program for the preservation of Forest Ecosystems in West Africa (PAPFor) are two EU funded projects. They have been active during different timespans and are continuing the work of the previous project. Apart from ARTP, they are overarching, and their focus is not only on Sierra Leone and Liberia but all of West Africa. Both of the USAID programs aim at improving conservation and climate resilience through low-emission development (WABiLED, 2022; WABiCC, 2023). The PAPFor program has a slightly narrower aim as it is concerned with the protection and conservation of the Guinean forests (PAPFor, 2023b). The GGL is one of six areas where PAPFor works with its local partners (PAPFor, 2023a).

ARTP was on the other hand concerned with the establishment of the GTPP. It was funded by the EU and ran between 2009 and 2013. The specific goal of the program was to advance the long-term conservation of the Gola forest along the Sierra Leone and Liberia border through international and national partnerships (ARTP, 2013, p. 7). An important part of that was the establishment of the GTPP. The project ended before it could be established since the Liberian part was not established as a national park and it was deemed that both the Sierra Leone and Liberia part of the park would need to have the same level of protection for the cooperation around it to work (ARTP, 2013, p. 8). As previously mentioned, the GNFP was established in 2016 and the cooperation surrounding the park was revitalized in 2018.

This brief contextualization highlights the process of the establishment of the GTPP and the different major events that have occurred. It also highlights the plethora of agents that are involved in the process and how they are connected.

The thesis will proceed with a literature review of previous research in the field. It focuses on how the environment and environmental questions have been coupled with peace and peacebuilding in previous research, and how scholars explicitly or inexplicitly have engaged and contributed to this research.

3 Literature review

This literature review is divided into two parts. The first part situates this thesis within the wider field of environmental peacebuilding. It serves as an overview of the research that has been done when it comes to the questions of peace, the environment, and peacebuilding, and how they have been connected.

The second part introduces the concept of peace and situates the thesis within the field of peace and conflict studies. It very briefly introduces the term and how it has been conceptualized and understood. What is important to note is that while the concept of peace is central to environmental peacebuilding, how peace is conceptualized varies and it is far from self-evident.

3.1.1 Environmental peacebuilding

As I have mentioned the field of EP is a pluriverse of ideas and practices all connected to the questions of the environment and peace. The research on the subject illustrates this. There exists a wide range of research touching upon both inter- and intrastate conflict and cooperation, as well as research on its perceived positive and negative effects on peace.

As we turn to peace and the environment an excellent example of the early work within EP is the edited volume of *Environmental Peacemaking* by Conca and Dabelko (2002) where environmental peacemaking is discussed in a wide array of contexts, from the US-Mexcio border (Doughman, 2002) to the Caspian sea (Blum, 2002). Interdependent environmental issues are presented as opportunities for cooperation instead of another obstacle to overcome in conflict-prone areas, especially when it comes to transboundary environmental issues (Dresse *et al.*, 2019, p. 103). One of those issues is water-related cooperation which is framed as one area of potential cooperation (Doughman, 2002) as is transboundary conservation cooperation (Swatuk, 2002).

Water and how that might affect peace in different contexts have been prominent in research, as Weinthal, Troell, and Nakayama (2014) highlight with their edited volume *Water and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding*. Empirical examples are among other Angola (Cain, 2014) and Bosnia and Hercegovina (Bogdanovic, 2014). As a case study, the Middle East has been prominent and water security and cooperation are seen as an important step in the process toward peace (Amery and Wolf, 2000; Mourad, 2013; Mehyar *et al.*, 2014; Williams, 2017; Brooks and Trottier, 2021).

Ide and Detges (2018) conclude in their cross-case study that the results suggest that water cooperation has a positive effect on peace and therefore there could be a case to be made for water cooperation as a peacebuilding practice. On the other hand, there is a critique of peacebuilding in general, and water cooperation specifically, to apply a technocratic approach. The risk is that the approach ignores the power dynamics of the conflict and instead of transforming the conflict, consolidates the status quo and depoliticizes the issue (Aggestam and Sundell-Eklund, 2014; Aggestam, 2015), as the joint water cooperation between Israel and Palestine illustrate (Zeitoun, 2008).

Transboundary conservation cooperation, or conservation as peacebuilding, has been brought forward as a suitable practice within EP. The edited volume of *Peace parks: Conservation and Conflict Resolution* (Ali, 2007b) highlights this. Peace parks can be viewed as transboundary conservation zones with the explicit aim of fostering peace and cooperation through the sharing of physical space. A peace park needs to be transboundary, e.g. stretched into two or more jurisdictions, for it to be able to either help resolve a conflict or maintain an existing peace (Ali, 2007a, pp. 1–2).

A peace park can take many shapes. A few examples are two or more continuous protected areas that stretch across a national border, several clusters of protected areas that stretch across borders or a transboundary area that includes proposed protected areas, e.g. the peace park is a step towards the establishment of new protected areas (Ali, 2007a, pp. 7–8). As I will show the establishment of the Gola Transboundary Peace Park can be characterized as the third type of peace park.

As with any type of cooperation a peace park is not an empty or neutral space. Ali argues that for the peace park to not be coopted by hegemonic interests, many of

the existing structures that exist between the parties need to be reformed (2007a, p. 2).

Within the global community, the concept of peace parks has been brought forward as a suitable peacebuilding practice (Ali, 2007a, p. 7). As such most cases of peace parks are interstate ones, focusing on bringing together (proposed) protected areas, as national parks or reserves, on each side of the border into a transboundary peace park with measures of management cooperation that can act as a steppingstone to greater cooperation within other areas of contention (Ali, 2007a, p. 12).

The assumption that transboundary protected areas (TBPA) can promote and lead to more peaceful relations between former adversaries has some support. Barquet, Lujala, and Rød (2014) found that in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East more peaceful relations between states are related to the existence of a TBPA, while not being the case in Latin America. An important point is that the peacebuilding capabilities of a TBPA are not inherent but hinge on its design as well as contextual factors such as interstate trust and political will (Barquet, Lujala and Rød, 2014, pp. 9–10).

Hsiao (2018) echoes these conclusions with a further emphasis on the importance of a clear mandate for peacebuilding in the TBPA agreements. Ide (2018) confirms these findings and concludes that cooperative environmental agreements, such as the establishment of a TBPA, facilitate interstate reconciliation under certain conditions. Internal political stability, attention to environmental challenges, wider cooperation, and an ongoing reconciliation process are all conditions that need to be met (Ide, 2018, p. 361).

It has been proposed that the contested area of the Siachen Glacier should be assigned as a peace park to end the conflict in the area between India and Pakistan (Kemkar, 2006), something that has not been realized. An example that has been realized is in the Greater Virunga Landscape Cooperation (GVLC) transcending the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda.

The GVLC and the conservation of mountain gorillas are argued to have led to greater integration, cooperation, and peaceful existence among the three nations (Refisch and Jenson, 2016). Others point to the neoliberal underpinnings of the conservation effort and how the marketization and commodification of the gorillas

through tourism is perpetrating conflict between the parties (Marijnen, 2022; Trogisch and Fletcher, 2022) and others point to the displacement of the indigenous population (Hsiao, 2018) and discrimination along socioeconomic lines (Hochleithner, 2017) within the park, thus echoing the critique that exists towards EP in general.

Another prominent example is the establishment of the Cordillera del Condor Corridor as part of the peace treaty between Ecuador and Peru. It has been viewed as an excellent example of how comprehensive conflict resolution can be practiced through conservation (Ali, 2007a, p. 10). While interstate peace was achieved, and arguably because of the peace in the area, extractivism has been prominent and on the rise on both sides of the border since (Vela-Almeida, 2018; Ramos-Cortez and MacNeill, 2022), with the indigenous populations facing displacement (Ali, 2019, pp. 185–186).

The critique aimed at the Greater Virunga Landscape Cooperation and Cordillera del Condor Corridor is not isolated to those cases and conservation as a peacebuilding practice has gained plenty of critique. Several authors argue that conservation at large can act as justification for *green militarization* and employment of *green violence* (Neumann, 2004; Ramutsindela, 2007; Lunstrum, 2015; Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016; Büscher and Fletcher, 2018; Jooste and Ferreira, 2018; Duffy and Massé, 2021; Trogisch, 2021) and green grabbing of land (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012). Others point to the neoliberal underpinnings of conservation and question how conservation efforts are implemented (Duffy, 2006; Brockington, Duffy and Igoe, 2008; King and Wilcox, 2008; Ramutsindela and Shabangu, 2013; Chiutsi and Saarinen, 2019; Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2021). In opposition to the idea of peace parks and conservation areas as promoting environmental biodiversity they have been critiqued as tools for state control and increased extractivism (Bruna, 2022). While transboundary conservation has been shown to have positive effects on peace, there are also instances where the conservation effort in itself exacerbates conflict (Barquet, 2015).

When we turn to intrastate peace EP can be argued to have a positive effect, as well as a negative effect, and thus mirror the findings when it comes to interstate

peace. Johnson, Rodríguez, and Quijano Hoyos (2021) conducted a cross-case review and found that EP, in the form of natural resource management (NRM), can both contribute to and undermine peace outcomes (2021, p. 15). It can contribute to peace as capabilities, that is enhancing livelihoods security, and focusing on just distribution and access of environmental resources. At the same time, they found that it can undermine peace as substantial integration, that is state legitimacy and state-society linkages (Johnson, Rodríguez and Quijano Hoyos, 2021, p. 3). Their findings support the notion that EP can contribute to peacebuilding, both positively and negatively.

As illustrated with this literature review the research on conservation and peace is diverse. But as Ide points out the field is lacking research with an explicit spatial perspective (Ide, 2017, pp. 544–546). This thesis addresses this theoretical gap.

Within EP important concepts are defined differently depending on the academic context the study is conducted (Dresse *et al.*, 2019, p. 100; Johnson, Rodríguez and Quijano Hoyos, 2021, p. 2). One of these concepts is that of peace. In the studies mentioned there is no coherent definition of the term, and considering how fleeting the term can be that is no surprise. Therefore, the second part of this literature review is concerned with the concept of peace, and introduces some key concepts within the research.

3.1.2 Peace

In the world we live in peace is a word that evokes many different feelings and understandings. Peace can be a place, peace can be a feeling and peace can be a moment in time and as such it has different meanings for different people (Standish *et al.*, 2022, p. 6).

Peace is therefore not an easy term to conceptually pinpoint, nevertheless, one must do so when working with questions of peace. Despite its multiplicity peace can often be taken for granted or understood as self-evident. Contrary to that view questions such as what is peace, who is it for, who creates, promotes and whose interest does it serve is essential (Richmond, 2020, pp. 20–21).

It is also important to keep in mind that peace is not a static concept, but a concept in constant movement, being changed and adapted depending on where and by whom it is employed and enacted. Standish *et al.* (2022, p. 7) point to the fact that within peace and conflict studies the concept of peace has been conceptualized as many things, such as sustainable (Lederach, 1997), and durable (Wagner and Druckman, 2017).

Historically the field of peace and conflict studies has been concerned with negative peace between nations and groups, e.g. the absence of violence, when the concept of peace has been used (Standish *et al.*, 2022, p. 7). Later on, the discipline expanded through the work of Johan Galtung and his notion of positive peace, e.g. the absence of structural violence (Standish *et al.*, 2022, p. 8). That, in turn, opened the door for a further expansion of the concept of peace to include peace between people and the natural world, and to view peace as relational (Standish *et al.*, 2022, p. 7).

While peace has conceptually widened different perspectives of peace it is argued that the dominating perspective of peace within the global conversation and peacebuilding community since the end of the Cold War has been that of liberal peace (Koopman, 2014, p. 111; Richmond, 2020, p. 11). Within liberal peace, you can distinguish between different types of liberal peace and break it down into different strands (Richmond, 2006, p. 300). For this thesis though, liberal peace is understood to be a broad umbrella of peacemaking resting on western liberal assumptions, brought forward by agents in the global north. In effect it underpins the international norms and structures of global peacemaking, emitting a top-down order of peacemaking ideas, practices, and language (Mac Ginty, 2010, p. 396).

Since the early 2000s it could be argued that this global model of peace has changed character in favor of neoliberal peace where state security, global free trade, global profit, and resource extraction are the main building blocks as opposed to democracy and human rights (Richmond, 2020, pp. 11, 280–281). It is never less a liberal peace, and it can also be argued that this has always been the character of liberal peace (Mac Ginty, 2010, p. 394), thus equating liberal peace with neoliberal peace.

It is important to note that while liberal peace might be the dominant narrative of peace, it is in constant conversation with other modes of peace(s) producing what has been called a hybridization of peace (Mac Ginty, 2010; Björkdahl and Höglund, 2013). The hybridization of peace can in essence be described as the outcome when different peacebuilding agents and their norms and ideas clash and interact.

A further theorization of the concept of peace is to come in the following section. The goal of this introduction is to illustrate just how elusive the concept of peace can be, and how it can be a narrow and unyielding concept just as well as an inclusive one. What will follow is a presentation of the theoretical framework used to analyze the spatial imaginaries of peace(s).

4 Theory

In this thesis, I will use the overarching theory of spatiality and analyze the spatial imaginaries of peace(s) that are informed by and mutually constituted by the establishment of the GTTP and work towards conservation in the GGL. I will do so through a theoretical framework consisting of spatial imaginaries and spatial stories. I will continue this thesis with a brief introduction to my main theories. Following that comes a more in-depth exploration of my understanding of spatial theory, spatial stories, and how I conceptualize peace(s) and connect them all. Finalizing the theory section of the thesis comes a section on spatial imaginaries and how I conceptualize spatial imaginaries to be made by spatial stories.

Surprisingly the analysis of space has been rather absent from peace- and conflict research. Space has been treated as a background to where something is happening as opposed to the constitutive practice of peace and conflict. Spatial analysis can tell us what kind of space is produced, what norms, and what practices they imply (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022a, pp. 536–537). Similarly, the field of environmental peacebuilding is lacking in explicit spatial analysis of both the processes and outcomes of environmental peacebuilding projects (Ide, 2017, pp. 544–546). This thesis then addresses this theoretical gap by incorporating the spatial aspect within the fields.

Peace(s) is another core concept of this thesis. Peace is not a singular phenomenon where it means the same for everyone. On the contrary, peace is always subjective and plural. It is socially constructed and constantly changing (Kühn, 2012, p. 397; Koopman, 2014, pp. 120–121; Gusic, 2020, p. 23; Richmond, 2020, p. 22). I argue that this notion is of utmost importance and therefore I am utilizing the suffix (s) to the word peace to highlight its plurality. I argue that peace(s) is inherently spatial and produced and reproduced on different scales. Peace(s) and space are mutually constituted of each other where peace is shaped by the space it is created in, and peace is shaping the space (Koopman, 2014, p. 109). What follows is now a more in-depth account of spatial theory, peace(s), and spatial imaginary.

4.1 Spatial theory

Scholars from the discipline of geography have been engaged with the question of peace and space in varying degrees throughout the years as McConnell, Megoran, and Williams highlight (2014, pp. 7–11), which has happened in conversation with other disciplines, one of them peace (and conflict) research (McConnell, Megoran and Williams, 2014:6). Within peace research, the spatial aspects have gained traction during the last two decades (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016b; Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017; Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b). Within spatial theory, certain core concepts need a clear definition. These concepts are of importance to my understanding of spatiality and how I have analyzed my data. Therefore, what follows is a definition of the concepts of *space, place,* and *agency* and how they in turn inform the concepts of *spatial practices, spatial dynamics,* and *spatial formation.* These are in turn informing my understanding of *spatial stories.* By going through these concepts, I aim to convey how I arrived at my understanding of spatiality and how it shapes and is shaped by peace(s). The two concepts of *scale* and *boundaries* are also defined to highlight the vertical and horizontal aspects of space. I argue that it can be helpful to unpack any theory to reveal its inner workings and then put it together again with a greater understanding.

Space is not an objective material entity, but ideas, phenomena, and social relations shaped by societal discourses, ascribed meanings, norms, and values (Ide, 2017:547; Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b:660). Space is never empty nor neutral, and the production of space is always political. It comes with historical and political assumptions, and various agents seek to ascribe it to meaning, norms, and values (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b:661). Just as it is never empty, it is never fixed but fluid (Donnelly, 2016, p. 203).

Place is the material locality of space, and they are mutually constitutive of each other. The capacity to transform spaces into places and places into spaces are expressions of agency (Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017, p. 2). Ide brings up the example of the Middle East as a water-scarce or water-rich place (2017:547). Depending on

how the place is spatially constructed it calls for different actions in water management. This is also an important aspect when it comes to conservation. Natural characteristics of places are not objective and independent and facilitate corresponding conservation practices (Ide, 2017, p. 547). While both place and space are shaped by natural (in essence spatial) characteristics, they will not always be shaped in the same way throughout time. How society understands a certain characteristic differs, and both the societal understanding and the characteristic in itself might change, thus making it mutually constitutive (Koopman, 2014, p. 121).

Agency is then the driver behind place-making and space-making. Therefore the transformative process that occurs in a post-conflict society can be understood as the transformation of place and space (Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017, p. first page). The capacity to shape spaces and places is what defines agency. By transforming ideas and imaginaries into material realities (place-making) and (re-)creating the possibilities and meanings of places (space-making) agents exercise agency (Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017, p. 2).

Without agency, space loses its material footing and becomes merely a symbolic idea and therefore loses its transformative capability (Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017, p. 144). Therefore, agency and practices of place-making and space-making are mutually constitutive of each other, and space mold agents (Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017, p. 6). This notion is paramount to how the transformative ability of spatial stories is understood to be intimately intertwined with agency.

The vertical organization of space is *scale* which refers to the local, national, transnational, etc. It can also refer to more specific constructions as a certain city or area (Ide, 2017:547). The scale goes somewhat against the more conventional idea of levels of analysis where you traditionally view them as static, where agents jump from one scale to another (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b:664). Here scale has different aspects, where all political projects employ politics of scale, and agents can instrumentally use scale, as in scalar politics. The very concepts of scale, for example, transboundary or indigenous, can shape environmental cooperation (and conflict) (Ide, 2017:547). As in, on what scale the cooperation is perceived as taking place is shaping the nature of the cooperation.

Boundaries are the horizontal aspect of space and relate to what one might think of first when it comes to space, namely the delineation of territory. Different agents in different scales might perceive boundaries differently; in how they run, their characteristics (social, natural, political), and their meaning (protective, obstructive, etc.) (Ide, 2017:547). Boundaries are also constitutive of social-spatial identities, meaning the construction of boundaries (rhetorical and material) delimit the self from the other. Boundaries are therefore an important aspect of imagined peace(s) as they define who is included in it and not.

Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel (2022) suggest three entry points into analyzing spaces for peace. *Spatial practices* shed light on the agents and activities that create, transform, or dissolve space. Agents create space through spatial practices and thus a focus on spatial practices in research is a focus on agents and the possibilities for, or restrictions against agency and how agents actively try to shape space (661-667).

Spatial dynamics emphasize the social construction of space, analyzing the rise, change, and fall of them. With a focus on dynamics as processes, scale, interactions, and relationality, spatial dynamics aims to untangle how spaces relate to each other and mutually constitute (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b:664).

S*patial formations* are concerned with how space matters and manifests, both material and conceptual. The aim is therefore to unpack the underlying assumptions and understandings that the spatial formation is based on. The practices of agents produce spatial formations with certain agendas. Spatial formations are then the results of past political efforts, and even as they become taken for granted the underlying norms, values, and imaginaries within spatial formations remain (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b:665). One can then utilize this to analyze a spatial formation where peace is to be achieved, and what sense of peace this would imply (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b, p. 666).

It is important to note that these three entry points of spatial inquiries into peace are presented as separate from each other. They are always interconnected and mutually constitutive (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022b:661). In this thesis the analytical inroads presented above are put together in the more holistic approach of *spatial stories,* highlighting their interconnectedness. At the same time, I

acknowledge that spatial stories are a spatial practice in themselves on the ground that spatial stories are not simply told but performed (Donnelly, 2016, p. 204).

Spatial stories are an attempt by agents to enforce order on and make sense of, fluid spaces through discourse (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016a, p. 16; Komarova and O'Dowd, 2016, p. 271). Spatial stories tie spatial practices, spatial formations, and spatial dynamics together. They facilitate transitions between spaces and places as a spatial practice and are part of how spaces and places are constructed, inhabited, and embodied, as in spatial dynamics as well as spatial formations (Donnelly, 2016, p. 204). Spatial stories link space and place together by organizing the same into "spatial trajectories" (Donnelly, 2016, p. 204).

In essence, spatial stories are narratives understood in a spatial sense. A common understanding of narratives is that of a form of discourse that organizes human experiences and makes sense of them concerning the self. It is organized through the sequencing and creating of different events and agents into coherent stories (Patterson and Monroe, 1998, pp. 315–317).

Narratives as spatial stories take the definition of narratives and put it into a spatial focus. We could then call it spatial narratives, as Komarova and O'Dowd (2016), but I prefer the term spatial stories to highlight the imaginary of the concept. To talk about stories suggests the involvement of the imagination, while narratives suggest a straight account of what happened or should happen. This does not exclude the prescriptive or descriptive aspects within spatial stories but rather opens it up for more possibilities. Importantly the definition of narrative aligns with the definition of spatial stories and therefore I argue that they are the same, no matter what you call them.

Spatial stories are constructed by spatial characteristics and discursive, and performative elements. They manifest in a collection of ideas and practices and through this create and re-create places and spaces, as well as provide them with visual, discursive, and material expectations of practice and behaviour for certain places. It is through this process that spatial stories give both shape and content to socio-spatial change (Komarova and O'Dowd, 2016, p. 271) and act as tools for action either by promoting or resisting change (Komarova and O'Dowd, 2016, p.

282). Spatial stories are then vital for the transformation of space into place and vice versa (Donnelly, 2016, p. 204).

One important point is that spatial stories can be interconnected to others, showcasing that opposing stories can be combined while remaining separate and incomplete (Donnelly, 2016, p. 204). Spatial stories engage with each other in a "narrative field of struggle" (Komarova and O'Dowd, 2016, p. 271) and address important questions such as *what* they are, *how* to address them, by *whom*, and what emotions are to be felt around them (Komarova and O'Dowd, 2016, p. 272).

Spatial stories dictate a certain imaginary, what is possible and what is it not, who is included and who is not. We tell stories about what we imagine and as such spatial imaginaries are made up of spatial stories.

An account of how peace(s) are understood in this thesis, as well as how it connects to spatial stories is now to follow. In essence, I argue that spatial stories are crucial for how peace(s) are imagined and envisioned.

4.2 Peace(s)

While liberal understandings of peace have dominated the global conversation of peace and its construction in societies, that does not preclude other conceptualizations of peace. What guides my understanding of peace is the notion that it is forever becoming (Richmond, 2020, p. 24). It is a socially constructed, changing, and constantly evolving concept, dependent on the principles, ideas, norms, social relations, and institutions it rests on (Kühn, 2012, p. 397; Koopman, 2014, pp. 120–121; Gusic, 2020, p. 23; Richmond, 2020, p. 22). As such it is inherently spatial, produced and reproduced on a range of different scales. From the bodily to the global where peace does not mean the same at different scales, for different agents, and at different times and places (Koopman, 2014, p. 111; McConnell, Megoran and Williams, 2014, pp. 18–19). Peace as such is shaped by the space it is created in, and peace is shaping the space (Koopman, 2014, p. 109).

As created and not given peace always exists in a continuum and as such in plural and subjective forms. Consequently, there exist almost infinite viewpoints regarding the conceptualization of peace and how it is understood (Gusic, 2022, pp. 621–622).

While I define peace(s) as more than the absence of war, I realize that some will define it as just that and nothing else. But as Koopman argues, peace(s) are only useful when defined in an open sense (2011, p. 194). Peace(s) in this study is understood in a broad and complementary sense. Meaning that it is not only concerned with the absence of violence, justice, security, or solidarity but that it can encompass all these aspects as well as others (Koopman, 2011, p. 194). In this sense, it can be argued that the term peace(s) is vague, undefined, and all-encompassing. Instead, I argue that peace defined narrowly can never capture the different experiences and the relationality of peace(s). When it comes down to it peace is about relationships between parties (Standish *et al.*, 2022, p. 13) and one can have a better or worse relationship with another party.

The peace(s) produced are not static, not an endpoint but are constantly produced and reproduced as socio-spatial relations. As such it is made for some people somewhere, in some manner. They are produced and interact on different scales (Koopman, 2011, p. 194). I argue that spatial stories are an important component of this constant production and re-production. How the peace(s) are imagined as spatial stories then becomes crucial for how the peace(s) are made, and for what kind of peace(s) are being produced. The peace(s) being produced in my case are then understood by me in a grounded and contextual way.

4.3 Imaginaries

How we imagine peace matters since peace is both shaped and shapes the space in which it is made. A peace imagined as being made in a closed room by men in suits will inevitably exclude a range of agents from the process. Similarly, if we reject the idea that space shapes peace(s) and merely acts as a container this will shape how we

imagine peace(s) to be made, and what we can do to and in it (Koopman, 2014, p. 109).

Imaginary and practice are two sides of the same coin. As stressed before peacebuilding agents deploy specific imaginaries and practices in their space-making and place-making process (Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017, p. 2). I argue that imaginaries are not separate from practice, but rather that they are enacted in material practice and that this enactment can modify the imaginaries.

Imaginaries can take different forms. In this thesis, I am concerned with spatial imaginaries. Spatial imaginaries are collectively held ideas and stories about space and place, and a way of representing and talking about space and place. Thus, they shape material practices acting as discourse, (re)producing and changing social perceptions about places among people (Watkins, 2015, p. 509). This is in turn related to place-making and space-making processes and how peace(s) are shaping and being shaped by space and place.

A spatial imaginary is being (re)produced through text, images, and language telling a story. It can then materialize when people act both concerning and through the imagination (Watkins, 2015, p. 509). A spatial imaginary is therefore not only representative but also performative (Watkins, 2015, p. 509) and acts as "… a staging ground for action…" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 7).

I agree with Watkins who argues that spatial imaginaries are best understood as performative discourse (2015, p. 514). The difference between this and the more traditional position of spatial imaginaries as representative discourse, is that spatial imaginaries are understood as being (re)produced not only though language but also through material practice (Watkins, 2015, p. 516). As such it rejects the discourse/material practice binary by suggesting that spatial imaginaries establish ideas through language *and* practice (Watkins, 2015, pp. 514, 517).

What this means is that spatial imaginaries are not only found in language but also in what agents do and act on concerning space and place. A policy document from one agent might convey one spatial story, while the actions of the same agent convey a contradicting spatial story. This understanding aligns with that of Side who argues that narrative, in this thesis understood as spatial stories, is intimately

connected to agency as agents act on and try to affect others through narratives (Side, 2015, p. 488).

Conceptually Watkins divides spatial imaginaries into three types (2015, p. 512). *Place imaginaries* transmit ideas about characteristics concerning a place (for example Africa, Sierra Leone, or the Gola Rainforest) and 'othering' contesting interpretations of that place. Different groups might have different place imaginaries about the same place (Watkins, 2015, p. 512).

Idealized space imaginaries usually support a place imaginary by transmitting the said characteristics as representative of an idealized space (for example developed country, ghetto, or peace park) If a place is imagined as a 'developed country' it is argued that that place should remain, by 'othering' other places. If a place is imagined as a 'ghetto' it is argued how that place should change from one idealized space to another, more positive one (Watkins, 2015, pp. 512–513).

Spatial transformation imaginaries are often coupled with place and idealized space imaginaries consisting of ideas of how places will, should, or have evolved through a generalized process (for example globalization). This type of imaginary often comes with ideas of inevitability, and 'othering' of other ideas of what may come and has been (Watkins, 2015, p. 513). These three types are all connected but by dividing them we can analyze the different kinds of stories they are telling; how different agents use them and, *how* they are interconnected. One can especially analyze how deterministic ideas of spatial transformation and idealized spaces are embedded in place imaginaries (Watkins, 2015, p. 514).

I argue that these different types of spatial imaginaries are better characterized as spatial stories that in turn make up a broader spatial imaginary. I do realize that it could be argued that spatial stories and spatial imaginaries are the same conceptual and that the only difference lies in the name. They are also somewhat used interchangeably, as Watkins illustrates by describing his three different types of spatial imaginaries as "…each of these three tells a different type of *spatial story* and is used by actors in varying ways" (added emphasis) (2015, p. 512). It also nicely illustrates how spatial imaginaries are made up by spatial stories, practiced by different agents. Coupled with Donnelly's argument that spatial stories are separate

and, in some regards, incomplete (2016) I argue that the argument that spatial imaginaries are made up of spatial stories holds up well.

As mentioned before, spatial stories do not exist in a vacuum but engage with each other. They complement, support, contest, and reject each other. Understanding spatial stories as making up wider spatial imaginaries takes Donnelly's argument of a plurality of spatial stories as a "… larger totality of enacted spatial practices." (Donnelly, 2016, p. 211) a step further.

Spatial imaginaries and spatial stories are often talked about in the same context, but rarely do they engage explicitly. Stories are present, as in the definition of spatial imaginaries presented in this thesis, but they are not engaged with as such. By seriously engaging with and incorporating spatial stories as an analytical concept in spatial imaginaries we can better understand not only the spatial imaginaries themselves but how they are informed by the relationality between different types of spatial stories.

5 Method

This thesis and its research problem is a qualitative one, approached through a case study methodology. The case study logic has guided the choice of methods and provided answers to the question of *why* I decided to approach the research problem with the methods I did (Mason, 2018, p. 32). The case study seeks to answer the question of what constitutes the case (Mason, 2018, p. 209) and what it is a case of.

Qualitative research is not a linear process, but an organic and messy one. As such qualitative analysis requires creativity, reflexivity, and solid theoretical engagement (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. xxvi). Qualitative methods as such are not necessarily creative but in the diverse field of qualitative methods, we can find certain methods that give more room for creativity and others that provide less room (Mason, 2018, p. 164).

Instead of looking at a set of 'creative methods' it is more helpful to view creativity in qualitative research as how we engage with the subject of interest and how we handle the data that comes from that engagement. Method in this view is more about the experience and activity of research rather than a set of steps off the shelf that is to be followed (Mason, 2018, p. 164). These methodological principles have underpinned this thesis.

While I argue that qualitative research in many ways goes against the positivist research tradition I do realize that the established ways of measuring and evaluating research are through terms such as validity, reliability, and generalizability (Mason, 2018, p. 34). I do not reject the terms out right but instead agree with Mason who argues that the broad ideas behind them can still be useful (2018, p. 35). Good, rigorous qualitative research can show that the data and analysis are related to the key concepts, that is validity. How you generate data and analyze it should be as accurate as possible, that is reliability. The same goes for generalizability, where you need to be able to reflect on the research in a wider context and what claims can be made (Mason, 2018, p. 35).

Qualitative research is then a matter of critical and reflexive practice. To have your research be valid and reliable, transparency in how you went about your research is paramount. There are no universal rules for how to go about it, but you need to be able to show *how* and *why* you made the choices you did (Mason, 2018, pp. 36–37).

In this thesis I analyze the spatial stories and imaginaries through a qualitative visual and textual analysis, drawing inspiration from Side (2015) and her work in visual and textual narrative analysis. Side's research is concerned with conflict-instigated displacement in Northern Ireland, and how textual and visual narratives are employed by different communities in attempts to gain either political recognition or an advantage over other communities in the ongoing conflict transformation (2015, p. 486). While I recognize that both the object of study and context are quite different from what I am studying in this thesis we ask ourselves similar questions about why certain stories are told, as well as how and for whom they are told and retold (Side, 2015, p. 486).

I also draw from Edenborg (2016) and his work on belonging and visibility in Russian media, also through a visual and textual narrative analysis. The study provides me with methodological inroads of how to conceptualize the image in relation to text.

More often than not visual and textual methods are employed separately in social sciences. When instead analyzed as a pair the two mediums can perform several functions. It can generate emotions through an interactive function, a compositional function to generate a political and/or emotive response, and a representational function to communicate a certain story to an audience (Side, 2015, p. 487).

The material in the study consists of 62 media and visual representations where 37 are from news sources based in Sierra Leone and 25 are from news sources based in Liberia. I also draw from visual and textual material produced by local NGOs. I do not claim to include the whole corpus of material surrounding the GGL. Instead, the material has been selected according to the principle of purposive sampling.

The following section of the thesis will account for the method used and how it is been employed to analyze the data generated. It will be followed by a discussion of the material and a more in-depth discussion of the sampling strategy.

5.1 Visual and textual stories

A visual and textual approach to the analysis is inherently a multi-method approach. Textual and visual analyses are usually analyzed independently. While one can do one or the other, I argue that both the visual and the textual dimensions of the material available to me tell a story and it is doing that together and in union. The different approaches are as such able to investigate the puzzle pieces that make up the 'research puzzle' in different ways (Mason, 2018, pp. 37–38). By ignoring one or the other I argue that I would miss important parts of what makes up the spatial imaginary and thus end up with an understanding of it that is not as exhaustive as it could be with the material available to me.

Visual materials are never innocent representations of the world. They represent and interpret the world in very particular ways (Rose, 2016, p. 2). They do so in conjunction with written texts and make sense in relation to them, and in some cases, they can be argued to make sense without the written text (Rose, 2016, p. 22).

In this thesis though, images are understood to be used to support, tell, or contest a spatial story. They are not spatial stories in themselves but are dependent on the way they are displayed for what meaning we as readers attach to them. As where they are placed, how they are described (by a caption for example), and in what context (Edenborg, 2016, p. 26).

I am interested in visual material in relation to textual material, and the textual material in relation the visual material. That is the visual and textual material is analyzed together. I made this choice since they were produced to tell a story together, and not as separate entities.

Images are non-verbal by nature, and they work differently from text (Bleiker, 2015, p. 873) and can therefore be an inroad into the non-explicit (Edenborg, 2016, p. 26). As a complement to the texts analyzed images can point to tensions, ambiguities, or what is left out from the manifest content in the text (Edenborg, 2016, p. 26).

Images produce meaning through both interactions with other images (inter visuality) as well as with different text (intertextuality). For those familiar with the contexts they refer to they can evoke specific readings of the image. Certain intervisual/intertextual connotations can be made through "sticky associations", where certain images and texts are repeatedly put next to each other in representation and thus force an emotional connection between them (Edenborg, 2016, p. 27).

As mentioned the method in this thesis draws on the work by Side (2015) and Edenborg (2016). The textual analysis in their work rests on the principles of close reading, thematic analyses contextualization (Side, 2015, p. 488), and a circular movement between the reconstruction of overall narrative patterns and in-depth examination of the textual material (Edenborg, 2016, p. 24). These principles align with those of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 8).

As mentioned before good qualitative analysis is creative and certain methods are more creative than others. The guidelines proposed by reflexive thematic analysis provide me not with a clear step-by-step guide but rather with process guidelines of how to work with the material (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 10, 35–36).

In following these guidelines my work with the material started with a familiarization phase where I read and re-read through the material to become as familiar with the material as possible. When I reached that point, I started coding the material. While the familiarization of the material is done with broad brush strokes the coding is a meticulous process where I coded and re-coded and collapsed and expanded codes in a systematic and theoretically grounded way.

The codes are the budling blocks from which the themes (spatial stories) are built. It is the smallest unit of analysis and is intended to capture a specific and singular idea, concept, or meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 53). All relevant segments of data were tagged with a code, and some segments were tagged with several codes

since the same segment had several distinct ideas, concepts, or meanings attached to it.

As qualitative research as a whole, the coding process in reflexive thematic analysis is an organic yet systematic one. It is an evolving process where codes are developed and not set in stone (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 54–55). Through the analytical commitment put into the process, the codes evolve, and as such more nuance and depth are added to the output of the process. In appendix 2 the codebook is attached to further give transparency to my coding process and to illustrate how each code captures a single idea, concept, or meaning. A further explanation of how the theoretical framework guided my coding process is presented in the following section.

5.1.1 Operationalization

The operationalization of the thesis hinges on key theoretical and methodological assumptions presented above. To reiterate, in this thesis *spatial imaginaries* are conceptually conceived as being made of *spatial stories* that in turn are constructed by spatial characteristics, discursive and performative elements being manifested in a collection of ideas and practices that can be viewed as *spatial practices*, *spatial dynamics*, and *spatial formations*. The spatial imaginaries are informed not only by the spatial stories themselves but also by the relationality between different types of stories.

Spatial stories and spatial imaginaries of peace(s) are vital for the transformation of space and place is the process of space- and place-making. Peace(s) are plural and subjective, and one agent's understanding of peace can differ from another. Peace(s) are socially constructed and inherently spatial. As such peace(s) and spatial imaginaries and stories are intimately connected as they are mutually constitutive. How we imagine peace(s) shape the place, as well as space and place are shaping the peace(s) imagined.

To be able to analyze the spatial stories of peace(s), and in turn the spatial imaginaries being the result of these stories I have utilized Watkin's (2015) typology

of spatial imaginaries, as well as Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel (2022b) analytical inroads into space for peace. As I argued before the different types of spatial imaginaries conceived by Watkins (2015) are better understood as spatial stories making up the spatial imaginary through the relations between the different stories. Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel's (2022b) analytical inroads are on the other hand argued to be understood as what spatial stories are constituted of.

The table below summarizes the characteristics of different types of spatial stories and the signifiers used to characterize them within the data, showing how my theoretical understanding explicitly informs the analysis.

Type of spatial story	**Characteristics and ideas**	**Signifiers**
Place imaginaries	Characteristics and ideas concerning place by 'othering' other interpretations of that place.	Language and representations of us and them. Language and representations of distinctive characteristics concerning a place.
Idealized space imaginaries	Characteristics and ideas concerning positive or negative values are representative of a certain idealized space.	Language and representations of distinctive characteristics of a place are presented as representative of a space.
Spatial transformation	Characteristics and ideas concerning how places will, should, or have evolved.	Language and representations of change and a certain future that comes with the process of

		change, as well as ideas of the past and present.

As touched upon earlier, theoretical assumptions are always present in the analysis of data (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 8). The analysis can be either more inductive or more deductive. The analysis performed in this thesis is more deductive on account of the theoretical frame presented above, where the analysis is conducted through the lens (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 10) of the types of spatial stories and how they relate and mutually constitute each other.

5.2 Material

The analysis draws on textual and visual representations produced by non-state, and media agents. Since this thesis is concerned with the spatial imaginaries of peace(s) that surround the GGL I have generated[2] data concerning the agents that have been active in the landscape, as well as media agents reporting on questions surrounding it. As shown before the establishment of the GTPP has been a process where a multitude of agents on different scales have been involved, from the global to the local. I opted to analysis material from the identified local NGOs:s as well as media agents. By doing so I was able to analysis the spatial imaginaries of peace(s) relating to the GGL from the international, regional, national, and to a certain extent, local scale. While the material has been produced by local agents, it engages with agents on all scales.

To be able to follow a potential development of the spatial stories being told the timespan of the material starts at the year of the proclamation of the establishment of the GTPP, in May 2009, and goes up until June 30th, 2023. This does not mean that I

[2] Following Mason I use the word *generating* instead of *collecting* data (2018, pp. 21–22). As a researcher you do not go on a field of data and collect the pieces that you are interested in, but it is an active process where the data is generated. The choices that are made will determine what kind of data are generated from the sources used.

have an equal amount of data relating to all the years, but certain years have generated more data because of different events happening.

The biggest challenge of this thesis has been to gain access to the population of the GGL and the local scale. I have not generated any ethnographic or interview data for this study and thus faced a conundrum of how to proceed. I have then turned to national media agents and material produced concerning the GGL. As such my thesis is limited to what the media deem worthy of reporting on. The same logic goes for the material produced by non-state agents. The study is limited to what picture the agents want to paint when it comes to conservation and peace(s).

The most important principle when it comes to data generation is to conduct it deliberately and systematically (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 27). The corpus of material relevant to my thesis is quite big because of the chosen temporal limits and I could not analyze it in its entirety. Instead, what material I generated my data from was decided by my sampling strategy. I view sampling as an open process where you follow certain principles to gain access to relevant data sources, that might say something concerning a wider universe. This is then not the same notion of sampling as we might find in quantitative research (Mason, 2018, pp. 53–54). The main purpose of sampling in qualitative research is to be generative and provide the researcher with useful data concerning the research aims (Mason, 2018, p. 55). How I conducted my sampling and data generation is described below.

5.2.1 Material from NGO agents

I proceeded by mapping the key actors active in the GGL, through the establishment of the GTPP, as presented in section XX. In this thesis, I decided to focus my efforts on the national NGOs of SCNL and CSSL since they are the ones working on the ground. The delimitations to these agents are made with the confidence that they can convey and be representative of spatial imaginaries of peace(s).

The process of identifying the material from the two organizations was made with the use of the search engine YaCy[3]. I did this to be able to make more precise searches and to have control of what has been indexed (searchable) on the websites. For example, by making an advanced search on the Google search engine for pdf:s published on the websites of SCNL with the search terms "filetype:pdf site:scnlliberia.org" I got four results. By making the same search on YaCy after I locally indexed the website, I got 14 results. I locally indexed the websites of SCNL and CSSL and searched for pdf:s to find reports, newsletters, policy documents, and similar material. I also used the search term "gola forest" to find blog posts or articles on their websites.

In the initial phase, I ended up with 14 pdf:s from SCNL and 10 pdf:s from CSSL. Out of these SCNL had four newsletters and CSSL five newsletters. The search for "gola forest" generated 253 and 42 hits. With the uneven ratio of results and the scope of the thesis in mind, I decided to only focus on the newsletters.

By doing so I could allow myself to gain a deeper understanding of the material than I would have been able to if I included all the results. Another factor in the choice of the newsletters is that they included plenty of the material that was included in the other results.

5.2.2 Material from media agents

I opted to use material produced by national media, as opposed to international media, as a way of investigating what spatial stories are communicated to the people who are affected by how the GLL and GTPP are managed. I used two lists compiled by Stanford Libraries to identify media agents in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Stanford Libraries, 2023b, 2023a). From there I made site-specific searches on the Google search engine with the search term "gola forest" to identify websites that would have reported on activities relating to the GLL and GTPP. The same approach as used

[3] For a technical explanation of how YaCy works I recommend their website www.yacy.net.

before with YaCy was not possible because of technical limitations with the computer used. I also tried the search terms “gola peace” and “gola landscape” but found that they did not produce a good number of relevant results.

The media agents used are two newspapers from Sierra Leone and two from Liberia. They were chosen based on the number of results gained from them, as well as a closer look at their websites to determine if any glaring partisan bias was present that could affect how the news is reported. To get the most relevant results I wanted the newspaper to be based in the countries that they report from, and to have articles spanning from 2009, to align with the scope of this thesis. In the case of Liberia, these criteria were not easy to fulfill, and most of the articles are from the 2020s. In the case of Sierra Leone, the newspaper Awoka Newspaper fulfilled the criteria and therefore the number of articles ended up being 77. The number of articles from the other newspapers ended up being between 8 and 17, therefore I randomly[4] selected 20 articles with an even distribution across the years provided to mitigate the risk of the analysis being overly dependent on one of the four media agents, as it would be if I included the whole range of articles from Awoka. The articles from the newspaper Politico SL are the Liberian ones predominantly from the 2020s, with a few exceptions. With the above in mind, the analysis conducted based on the media agents will have a temporal bias towards the later part of the period analyzed.

In the end, I ended up with 20 articles from Awoka Newspaper, 16 articles from Politico SL, 8 articles from Liberian Observer, and 17 articles from The DayLight where the two former hail from Sierra Leone and the two later from Liberia.

5.3 Ethical considerations and limitations of the thesis

Ethical considerations are always important, not matter the nature of the research project. I have followed Mason and her principles for situated ethical practice in

[4] I did this by selecting every fourth article from a list sorting them according to publishing year.

qualitative research. This means that the ethical considerations have been an ongoing process and not decided upon beforehand (Mason, 2018, p. 85).

The material I am working with has not been produced by me, so I cannot argue to have the informed consent of the people who figure in it. I have had no opportunity to inform them of my research and ask them if they are okay with me using their quotes, sometimes together with their picture. Am I violating their privacy? In the end, the answer must be no.

The information is public through the publication online, on either the newspaper or NGO website. It would be a different matter if I had gained access to the material through a more private website where people could have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

Since they appear in either a newspaper article or a newsletter, I must assume that they allowed the author to use their quotes and information. There is a possibility that the people figuring in the material were coerced in one way or another into participating in an interview or posing for a photograph. This is hard for me to know without having access to the people and asking them about it. In my reading of the material, I have tried to mitigate the risk of inflicting harm through the inclusion of an article or newsletter in this thesis by assessing if any of the material can be deemed as hurtful for any person figuring in it. I have done that to the best of my ability while acknowledging that I can't know in a certain way.

The scope of the thesis is limited by time, resources, and access to material. As I have mentioned before I have not generated any interview or ethnographic data and is instead dependent on other types of material such as news articles and newsletters. As with all research, I am limited to the data available to me.

With that in mind, I do not aim to paint a complete picture of spatial imaginaries, spatial stories, and practices of peace and conservation in the GGL. With the resources available to me I can conclude specific to the material and context available to me. The conclusions drawn will be hard to generalize and apply to another context based on this thesis alone but instead offer an opening for further research into the field of spatial imaginaries and spatial stories of peace.

6 Analysis

By analyzing the data as described above I identified several different spatial stories relating to peace(s) and the GGL. I will reconstruct these spatial stories throughout my analysis and show how they are present in the discourse and practice of peace(s) concerning the GGL. The stories are then constructed as an imaginary constituted of not a singular spatial story but of spatial stories of place, space, and transformation of the GGL.

The GGL is a landscape of competing interests and in the material, I have identified tension between these interests. The most prominent of these tensions is the one between the idea of conservation of the forests and the local community drawing their livelihood from the same forest. This is best illustrated by a quote by the executive director of the SCNL who at a community stakeholder meeting said to the participants:

> *"SCNL and the communities are like tooth and tongue, they will fight but yet none can live without the other" (SCNL, 2022b, pp. 22–23).*

This tension is derived from the notion of ownership of the forest and the source of livelihood. As previously mentioned, the communities in the GGL are those of poverty and structural violence. The expressions of the need for alternative livelihood are very much present in the material and what underpins these expressions are the normative questions: Who has the right to the land? Who can decide what to do with it? Who should benefit from it?

To answer these questions and make sense of the peace(s), a spatial imaginary is constructed where conservation is equated to peace and prosperity. This imaginary answers the question of ownership and alternative livelihood by putting the local communities in charge of the forests that they derive their livelihood from. By implementing the idea of community forests, the GGL is to spatially transform from a place of environmental destruction, underdevelopment, and nature-human conflict, to

a place where humans and nature live in harmony and the responsible management of nature resources has led to a more developed and peaceful landscape. Instead of becoming a landscape of environmental destruction consisting of cleared areas and islands of encroached national parks and protected areas the GGL is to become a landscape of continuous forest cover spanning over national borders. The forest is to be either managed by the national forestry department or the community living there.

This spatial imaginary is constituted of stories of place, space, and transformation. The story of place tells a story of a unique landscape in danger and conflict with its human population. The visual representation of the GGL is that of pristine rainforest coupled with visual representations of human destruction. The destruction is often done by an'other' while the community or other agents do what they can to protect 'their' forest. If not by a 'other' the destruction is done by uneducated or unpatriotic people. It is a story full of contestation and tensions about *who* is performing the destruction.

The storytelling of space is centered around the positive characteristics of the GGL as a unique and pristine location, and how to divert from the path of environmental destruction that it is on. It is also a story of how the community forest as an idea can be the solution to the problems plaguing the GGL, from poverty, destruction, and lack of development. Here the dominating story of space reaches an intersection and takes two different paths and becomes about either forests of conservation or a community forest of sustainable extraction. These two stories might be perceived to be incompatible, but they exist in tandem with each other, and surprisingly little contention exists between them. Both are idealizing the space of a peaceful, prosperous, and protected forest. Depending on what story is being told different ideas and interpretations of the forest are being disseminated and enacted.

The dominating idea of conservation as peace is contested by a few dissenting voices. These voices do not accept conservation as peace. On the opposite, conservation for them is an existential threat where their farms are being destroyed and their livelihood activities are being taken away.

The story surrounding the spatial transformation is that of development and how the establishment of community forests together with national parks and protected

areas will inevitably bring prosperity to the GGL. The place-making and space-making of the GGL are underpinned by neo-liberal norms and assumptions where the forest, even though protected, is to be used as a tool for development.

What is constructed is then a spatial imaginary of a peaceful and prosperous GGL, thanks to the peace(s) that conservation efforts inevitably will bring to the landscape.

6.1 Story of place

6.1.1 The Greater Gola Landscape as a place of environmental destruction

> *"As one approaches the buffer to the park, the forest thickens, as its volume increases in a canopy of full-size timbers and young understory trees and shrubs, punctuating its richness. Going further, the canopy is broken by a 20-acre land, in the middle of the forest, four kilometers from Tima and about one kilometer to the boundary of the park, which was recently cleared and burned." (Adeleke, 2022)*

This quote by the country manager working for the RSPB, disseminated through the Liberian Observer, neatly captures the core of the story of place constructed about the GGL. It is a story of a unique landscape that is engaged in a conflict with its inhabitants, leading to "… a fight between nature and human beings due to the massive destruction on the environment…" (Musa, 2021c).

The uniqueness of the landscape is repeated throughout the material by a range of actors. It is stressed that the GGL contains the largest block of the Upper Guinea Rainforest (Mehnpaine, 2022) and that it is a biodiversity hotspot (Moriba, 2011; Musa, 2019; CSSL, 2021, p. 4). Its beauty is stressed through visual representations of the rainforest by scenic photographs coupled with text that underlines its value for conservation (CSSL, 2021, p. 2, 2022b, p. 5; SCNL, 2023, p. 21). For a reader with knowledge of the context, the beauty is being saved by international projects from the destruction that is being practiced by the local population in the forest. The two types of representations of the forest paint a clear picture of who the good guy is and who the bad guy is, in essence, 'othering' the local population.

Figure 3: A photograph of the pristine Gola Rainforest.

Figure 4: A photograph of a cleared patch of forest in the GGL.

As the quote above illustrates one of the threats towards the forest is that of clearing of the land for agricultural purposes (Moriba, 2011; Musa, 2019, 2020; Adeleke, 2022).

With the GGL constructed as a place of environmental destruction a contestation between who is doing the destruction exists and with that comes the 'othering' of people and their story of place based on the activities they participate in. Certain activities are allowed, and others are not. The extraction of resources in an unsustainable way then becomes an undesirable trait, as illustrated by the use of terms such as "unpatriotic citizens" (Moriba, 2014, 2017), "unscrupulous invaders" (CSSL, 2021, p. 3), and "enemies of the environment" (Musa, 2021c) aimed at the people practicing mining, logging, and slash and burn agriculture. There is a clear

delineation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ where the in-group does not engage in these activities and the ‘other’ is (Awoko Publications, 2011; CSSL, 2021, p. 3, 2022a, p. 5).

The delineation between different groups is present concerning different scales. Sierra Leonians are singled out as coming and destroying the forest on the Liberian side (SCNL, 2022b, p. 23), and vice versa (Awoko Publications, 2009, 2011; Moriba, 2017). An illustrative example of this is how one of the paramount chiefs on the Sierra Leonean side express concern that his community is accused of practicing hunting in the forest reserve, while he claims that they are committed to the conservation of the forest. Instead, it is Liberians coming into their community and hunting in the reserve during the night and then disappearing before day (Awoko Publications, 2011).

The ideas and norms of ownership also come into play here. Distinct sections of the GGL are claimed by different communities and by delineating between ‘our’ and ‘their’ tension arises. One example of this is the tension between communities near forest reserves and the governing bodies of the reserves. As illustrated by the case of the Kambui Hills Forest Reserve in Sierra Leone where a representative of the reserve is quoted saying*: “One of the challenges is that the communities claim the land as being theirs.”* (CSSL, 2023, p. 8). The communities' claim of ownership would give them a certain claim on how to manage the forest, while the forest delimitation as a reserve prohibits activities such as mining and logging within its boundaries. The story of GGL as a place of environmental destruction is in turn legitimizing the delimitation of the forest reserve on land that the communities claim ownership over.

One of the more prominent ideas being brought forward is that of community responsibility to not destroy the forest. The forest communities are often portrayed as agents of their destruction. An example of this is how a representative of CSSL in Sierra Leone at a community meeting urged them to not destroy the forest since *“... in case of any future disaster; they will be the first victims to suffer from the negative effect of the environment.”* (Musa, 2021a). The assumption here is that if the local population gets an education on the importance of conservation they will not engage in practices destroying the environment (Kamara, 2021b; Musa, 2021a, 2021d), and

as I have shown if one would still engage in activities of destruction one is labeled as possessing an undesirable trait.

This led us to the story of idealized space, where the unique (positive) characteristics of the GGL as a place, its beauty, and conservation value for both a local and global community, stands as representative of the idealized space of the community forest. The community forest seeks to solve many of the tensions that I have brought up and to spatially transform the GGL from the negative place of environmental destruction to the positive place of community forests and conserved areas.

6.2 Story of idealized space(s)

6.2.1 The Greater Gola Landscape as an idealized space of conserved and protected forests

> *““We are very serious about preserving our forest. There are regular patrols of the area by members of the CFMC, who are familiar with the entire area. No one will be allowed to engage in any activity that will destroy that forest. Several persons were caught trying to engage in these activities and were reported to the CFMC and the town. They were warned not to repeat such actions. Violators will definitely be fined”, said Lahai Nyallay, an elder from Joru town, headquarter of the chiefdom.”” (CSSL, 2023, p. 3)*

This quote from an elder in Sierra Leone encapsulates how the conserved forest is envisioned. An educated community has realized the value of the conserved forest and is taking responsibility for it. The story of the conserved forest is one where the

population of the landscape is at peace with nature and has learned the value of its uniqueness for both the local community but also the global community.

Lack of education and knowledge is perceived to be the main reason why the population conflicts with nature. Quotes such as the following highlights this assumption:

> *"... engagement with the communities will help them know the value of conservation and how it will impact on their lives if they protect it." (Musa, 2021a) and "We didn't know the importance of the forest, but through the work of SCNL, and the support from partners, we now know the importance of protecting the forest." (SCNL, 2023, p. 17)*

By receiving education on the value of the conserved forest not only are the local communities protected against local environmental destruction but they also join the global fight against climate change (Musa, 2022).

Conservation and alternative livelihood activities are viewed to be two sides of the same coin. The best protection of the forest is the engagement of the local community and making sure that they have means of supporting themselves (SCNL, 2022b). This sentiment is mirrored by CSSL who writes in one of the newsletters: *"Therefore, unless opportunities for rural livelihoods are created, protection of forest would be extremely difficult."* (CSSL, 2022a).

As such, an integral part of the story of the conserved forest is that of alternative livelihood options. Without any alternative to how to make a living the local population will revert to the unsustainable extraction of the forest (Kamara, 2021b; Musa, 2021e; Adeleke, 2022; CSSL, 2022a, p. 8, 2022a, p. 3; SCNL, 2022a, p. 11).

The story of the forest as a space of conservation makes certain livelihood options unsuitable, which on the other hand are expected when it comes to the parallel story of sustainable extraction. This means that the two main livelihood alternatives for the

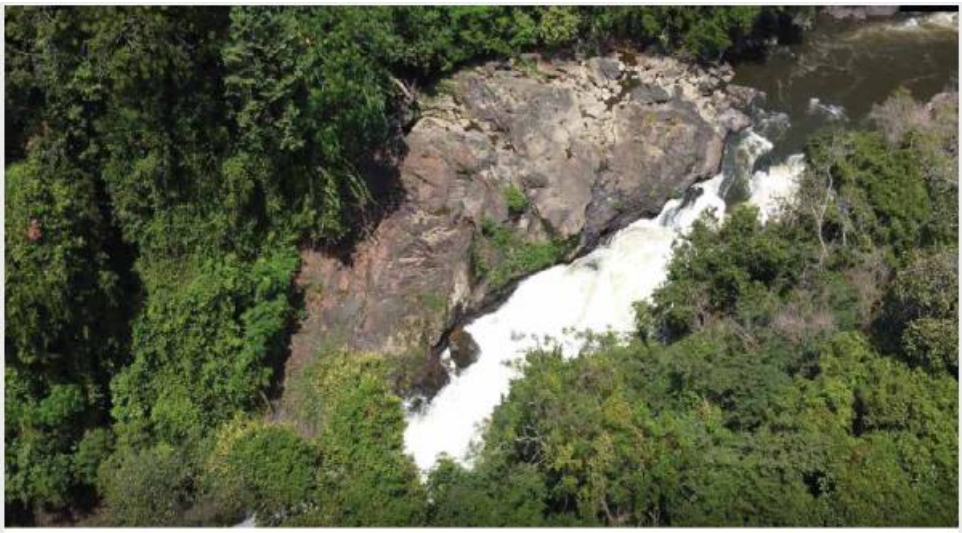
conserved forest are eco-tourism and REDD+[5] schemes coupled with carbon credits (SCNL, 2023, p. 4). Both livelihood options rest on the assumption that the unique forest of the GGL is preserved.

The economic opportunities draw from the forests themselves as sites worth visiting as a tourist destination. The practices of putting up signs, clearing roads, and "beautifying" certain sites to make them more tourist-friendly (SCNL, 2019, p. 6, 2023, pp. 20–21) are examples of enactments of the story of the GGL as a conserved landscape.

While the national parks are the main focus as sites of tourist destinations the communities surrounding the forests are to gain employment from the running of eco-lodges (Bah, 2020), and as such the need for resource extraction from the forest is no longer and will protect the forest.

The transformation of them and what kind of opportunities they will bring are not only told through text but through the visual representations that accompany the textual. The photos themselves are enactments of the story, where photographs of pristine rainforests are coupled with photos of workers making the site more accessible for potential tourists (SCNL, 2023, p. 21).

[5] REDD is the acronym used for *"Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries"* and the "+" represents additional activities that protect the climate through sustainable management of forests, conservations of forests and enhancement of carbon stocks. The idea is that developing countries can receive payments based on their results, eg conserving forests instead of cutting them down. An economic incentive is then created to mitigate deforestation (UNFCC, 2023). The payment can be in form of carbon credits that then can be sold to a bigger emitter, and thus compensate for the bigger emitter emissions.



A partial view of the Elephant Falls

Providing Maintenance, Attracting Tourists

the trail being constructed at Elephant Falls. He said residents of Camp Israel will have the opportunity to get trained in hospitality, tour guide, and the hiring of skilled and unskilled people during the construction of the trail and eco-lodge.

Meanwhile, the key points of education on trial development were: Planning, designing, construction, griddling and drainages, signposts, mapping interpretative experiences, exploring, education, and communities.

With support from PAPFor, and in keeping with the commitment signed by SCNL and communities close to GFNP, in the upper Sokpo Region of GFNP to regularly maintain the road leading to the Elephant Falls and campsite facilities, a total of ten community workers including two females were hired to do side brushing, repaired damaged bridges and clean up the Elephant Falls Campsite site.

The clearing of the road is now providing clear access to tourists and guests the opportunity to safely drive to Elephant Falls. The youth who helped to brush the road expressed satisfaction with SCNL for the ongoing collaboration. SCNL Eco-tourism Officer, Adolphus Tiah, and Camp Israel Assistant Town Chief, Mohammed Kamara Commended PAPFor and SCNL for the outstanding services for the maintenance of the Elephant Falls.

SCNL Adolphus Tiah explaining to DW-TV staff about the huge eco-tourism potential in GFNP

Youth carrying side brushing along the Elephant Falls Road

21 | THE PEPPERBIRD - MARCH 2023

Figure 5: A picture of a page from the Pepperbird newsletter (SCNL, 2023, p. 21).

This is a visual representation of the alternative livelihood option that will come with the increase in tourism thanks to conservation, and underscores the discursive assumptions that are being made, such as the following by a representative of an international consulting firm:

"He said residents of Camp Israel will have the opportunity to get trained in hospitality, tour guide, and the hiring of skilled and unskilled people during the construction of the trail and eco-lodge." (SCNL, 2023, p. 21)

The second livelihood option for communities in a conserved GGL is that of REDD+ and carbon credit schemes. It is being suggested that a bigger engagement with carbon credits will be beneficial for the communities (SCNL, 2022b, p. 8; CSSL, 2023, p. 8). In an address by the Liberian president, recounted in a newsletter from SCNL, the carbon market and leveraging of Liberia's forest resources are not only presented as beneficial to the local communities but to the global community in the fight against climate change (SCNL, 2023, p. 14).

6.2.2 The Greater Gola Landscape as an idealized space of sustainable managed extraction

"After the weeklong, event they would go on to take stock in the forest, which will inform their decision on how to manage the forest. "This thing will make us to learn how to properly look at our forest," said McGill Wulleh, Paramount Chief of Tonglay Clan. "It will help us to reduce illicit activities in our bush." ... "The outcome of this data collection process will determine whether or not the community will engage in legal commercial activities such as logging, mining, or even ecotourism business," Mulbah added." (Kamara, 2022c)

Like the story of the GGL as an untouched and conserved landscape, the story of GGL as a space of sustainable managed extraction is that of the preservation of the forest, as well as that of development and ownership. This story is not about stopping extraction, but about doing it in a regulated and sustainable way where the local community has ownership of the forest and its resources. The quote above from a paramount chief and representative of a national NGO highlights this assumption.

The key to the sustainable management of the community forests is assumed to be an engaged and educated community. Both textual and visual representations of an engaged community are plenty in the data, especially through photographs of men and women of the local population in meetings with other stakeholders (Musa, 2019; SCNL, 2022b, p. 22) coupled with text underscoring the cooperation between the parties as can be seen below (SCNL, 2022b, pp. 22–23).

SCNL AND KONGBA DISTRICT A HOLD
COMMUNITIES DIALOGUE MEETING
WORKING TOGETHER, FINDING SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

A cross-section of participants at the meeting

In an effort to buttress the national government's efforts and make communities more effective in participating in land use planning, develop and respect natural resource management by-laws, including the designation of forest community conservation zones and at the same time providing sustainable livelihoods and sustainable forest management activities, the Liberia Forest Sector Project, (LFSP), through its implementing partners, the Society for the Conservation (SCNL) and the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) for the Intensification and Acceleration of Impacts by Focusing on Livelihood Development and Land Use Support to Cluster Communities in the Northwest Landscape as well as the involvement of the communities in the process.
The Gbarma's Dialogue was intended to sit with the communities' key stakeholders to discuss issues trending in the landscape and find a way forward. The total number of persons in attendance was 59. There were eleven (11) females and forty-eight (48) males. The District Commissioner, Alfred O Bai, of Gbarma District, made remarks where he welcomed everyone, and thanked SCNL for calling for such a dialogue and selecting Gbarma as the venue. SCNL Program Manager, Michael E. Taire, presented SCNL and partners' initiatives in the Gola Landscape before Key Gola Stakeholders.

In Mr. Taire's presentation, he reminded the participants that SCNL has cooperatively worked with the communities of Gola since 2009, and SCNL is not prepared to, ever leave because the [empowerment and improvement] of the lives of the communities matter to SCNL. He admonished the participants to always reach out to SCNL through the sub-offices or head office in Monrovia if there are grievances that need intervention. The program manager then said the doors of SCNL have always been opened and will continue to be opened to address the concerns of the communities

The Executive Director of SCNL, Mr. Michael F. Garbo added his voice to the presentation and thanked the communities for accepting the invitation for the dialogue.

He said, "SCNL and the communities are like tooth and tongue, they will fight but yet none can live

22 | THE PEPPERBIRD - OCT. - DEC. -2022

A cross-section of participants at the meeting

without the other". He said the communities have been very cooperative and nothing should stop the level of cooperation that has existed. He reaffirmed the openness of SCNL's doors to them for discussion on matters trending in the landscape. He pinpointed a few of the livelihood interventions that are about to kick off by the funds of LFSP and among those are: Provision of motorbikes to some communities, solar light installation in some communities, renovation of Townhalls and schools, and the building of one major bridge on the Kongba Road. On the issue of the road, Mr. Garbo said, he will continue to knock on the doors of the national government and other partners to see the need to intervene someday as the matter of the road cannot be handled by one company or NGO like SCNL.

The Acting Clan chief, of Tonglay, Mr. Elijah Nyonkeh, thanked SCNL for the level of support since 2009 and most importantly for the support given to them for their community Forest legally being established. He said the bad road condition is a major concern and wants SCNL to see what can be done to make the road pliable for vehicles. He was buttressed by the Town Chief of Normon, Joseph Varney. Mr. Varney said SCNL has taught them too many good things about the importance of the forest and due to this massive awareness along with the livelihood provided to the citizens, they have stopped those who used to cross over from Sierra |Leone to farm and hunt in their forest.
The office of the Representative, Hon. Joseph Matthew was represented by his chief of office staff, Mr. Zwanah Boima Dono. He thanked SCNL and the community for turning out and flagging the issue of the bad road. He said, Hon. Matthews is working hard to make sure benefits come to them in kongba as he will continue to engage the national government and partners to intervene.

In Response, SCNL's Science and Conservation Coordinator, Jerry C. Garteh, thanked the community for their participation in the meeting and flagged the recent recruitment of women eco guards to help protect the environment. Mr. Michael F. Garbo admonished the citizens of being mindful of concession companies that are currently operating in Camp Alpha. "The community should also try to sit with the companies to see what the concession contract says and what they are doing to benefit the communities. These things must be clear in the minds of the communities to avoid the company robbing the citizens of their desired benefits," he added.

THE PEPPERBIRD - OCT - DEC. - 2022 | 23

Figure 6: A picture of two pages from the Pepperbird newsletter (SCNL, 2022b, pp. 22–23).

The communities are then expected to act according to the framework of a sustainably managed forest that will bring development. When they act in a different way contention and tension arise between them and other stakeholders, as illustrated by a case where a community signed a deal with a logging company, with a bad track record, for concession rights in Liberia (Sherman, 2022). When the company did not deliver on its promises a representative of a national NGO dismissed the community leadership explanation as to why with the lack of experience and knowledge in the management of community forests with the words:

"… Ignorance is never an excuse," Mrs. Pope-Kai says. "If they continue like this, they will continue to push themselves into poverty and underdevelopment." (Sherman, 2022).

By shifting the responsibility of the management of the forest to the local community they are also responsible for their development, and the expansion of necessities that are usually reserved for state agents. I identified a notion of a lack of government support when it comes to necessities such as roads, wells, and schools (Kamara, 2010; SCNL, 2022b, p. 13). In exchange for extraction rights private companies are expected to provide these necessities for the communities (Harding Giahyue and Kamara, 2022; Harding Giahyue and Sherman, 2022; Kamara, 2022b, 2022a; Sherman, 2022), and as such bring a notion of development towards the region. In turn, these ideas are underpinned by the neoliberal assumptions that private companies are better equipped to efficiently provide services such as these and that an environment geared towards the easement of private company regulation will bring with it other benefits. In this case, such benefits are things as roads, schools, and wells.

The communities are then enacting the story being told where the sustainable extraction of resources from the community forest will develop their community, as this quote from a community leader illustrates:

"Having all the needs for road connectivity, we were very much eager. Since it was logging business, we felt we were blessed." (Sherman, 2022).

While the story of place constitutes the practice of mining, logging, and farming as unwanted practices within the GGL this particular story of space transforms these practices into not only allowed but encouraged practices, and frames them as necessary for the development of the landscape. To illustrate this, I will use the example of mining.

The unwanted practice of mining is framed as destroying the forest (Moriba, 2014) but at the same time, it is framed as being an important part of the development

of the landscape, as long as it is practiced sustainably (Moriba, 2011). As with the management of the community forests education in sustainable mining techniques is viewed as being a key component. By receiving education, a miner can move from mining unsustainable to sustainable, as illustrated by the photograph and text published in one of the newsletters from SCNL (SCNL, 2022a, p. 15).

SCNL THROUGH CEPF SUPPORTS ARTISANAL AND SMALL-SCALE MINERS IN NORTHERN LIBERIA

ENCOURAGING SAFE MINING, WHILE PROTECTING THE FOREST

It was a scene of jubilation and huge excitement when several Artisanal and Small-Scale Miners gathered at Kongbor and Camp Alpha, Gbarpolu County respectively to receive mining equipment from the Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia (SCNL). With support from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), mining equipment provided to the miners included a water pump, raincoats, rain boots, shovels, rog, buckets, and diggers. The donation to Artisanal and Small-Scale miners is an additional effort from SCNL, through its partner to encourage these miners to mine smartly, while preserving the forest.

Isatu Johnson, Chairlady, Camp Alpha, and Musa A. Kamara, Town Chief, Kongbor welcomed SCNL's staff, and also extended appreciation to the non-profit organization for the huge support not only to miners but the communities.

In Kongbor and Camp Alpha, Fiona Malley, Project Assistant, SCNL, told the miners that SCNL's support was a kind gesture aimed at encouraging legal miners to keep mining responsibly.

"Today, SCNL is here to support Artisanal and Small-Scale Miners. SCNL through its partner, CEPF donates these mining tools to you, the (miners) and encourages beneficiaries not just to mine, but to practice what is called, "Dig a hole, and cover hole". Malley then advised the miners not to engage in activities that will cause damage to the soil and its future use. "As you all know, the forest is serving as the home for biodiversity, it gives oxygen and absorbs car dioxide. So, it is important the forest is preserved…SCNL's interest is forest preservation, that is why the organization is encouraging smart mining and reclamation of land".

Mulbah Kelleh, Chairman for Mining, Kongbor, and Issa Dumuya, Chairman for Mining, Camp Alpha, highly appreciated SCNL and partner for the donation. Particularly, Kelleh said, "We're happy with the support from SCNL, we will continue to mine safely for the protection of the forest. We have had meetings with SCNL, but this is the first time to receive this help from them, so thank you for what you have done, and by the grace of God, miners will keep mining smartly".

J. Alex Musa, Secretary, CFMB, Tonglay Clan, and Alfred Jabateh, Executive Committee for Tonglay Forest, also appreciated SCNL. "CFMB and SCNL are working together, this donation isn't strange to us, because SCNL has been doing a lot for the communities. SCNL has provided loans for marketers, provided financial and material assistance to students, trained several farmers, and provided livelihood alternatives to forest community dwellers today, SCNL has put smiles on the faces of the miners, and we hope this assistance will continue so [our communities] can keep developing," Musa said.

Figure 7: A picture of one page from the Pepperbird (SCNL, 2022a, p. 15).

The photograph together with the text tells a story of artisanal miners who have received training in what is called smart mining, or “Dig a hole, cover a hole”(SCNL, 2022a, p. 15). The practice and enactment of this education are perceived to help in the development of the community as well as in the protection of the forest (Kamara, 2021a; SCNL, 2022a, p. 15). In essence, you can eat your cake and keep it too by mining sustainable.

The move away from unwanted practices is also connected to the region’s history of war and conflict. Concerning enabling alternative livelihood activities for the local community a representative for SCNL is quoted as saying:

> *“This is part of a broader local and international efforts aimed at driving the region away from its war legacy to a new future focused on conservation and climate solutions.”(Kamara, 2021b).*

This is also illustrative of the spatial transformation that the spatial imaginary tells a story of. The GGL is to move away from a place of nature-human conflict to a space of harmonious nature-human relations. The peace in the region is intimately connected to conservation and they are as such mutually constitutive. To move away from the legacy of war the conservation of the forest is imperative.

The imaginary community forest and the story of forest conservation in the GGL place emphasis on the notion of conservation as peace. This conservation might seem to be universally shared by the different agents. And while the dominant notion is just that, there exist dissenting voices stemming from the tension that arises when the local population does not accept conservation as the way forward.

6.2.3 The Greater Gola Landscape idealized space as an environmental battleground

"Villagers around the Proposed Foya Park first spotted elephants in the area around 2018. Some five years on, the elephants are destroying farms and posing a threat to the villagers' existence." (Newa, 2023).

There has been frustration with the choice of conservation as opposed to extraction where the former has been perceived as more beneficial for the community (Kamara, 2010). One of the more prevalent perceptions is that the ban on hunting animals in the forest increases their numbers and drives them out to the farms in search of food, where they destroy the farms (Kamara, 2010; Newa, 2023). An illustrative example of this is the conflict between a local community and elephants.

As opposed to a peaceful existence between nature and humans the existence of the elephants, who enjoy the protection of a hunting ban and conserved forest, is perceived as an existential threat to the farmers close to the elephant's habitat. Accounts of elephants that eat the villagers' crops, drink their water, destroy houses, and force residents away from their homes (Harding Giahyue, 2023) are coupled with photographs of villagers showing the devastation. The visual representation of the destruction coupled with the textual tells a story of an environmental battleground where humans and nature are at war.

Varney Gropee, an elder of Manna Clan in Grand Cape Mount's Gola Konneh District, holds up an elephant dung in the remnants of his farm in Norman Village. The DayLight/James Harding Giahyue

A villager displays a cassava shrub elephant uprooted in November 2019 in Varguay, Grand Cape Mount County, probably the hardest-hit community in Liberia's human-elephant conflict. The DayLight/James Harding Giahyue

Figure 8: A picture from the newspaper DayLight (Harding Giahyue, 2023).

As I have shown the normative idea of ownership shines through the imaginary of a peaceful GGL. This story is not an exception as the notion of 'our' land and water is

prevalent in the villager's discourse around the conflict. They have worked the land and by virtue of their work the land is theirs as this quote illustrates:

> *"The elephants always come to our farm and eat the things that we are planting," says Sam Jah, a farmer in Tardee village in the Zuie Chiefdom of Gbarpolu County. Jah had met a herd of the towering mammals while on his way to his farm on one morning last month. He fled for his life. When he returned the following day, the herds had eaten 30 of his palm trees." (Newa, 2023)*

The elephants are not only an existential threat through the destruction of farms, but they are also an immediate threat to the farmer's life.

Through a representative of the Liberian government, the elephants also claim ownership of the land. Villagers are encroaching on the territory of the elephants and are establishing farms on elephant paths. This is in turn leading to the elephants destroying farms (Newa, 2023).

This story of space contests the idea of conservation as peace, and for this group of villagers, the conservation of the elephants means peace, neither negative nor positive. Instead, they live under constant threat of violence from nature to such a degree that some have been displaced.

This story highlights the notion of peace(s). The elephants can enjoy the peace to a certain degree in the conserved forest, while that same conservation is perceived to the be source of the villagers' professed existential threat. It also highlights how the dominating story of conservation as a space of peace(s) is contested by the story of conservation as a space of conflict, that is being constructed by the villagers. In a sense, neither story is complete, but they complement each other.

6.3 Story of spatial transformation

6.3.1 The spatial transformation of the Greater Gola Landscape from underdeveloped to developed

> *"He admonished member states to be more proactive on issues geared towards the development of the forest reserves, thereby mitigating climate change, attain conducive atmosphere, economic growth and regional peace." (Sama, 2010)*

The imaginary of conservation as peace(s) that is being disseminated in this case relies on the stories of place and space to tell a story of the spatial transformation of the GGL. While there exist dissenting voices the dominating story is that of a landscape of underdevelopment and a legacy of war, where the practice of conservation inevitably will bring prosperity, development, and peace.

As shown, the notion of conservation varies and ranges from protected areas where extraction is prohibited, and tourism is perceived to be the main source of income. Community forests that through the virtue of local ownership and education in sustainable practices are expected to provide for the community while at the same time conserve the environment.

It can be argued that the establishment of the GTPP is an enactment of the story of transformation and an integral part of the process of space- and place-making. It states that conservation is peace and intimate connected to development and the wellbeing of the local population (Moriba, 2011). By doing so it moves these ideas into the material world to transform the place of the GGL. At the same time, it enhances the idealized space of the GGL as a conserved landscape. This is in turn illustrating how the two processes are mutually constitutive of each other and the spatial transformation. It also highlights how the agency is vital for spatial transformation. It is through the agency that the GTTP is enacted thus bringing the idealized space of conserved forest into a material reality.

This notion is evident in the enactment of alternative livelihood programs. As discussed before alternative livelihood options and conservation are perceived to go

hand in hand. The enactment of an alternative livelihood program is therefore an enactment of conservation practice. Therefore diverse activities such as education in cocoa farming (Kabba, 2019; SCNL, 2019, p. 9; Musa, 2021e) and the donation of motorcycles (SCNL, 2022b, pp. 18–19, 2023, pp. 15–16) are viewed as an important step in the spatial transformation. By providing alternative livelihood to the community the unsustainable extraction will end.

The inevitability that development will come through conservation is highlighted by the case of motorcycles. As the motorcycles are donated as an act of conservation the assumption is that the recipient will use them for alternative livelihood activities, and thus not engage in practices that will hurt the forest. A representative of SCNL highlights these assumptions through this quote:

> *"We have come to add effort to what FDA is doing to safeguard the forest by providing these motorbikes which will be used to generate money for community dwellers in an effort to stop cutting down trees in the forest" (SCNL, 2022b, p. 18).*

While it's the specific act of logging that is mentioned in the quote it is safe to assume that other activities prohibited by the notion of conservation are included in the sentiment.

Throughout the analysis, I have pointed towards the underpinning of neo-liberal norms in how the forest is commodified and monetized through eco-tourism, carbon credits, and sustainable extraction. Interestingly enough neo-liberal underpinnings are not the only ones present in the spatial transformation of the GGL but there are also seemingly contradictory norms underpinning the process. The normative question of ownership is central to the transformation and local ownership of the process is viewed as paramount (Musa, 2019; CSSL, 2021, p. 2).

The notion of the community forest is not only to formalize the demarcation of a section of forest that's been customarily used by the local community but in certain instances, it's about individuals giving up land perceived to be theirs for the greater good of the community:

"Patrick Dauda stated that, the component teaches the community people in a portion of land various land use methods such as farming, mining, hunting among others, and to manage conflict in making sure that those that have a portion of land in areas suitable for farming, mining and biodiversity transform into community forestry managed by the people." (Musa, 2021b)

This notion goes against the sacrosanct norm of private ownership and not only frames it as a question of the suitability of how the land is used but also that it will decrease conflicts around it if the community manages it together in a cooperative sense.

This notion is persistent. Among cocoa farmers, it is encouraged for the farmers to work together under the umbrella of associations where they can share their experiences and combine their harvests to be able to sell it for a higher price than they would get if they sold it individually (Musa, 2021e). This is also visually represented through photographs of cocoa farmers from both sides of the border at a knowledge-sharing event (SCNL, 2019, p. 8). The photo succinctly views the camaraderie and cooperation between the farmers and the kind of peaceful relationships that a spatial transformation will bring.

The Pepper Bird Special Edition Liberia's Wild Life Law

THE PARTNERS FOR FOREST PROJECT-P4F

P4F is a cocoa farms development project in support of alternative livelihood activities for forest Communities in Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu and Lofa Counties. The overall objective of this project is to build on the experience in Sierra Leone to begin to pilot the business case for 'Gola Rainforest Cocoa' across the Gola forest Landscape in Liberia, Through this project a Baseline study was conducted to find answers to how Liberia could develop Forest smart cocoa. The findings of this survey translated into the organization of a national cocoa Conference held in Monrovia from June 4-6, 2018 at the PA's Rib House in Lakpazee, Airfield. The outcome of this conference led to the drafting of a Forest Friendly Cocoa Strategy which was submitted to the Minister of Agriculture (Dr. Mogana S. Flomo, Jr.) to form part of the National Cocoa Strategy of Liberia.

Success stories

The project was also instrumental in the hosting of knowledge sharing meetings between Liberia and Sierra Leone in June 2019 with its objective being the review of cocoa farming techniques that were discussed as a result of the P4F project baseline study conducted on cocoa production and the conservation of biodiversity in Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu and Lofa Counties. This project is at the pilot stage and is expected to provide jobs for 75 persons and trained over 500 cocoa farmers in Marketing, Natural Resource Management and Governance.

Cross-section ofLiberia and Sierra Leone cocoa farmers

LIBERIA FOREST SECTOR PROJECT(LSFP)

Liberia Forest Sector Project (LFSP) is aimed at the protection of Liberia's remaining forest and wide life. In June 2019 , the Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia (SCNL) and Subah Belleh Associate (SBA) completed a Biodiversity and Socioeconomic feasibility study in the Foya Proposed Protected Area in Gbarpolu and Lofa Counties under the LFSP.

The overall objective of this project is to describe the biodiversity value and socio-economic context in and around the proposed Foya Protected Area with respect to its future gazettement

Technicians Trapping in Foya Forest

SCNL NEWSLETTER- 2016-2019 | 8

Figure 9: A picture of one page from the Pepperbird (SCNL, 2019, p. 8)

This is again going against the neo-liberal norms and the notion of the eat-or-get-eaten sentiment that runs through the idea of the free market.

This points to the fact that even though the development that inevitably will come through conservation is underpinned by ideas of commodification and monetization of nature the form it takes does not necessarily need to be that of a private

corporation. There is space for cooperation not only through the actual act of conservation but also in the competitive world of business.

7 Discussion

The case of the Greater Gola Landscape and how peace(s) are imagined highlights the complexity and hybridity at which peace(s) are imagined and manifested. It illustrates how imaginaries are so much more than a single notion or assumption about how something is, became, or becoming. Instead, it highlights the relationality and connectedness of different stories that are being told to construct and support a specific kind of imaginary.

No story is complete, and each story needs the other to make sense. Together they outline a story of development, and they show where the GGL is coming from, where it is going, and how it is going to get there. In the end, the spatial imaginary that is being disseminated about the GGL is that of inevitable development.

Even though the imaginary being disseminated is that of investable development and certain unity in the way forward the GGL is not void of contention. As I have shown there is plenty of contention between the forest and livelihood options, communities and national governments, and local population and wildlife. This contention all boils down to the question of who got the right to the land.

In previous research on conservation and peace, a focus has been on the presence of neoliberal norms and how they underpin a certain kind of imaginary behind the idea of peace parks and conservation as peacebuilding. While these norms are present in this case it is not as easy to say that those norms are the only norms present.

On the contrary, a norm of communalism and shared ownership and management of the forest is present. This is manifested in the way community forests are being managed and governed. It is also evident in notions that some land is better run in a communal setting than privately.

However the commodification and marketization of the forest is ever-present. No matter if it is to be wholly protected or used for sustainable extraction it is to be exploited by someone in some way.

The norm of local ownership is ever present, something that could be argued to be traced to the local turn in peacebuilding. The hybridization of how peace(s) is

envisioned is evident in how the story is told and enacted. There is no "pure" international, national, or local practice of peace(s).

The visual material works in conjunction with the textual one and the intervisuality is ever present. While the articles or newspapers might not reference each other they all share certain commonalities depending on what subject the articles is reporting on. If the article is about education or local ownership the visual material represents that through pictures of people in collaborative settings. If the article is about how uniqueness of the rainforest, or its eco-tourism potential the visual material is representing that through pristine rainforests.

In conclusion, the spatial imaginary of peace(s) and the stories of what conservation will bring to the GGL have been shown to inform how the local NGOs work and how the media report on it. This is in turn illustrating just how these agents not only represent the views of someone else but enact and use their agency in the shaping of the stories and ultimately imaginaries of what the Greater Gola Landscape is, was, and is going to be.

8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I will answer the research questions and summarize the results of the thesis. As I mentioned before, I do not aim to paint a complete picture of the imaginaries of peace(s) that might exist in the GGL. Instead, because of the material available to me, I can paint a picture of how the spatial imaginary of peace(s) is disseminated and constructed through articles in newspapers and newsletters from NGOs.

The overarching research question to answer is: *How is the spatial imaginary of peace(s) surrounding the Grater Gola Landscape in Liberia and Sierra Leone constructed?* My two sub-questions are: *How are conservation and peace(s) made sense of through the spatial stories being told? How is peace(s) sustained, changed, and/or contested?*

As I have shown the spatial imaginary of peace(s) in the GGL is constructed through the telling and re-telling of the spatial stories of place, space, and transformation. It is the story of how the GGL is in a state of despair and without intervention the unique rainforest will be destroyed by the uneducated local population.

By implementing forest reserves and community-managed forests by an educated local population the local NGOs and their international partners are providing alternative livelihood options. These options in tandem with education are providing the local population with the tools needed not to use the forest in an unsustainable way.

Sustainable extraction is to be practiced in the community forests and provide livelihood in that way. The protected forest is provided through ecotourism and carbon credits. These interventions will inevitably lead to development for the region. While there exist contesting stories this is the dominating one in the data, making up the spatial imaginary of peace(s) in the GGL.

The two sub-questions that I had to guide my analysis were also answered throughout the analysis.

Conservation and peace(s) are made sense of as the same. With peace conservation is possible, and through the conservation of the forest, peace will come, and with peace will development and prosperity come.

Peace(s) are sustained, changed, and/or contested through the telling of stories, and how they are being told. In the data, the story of human-wildlife conflict was told through the photographs of destroyed property. The peace that was being suggested was then rejected by the people affected by the conflict. For them conservation was not peace and prosperity, but conflict.

On the other hand, peace was sustained by the same kind of storytelling where photographs and text supported each other in telling a story of prosperity and peace when conservation is practiced.

I conducted my analysis through a textual-visual method. From a methodological perspective, I argue that the main contribution of this thesis is the addition of the visual in the study of the imaginary. This approach added a deeper understanding of the peace imaginary. When working with material that consists of both text and visuals, I argue that it is imperative to not focus on one of the other but both.

While the visual is not as straight forward to analyze it adds another layer of the analysis as compared to a strictly textual analysis. Especially when it comes to the study of the imaginary that is inherently hard to pinpoint. A visual element can then point towards and in some cases show what is imagined.

Further research avenues should be that of a continuation of the inclusion of the visual into the study of peace imaginaries. This could be done through sketching or drawing by participants, as a way of expressing their vison of the future.

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10 Appendix

10.1 Appendix A, List of material analyzed.

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10.2 Appendix B, Codebook

Name	Description
Actor	
Community Leader	
IGO	

Name	Description
International NGO	
International project	
Local population	
National Government	
National NGO	
Alternative livlehood	Codes relating to alterantive livlehoods
(Sustainable) cash crop production to bring development	The assumption that cash crop production will bring development to the communities and provide a sustanable alternative livlehood, both in an economic and ecological sense
Adult literacy program as alternative livlehood	The idea that adult literacy will bring with it better working oppertunities for the community.
Artisanal mining as alternative livelihood	The idea that artisinal and small scale mining can be done in a sustanable way, and to be provided as an alterantive livlehood. As opposed to a non-sustainable way.
Beekeeping as alternative livlehood	The idea that beekeeping can provide as an alternative livlehood
Cocoa farming as alternative livelihood	The idea that cocoa farming will provide the community with an alternative livlehood option, and at the same time plant more trees.
Eco-guard as alternative living	The idea that eco-guards from the community will protect the forests from illicit activites, and in their work gain a salary.
Eco-tourism as a way	The idea that eco-tourism will provide development to the communities

Name	Description
forward	
Farming as alternative livelihood	The idea that different, new or adapted farming techniques will provide the community with an alternative livlehood, as opposed to slash and burn techniques
Fresh and pre-production as alternative livelihood for alternative livelihood farmers	Cocoa farming is brought forward as an alternative livlehood, an in one isntance it it mentioned how some of them need an alternative livlehood during the hungry season
Microloans as an alternative livelihood	The idea that microloans or microfinancing will provide community members with economic power to become entrepenaurs and generate a profit.
Motorbikes as alternative livelihood	The idea that the provison of motorbikes will provide the community members with an alternative livlehood as drivers.
Alternative livelihoods are paramount to conserve the forest	The assumption that alternative livlehoods are key to the conservation and preservation of the forest
Carbon financing as an opportunity with conservation	Carbon finanicing as an economic oppertunity and pathway towards development for the local communites. The idea that the conserved forest will yield economic benefit through carbon financing
Community forests to bring development to communities through sustainable extraction	The idea that community forests are to be managed sustanably, and therefore bring development to said communites

Name	Description
Community responsibility to lift themselves out of poverty	The idea that the communities have a responsibility to lift themselves up out of poverty, with the assumption that they are not doing enough.
Conservation as beneficial to a broader region	The idea that the act of conservation is of benefit for not only the local community but for the region, country of globe
Conservation of the forest is the responsibility of the community	The assumption that its the community that are destorying the forest, and therefore have the responsibility to protect it. The destruction is normativty bad, and the protection is normativity good.
Education of the value of the conserved forest	The assumption that an educated population will engage in conservation instead of destruction
Expectation of community forests to practice forest conservation	The assumption that a community forest will practice forest conservation, and not unsustanable extraction.
Explicit connection of peace and conservation	An instance where the speaker explicilty connect peace and conservation. That is, the word peace is mentioned on the context of conservation.
Extraction as a undesirable trait	Instances where the act of extraction is equaled with a normativity bad personality trait.
Extraction as development	The idea that the extraction of resources from the forest will bring development to the communities.
Human activity is destroying the forest	The assumption that human activity is destroying the forest
Instances of negative consequences due to	Descriptions of instances where conservation has been of negative impact for the local communties, such as human-wildlife conflicts

Name	Description
conservation	
Local ownership is important to the success of conservation	The idea that local ownership is important to the success of conservation
Praise of own one's own	A type of 'othering'. The idea that the group that the speaker represents are normativity good, with the assumption that the 'other' is not. This can either be explicit of inexplicit.
Private sector to provide services in exhange of (sustainable) extraction	The idea that the private sector will provide services and development in exchange of extraction of community forests. It is assumed that the corporation will engage in sustanable extraction.
Rationale for the conservation of the forest	The reasons, ideas and principles that guide the decision to protect the forest
Sustainable forestry is the responsibility of the communities	The idea that sustainable use of the forest resources are the responsibility of the communities
Tension between acts of extraction and acts of conservation	Descriptions of unwanted acts of extraction, hindering acts of conservation
Tensions between local communities and government	Acts of tension between local communties and their local or national government
Tensions between the act of conservation and the communities affected	Tensions that arise between the two intrests of: conservation and livlehood for the communities.

Name	Description
The lack of government support is hindering community development	The idea that its the lack of government support that is hindering the communities from achiving meaningful development
The lack of government support is hindering conservation	
Transboundary cooperation	Transbounary cooperation between Sierra Leone and Liberia on different scales with the goal of protecting the forest
Untouched rainforest	