

# Traditional beliefs promote sustainability in West Africa

March 5 2015

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Sacred forests and traditional beliefs are shaping sustainable farming practices in communities in West Africa, according to new research.

Scientists from Lancaster Environment Centre carried out a unique 18-month study in Liberia, examining the traditional agriculture of the Loma people where farmers do not use industrial [farming practices](#) or artificial fertilisers. They found sacred forests and ancestral lands were valued more than short-term economic gain through increasing food production.

Lancaster researchers calculated that their food production method, which involves farmers planting crops in fertile man-made soil known as 'anthropogenic dark earth', has twice the energy efficiency of either 'slash and burn' rice production and hunting and gathering.

This man-made highly [fertile soil](#), which is used for growing crops, forms in the same localised areas, building up over generations. The soil is created inevitably by everyday domestic life, from deposits of charred and fresh organic matter, including manure, bones, ash, charcoal and ceramics.

However, the expansion of the system is limited by 'sacred' forests, which form around current settlements and cover areas of fertile man-made soil which used to be towns in the past. Customary laws prohibit these forests being cleared for farming, as some trees are believed to have mystical 'medicinal' power, and also because of the presence of

graves.

Dr James Fraser, who led the fieldwork, said: "From a modern Western perspective not expanding the coverage of this highly fertile [soil](#) appears to be sub-optimal, but communities manage the land in a way that is informed by their relationship to past generations, sustaining their institutions and way of life over many generations, which are more important to them than material gain."

The team used GPS mapping, conducted quantitative surveys, and recorded interviews and oral histories in order to examine the relationship between physical and social factors over a long period of time in traditional sustainable agriculture.

**More information:** "An intergenerational transmission of sustainability? Ancestral habitus and food production in a traditional agro-ecosystem of the Upper Guinea Forest, West Africa," James Angus Fraser, Victoria Frausin, Andrew Jarvis, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0959378015000151](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0959378015000151)

Provided by Lancaster University

Citation: Traditional beliefs promote sustainability in West Africa (2015, March 5) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-traditional-beliefs-sustainability-west-africa.html>

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