

DATELINE: AFRICA

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**A Big Tarpon Tale And
More From Sierra Leone**

(Editor Note: Angling Report subscriber and renowned sustainable-use conservationist John J. Jackson, III, weighed in this month with the following report about a giant tarpon his wife Chrissie just caught at Bonthe Holiday Village in Sierra Leone. That success inspired the Jacksons to lay down the framework for a voluntary sustainable use conservationist program to help conserve Silver King in that troubled corner of Africa. We think the program with its emphasis on voluntary contributions by traveling anglers deserves the careful attention of outfitters, agents and individual anglers the world over.)

My wife, Chrissie Jackson, just caught what should qualify as the IGFA Women's World Record tarpon, 80-pound line class, in Sierra Leone. We have already filed the application. On the certified scales maintained by Bonthe Holiday Village, the tarpon weighed 110 kilos (242 pounds, 8 ounces). Its length was eight feet eight inches, and it had a girth of 46 inches. It was caught in the entrance hole of Sherbro Island where the Sherbro and Kittman rivers enter the Atlantic. She fought the monstrous tarpon in the rain for approximately one hour out of a 17-foot Boston Whaler.

The big tarpon is Chrissie's third Women's World Record class game fish, although her two earlier fish have long been displaced. She once held the Women's 130-pound-class tarpon for a 187.8-pound tarpon taken in Louisiana, as well as the 16-

pound-line class barracuda record taken in Gabon, Africa.

The Sherbro Pass of Sierra Leone is the foremost record tarpon hole in the world. More IGFA record tarpon have been taken there than anywhere in the world, from 166 to 283 pounds. Though record entries come and fall, most current record-category entries are still from there. This is the first since 1997.

The facilities and tarpon fishing here waned during the recent war but are being built back up. This was our first trip there and one of the first by any seasoned tarpon anglers since the war. The Bonthe Holiday Village is located on the northeast inland corner of Sherbro Island. It is approximately 10 miles upriver from the pass. The Village is a fence-enclosed hotel made up of six immaculately clean rondavels that each have three separate quarters and baths. Those quarters share a large, common entry room. There is a separate dining, bar, kitchen building. It is all-white, clean, enclosed and secure. The central building had satellite TV, internet service and more than one computer for guests to use. Our cell phones worked at the camp. There was also a large, clean swimming pool and outdoor bar but we did not find time to use them.

The food was exquisite and the bar was fully stocked. Although every room had a fan, it was hot. Joy Samake, the managing owner, has promised to air condition the sleeping quarters before next season.

There was a manned security gate at Bonthe Holiday Village, but the local people could not have been friendlier each time we walked in the surrounding town. Crime is non-existent. In fact, the locals were protective of us.

Chrissie and I decided to go to Sierra Leone because of the oil spill disaster in the Gulf. We fish the mouth of the

Mississippi River for big tarpon quite often but we could not do so this year. We flew Continental Airlines from Houston to London Heathrow, then direct to Freetown, Sierra Leone, without having to overnight. Alternatively, we could have flown to Brussels, then on to Freetown on Brussels Airlines, which is how we chose to depart because of a meeting we had in Europe. If one is willing to overnight, one can also fly to Dakar, Senegal, then on to Freetown the next day. (Delta, Royal Air Morocco, Kenya Airlines.)

Our arrival at Lungi Airport across the river from Freetown was at 7 p.m. We had the option of spending the night at the Lungi Airport Hotel (an air conditioned hotel with restaurant and bar) or being transported by helicopter, ferry or shuttle vessels across to Freetown. We elected to stay at the Lungi Hotel that first night. The next morning we were escorted to a launch. From there, we motored down the coastline in a twin-outboard Sea Pro to the Bonthe Holiday Village on Serbro Island. The trip took two hours and 40 minutes. We had the option to take a bus for six hours or a helicopter or fixed-wing plane at much greater cost.

Bonthe on Serbro Island is very isolated. The pass where we fished greatly resembles Boca Grande, Florida, except there are no other boats save for an occasional passing dugout with local native people. It is a beautiful, isolated paradise for the adventurous.

The tarpon season is said to run from February through June, but locals informed us that it effectively ends by May 15. Chrissie's tarpon was the second we caught in six days, and we saw only about a half dozen more. I believe we missed the season by several weeks. Supposedly, the waters boil with bait (menhaden and mullet) during the height of the tarpon season in

March and April and several tarpon can sometimes be caught within a day.

The fishing was slow, but Chrissie doggedly stuck with it. It was interrupted by an occasional large jack crevalle or giant barracuda. June is also the beginning of the rainy season and more turbulent seas, though most of the rain in the first month is at night and we welcomed the cloud cover in the day. When we left, the river was beginning to get dirty from the rain. Before that, the river was exceptionally clear for a tarpon river. June is too slow for all but die-hards and vacationers.

I realize most *Angling Report* subscribers are fly fishermen. Indeed, the water was clear enough for fly fishing. And we were told there is at least one ideal fly fishing area upriver. Chrissie and I did not give it a try because of the lateness of the season. There were just not enough fish in the river during our visit. Our fallback technique was to bottom fish with mullet on 16° circle hooks and 200-pound monofilament leader. We drifted with the current over holes just as in Boca Grande Pass in Florida. It is a half-mile-wide pass between two sand points with deep holes that one drifts over. We also drift fished beyond the pass in the Atlantic in 30 to 55 feet of clear water. We brought our own tackle, which I recommend at this time.

The website for the operators is www.bontheholidayvillage.com. The managing partner, a delightful and trustworthy businesswoman from Freetown, is Joy Samake. Here e-mail address is: samake.joy@gmail.com.

We fished out of various boats but preferred the 17 foot Boston Whalers. Several other boats were available, including

two large Sea Pros and similar Carolina center-console skiffs. Some were equipped with fish-finding depth recorders and GPS and some were not. Next time, we may bring a portable model of each for assurance.

There is an important resource conflict here which we handled as tactfully as possible. The local people live at subsistence level. They eat tarpon. In fact, I video-ed and photographed them butchering and dividing up Chrissie's world record tarpon, perhaps the first photographs of such an event. We also witnessed locals catch a giant tarpon, spear it at the side of their dugout and bring it aboard. They are fishing and catching tarpon for food when perhaps they could benefit more by supporting catch-and-release tourist fishing of the sort that has been practiced so sustainably in Florida and elsewhere. Sherbro Pass is a unique tarpon hole for giants. It must be saved and the local people must be made the beneficiaries, guards and stewards of the Silver King. Consequently, my conservation organization called Conservation Force has instituted a program to conserve tarpon in partnership with the local village on the Pass and the Bonthe Holiday Village owners.

Conservation Force is a non-profit, public, US charitable foundation with offices in the US, Canada, Europe and Africa. Contributions to Conservation Force are tax-deductible. We have wildlife projects based upon communal-based natural resource management (CBNRM) across the globe from Pakistan to southern Africa. We are members of the IUCN and its specialist group which specializes in sustainable use. On an experimental basis, we have initiated a program benefiting the Manai Village located on the shores of the Sherbro Island Pass.

Here is how it works. On a voluntary basis, tourist anglers are asked to donate \$100 US Dollars for every tarpon they catch

and \$250 for every tarpon they land/kill. 100 percent of the proceeds received will go to the Manai Village. If the donation is made through Conservation Force, the donor will receive a written acknowledgment and it will be tax deductible to those reporting income in the United States.

The payment can be viewed by the angler as payment in lieu of a license because Sierra Leone does not require a fishing license. Chrissie has begun the program with a donation of \$250 when her tarpon was taken. The Village Chief, Regional Chief and owners of the Bonthe Village have all agreed to the experimental program. Together, we can eliminate the subsistence killing of tarpon and greatly enrich and improve the living conditions of the local people that have the fate of the silver giants in their hands.

Sierra Leone may still be the capitol of the giant tarpon. It certainly is an isolated, unique fishing destination for the more serious tarpon fisherman. It is nice that English is so widely spoken and that the giants may still exist. It will be wonderful if Conservation Force's program for the local people can help sustain and restore the resource, as well as benefit the local stakeholders and guardians. - *John J. Jackson, III.*
(*Postscript:* You can learn more about Conservation Force and/or make a donation to the fledgling Silver King conservation effort in Sierra Leone by going to: www.conservationforce.org. The phone number is: 504-837-1233. Indeed, traveling anglers who frequent lodges and camps such as *Bonthe Holiday Village* need to step up to the plate and start voluntarily funding local conservation efforts. There is no effective government bureaucracy to help save fish in a country like Sierra Leone. The same is true in parts of Nicaragua, Brazil, Mongolia and Bolivia, just to name a few countries. All that will save fish

there is hard cash raised and distributed locally by fishing professionals who care about the future. Do you agree? Disagree? Do you want to get started? Weigh in by calling the agents and outfitters who help you fish in underdeveloped parts of the world. Weigh in, too, by sending your thoughts to: doncausey@anglingreport.com.)