

Transnational cooperation for effective management of World Heritage Sites in Africa: Case of the biodiversity of the Gourma, Mali



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Introduction

The Gourma region of Mali (hereafter ‘the Gourma’) is located in the Sahelian zone; it comprises 18 communes, divided between 3 administrative regions (Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao). In 1959, part of the Gourma region (about 1.25 million hectares) was classified as an ‘Elephant Reserve’ by *Law n° 59-53/AL/RS of 30 December 1959. It was inscribed onto the UNESCO Tentative List in August 2017.*

The Gourma is roughly bounded by the Niger River to the north and east, the Inner Niger Delta to the west and the borders of Burkina Faso to the south. The vegetation is composed of a herbaceous steppe, including *Salvadora*, *Leptadenia*, *Aristida* species, and woody with *Balanites aegytiaca* in the extreme north. The north and centre are also herbaceous with *Salvadorastipoides*, *Cenchrus* and *Schoenfeldiagracilis* species. The woody areas include *Acacia* and *Chomiphora Africana* species. Finally, in the south, there is a shrubby savanna with *Acacia nilotica*, *Anogeisusleiocarpus*, *Guierasenegalensis*, *Ziziphusmauritiana*, etc.

In summary, the area known as ‘the Gourma’ is a diverse set of landscapes – ponds, lakes (notably Inadiatafane, Banzena, Gossi), dunes, tiger bushes and sandstone promontories, plains and inselbergs – and unique biological features, such as the continent’s most northerly herd of 350 elephants.

The presence of these various ponds, inselbergs and bushes have made the Gourma an attractive traditional meeting place for transhumant herders. Also, this area is frequented in all dry seasons by thousands of heads of livestock (cattle, sheep, goats) and by the last herd of Sahelian elephants, the northernmost population of elephants in Africa, who live harmoniously with the human populations of the area, finding food in the bush and water at water points (Figures 1 and 2).

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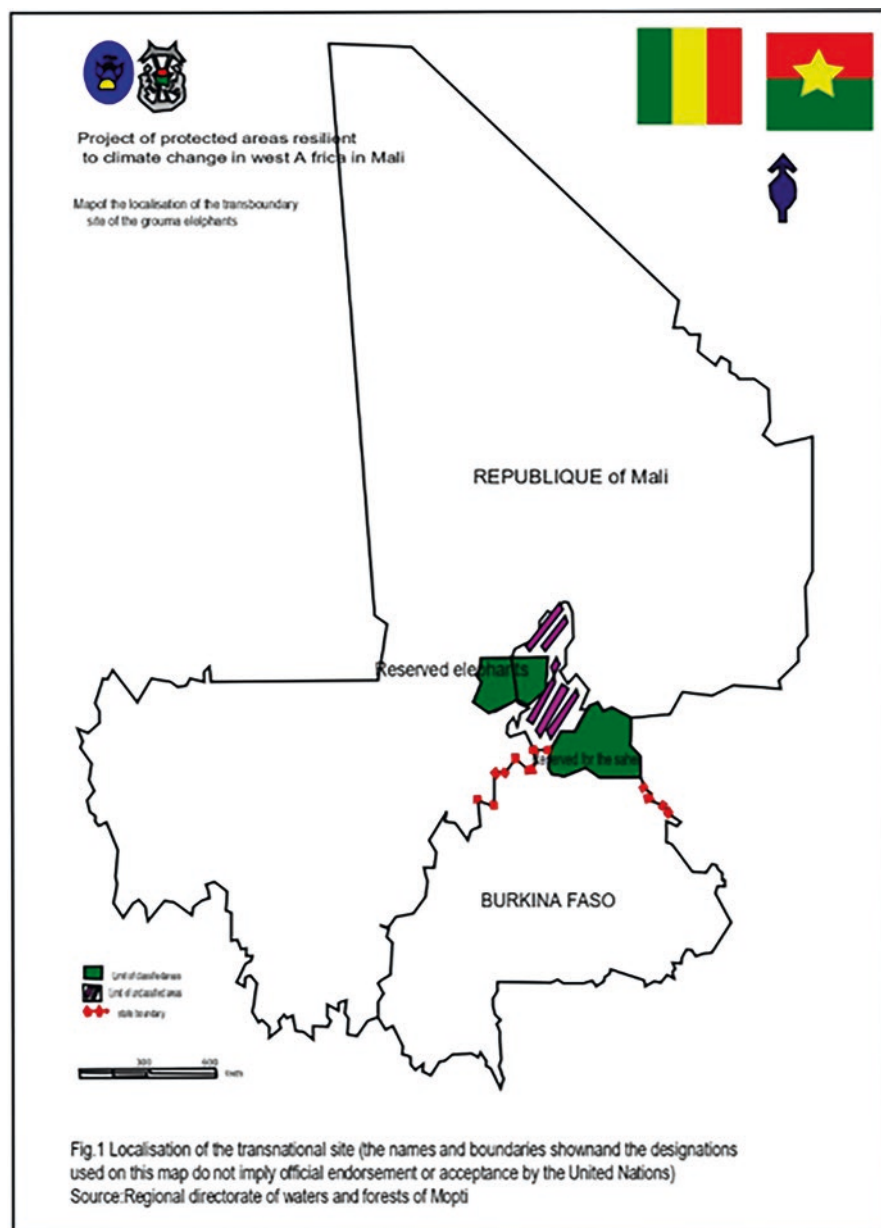


Figure 1. Location of the transnational site (The names and boundaries shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations).
Source: Direction régionale des eaux et forêts de Mopti.



Figure 2. Elephants in the Malian Gourma. © Direction régionale des eaux et forêts de Mopti.

Elements of the national strategy

In Mali, the proper conservation of any site through its classification as national cultural heritage and/or its inscription onto the World Heritage List favours its protection and enhancement, enabling communities to live their heritage by perpetuating their sociocultural practices, knowledge and know-how, while respecting the traditions and specificities of neighbouring groups and keeping them safe from anomie.

As part of the protection and promotion of our rich cultural heritage, Mali has adopted several legislative and regulatory texts, including:

Law No. 10-061 of 30 December 2010 amending and relating to the protection and promotion of the national cultural heritage, which provides in its first article that the protection of cultural heritage is ensured by the State, the territorial authorities and the communities; and

Decree No. 2016-0951/P-RM of 20 December 2016 setting out the details of the competences transferred from the State to the territorial authorities at the levels of the municipality, the circle and the region in the field of culture, intends to enhance the role of the territorial authorities in the creation, management, promotion, animation and dissemination of culture.

The Malian State, through the Ministry of Culture, issued Decree No. 203/PG-RM of 23 August 1985, establishing the National Commission for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage and its regional and subregional branches,

and bringing together almost all the ministerial departments. This commission rules on any proposal for classification in the natural heritage, thus promoting synergy or establishing links between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of the Environment and Sanitation in the specific case of the conservation and management of the Gourma Biodiversity Reserve. Institutionally, the protection and management of cultural heritage is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, which has central services at the national level, and regional and subregional services at the regional and local levels.

As for the protection of fauna and flora, this is the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment and Sanitation. This department *has an active structure that works on the valorization and protection of the Gourma biodiversity: the Project for the Conservation and Valorization of the Gourma Biodiversity and Elephants (PCVBGE)*.

These different structures work in perfect synergy with NGOs to improve the management of biological diversity and the living conditions of populations, with the support of grassroots organizations such as the IUCN, etc.

Thus, in order to ensure a better involvement and a participatory approach by the communities in the safeguarding, promotion and management of our heritage, the amended Law n° 10-061 of December 30, 2010¹ relating to the protection and promotion of the national cultural heritage, stipulates in its first article that the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage are ensured by the State, the local authorities and the communities.

Decree No. 2016-0951/P-RM of 20 December 2016 setting out the details of the competences transferred from the State to the local authorities at the commune, circle and region levels in the area of culture, intends to enhance the role of local authorities in the creation, management, promotion, animation and dissemination of culture.

Constraints or threats to biodiversity management in the Gourma

There are several threats to the Gourma, including:

The difficult coexistence of elephants that share the same natural rangelands during the dry season as the domestic livestock of the many transhumant herders who have settled in the area in an anarchic manner, without considering the presence of the pachyderms that need peace and quiet in their movements.

Due to the pressure exerted by populations on resources, the Gourma has been subjected for more than three decades to the harsh ordeals of climatic hazards, negatively affecting the balance of natural ecosystems that are already fragile due to the strong competition between the various users mentioned above. This

¹Law No. 10-061 of 30 December 2010, amending Law 85-40/AN-RM of 26 July 1985, on the protection and promotion of the national cultural heritage.

competition is most often to the detriment of elephants, whose territory has been shrinking over the years.

A hitherto unknown phenomenon of elephant poaching, with the authorities in charge of their protection (water and forestry services) being powerless to stop it. The abandonment of the Gourma by the administration and the security forces following the occupation of the area by criminals (consisting of jihadist groups, drug, arms and ammunition traffickers) (Figure 3).

Results of management activities

The State of Mali, concerned about the preservation of the Gourma's biodiversity, has engaged the help of several NGOs in the area to improve the management of biological diversity and the living conditions of the populations, with the support of grassroots organizations.

In order to better reinforce ongoing interventions through large-scale actions in the field of biodiversity preservation in the Gourma, Mali requested financial support from the World Bank and the French Global Environment Facility to implement the Gourma and Elephant Biodiversity Conservation and Development Project (PCVBGE).

This project, which is part of the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity signed and ratified by Mali on 29 March 1995, aims, among other things, to reverse the degradation of the environment and support local development initiatives, including animal husbandry in seven sites, corresponding to the elephant movement circuit.

The Ministry of Culture, through the National Heritage Directorate and its decentralized services (cultural missions), carries out awareness-raising and information activities for political, administrative and community authorities on the protection and promotion of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.



Figure 3. Elephants in the Malian Gourma. What will happen to Mali's elephants if the current poaching phenomenon continues?. © Direction régionale des eaux et forêts de Mopti.

The Department also encourages elected officials at the commune, circle and regional levels to include safeguarding and promotion actions in their five-year development plans to ensure their better involvement in the management of natural and wildlife resources in the general interest of the Gourma populations. It promotes cross-border cooperation with Burkina Faso, with both financial partners and UNESCO for the effective management of this common heritage.

These measures have led to a number of successful outcomes, including:

the establishment and management of conservation areas;
strengthening of communal and inter-communal capacities;
partnership through transnational coordination with PAGEN of Burkina Faso. Better still, a draft Mali/Burkina Faso agreement on the transnational management of shared ecosystems was the subject of a communication during the ninth session of the Joint Grand Commission on Cooperation between the governments of Mali and Burkina.

It should also be noted that, in addition to these administrative, political and community management initiatives, several NGOs and partners are also involved in the conservation of the Gourma's biodiversity and its elephants: the Wild Foundation based in Douentza, the Embassy of Japan in Mali, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Liptako Gourma Authority (ALG), the Embassy of the United States of America in Mali and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and Save the Elephants, among others.

Vision

In the face of the various threats and constraints to national biological diversity in general, and that of the Gourma biodiversity and elephants in particular, the conservation of biological diversity has become a development concept.

Mali has adopted a vision with several commitments and clear and concise priorities. This vision is summarized as follows: 'Mali, while developing, must preserve the variety of biological resources, the particularity and beauty of its landscapes. It will ensure that their values are appreciated both by its people and by the international community. It will ensure the sustainable use and security of this wealth for the benefit of present and future generations'.

Thus, through this vision, Mali aspires to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

Challenges

The Gourma Biodiversity Reserve faces several challenges, including:

The fight against the shortage of water and pasture and its consequences (animal and human pressure, which has been particularly strong in recent years in areas where elephants spend a long time, such as Banzena). One example is the arrival of large herds of cattle from western Niger and northern Burkina Faso, also in search of water and pasture following poor rainfall in their respective areas.

Cohabitation with transhumant herders, who are becoming sedentary, and the settlement of farmers on elephant-sensitive rangelands (Figure 4).

Cross-border cooperation practices and needs of the region

In the past, people in the Gourma were nomads. However, trends towards sedentary transhumant herders and the settlement of farmers on elephant-sensitive rangelands are a major factor in the depletion of space, making it impossible to ensure long-term feeding of elephants.

In order to ensure the preservation of the Gourma biodiversity, the following actions are needed:

Strengthening transnational cooperation with Burkina Faso on the transnational management of shared ecosystems.

Development and implementation of the terms of reference for the development of a joint Mali-Burkina Faso communication plan.

Identification and realization of hydraulic pastoral and grazing infrastructures on appropriate sites.

Establishment of a framework for periodic consultation between the State, partners, officials and elected representatives of both countries.



Figure 4. The social life of elephants. © Direction régionale des eaux et forêts de Mopti.

Strong awareness-raising and information campaigns for transnational communities in favour of elephants. This will include:

- persuading all stakeholders to accept the sharing of space and resources with elephants;
- becoming aware of the ecological, economic and cultural importance of the elephant;
- collaborating with dedicated staff in actions to safeguard elephants and their habitat;
- involving the population in all discussions, strategies and actions to protect elephants;
- responding to the priority needs of the population;
- providing economic benefits from elephants to the local population; and
- inscription onto UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage List.

Conclusion

The Gourma Biodiversity *Reserve*, home to the northernmost population of elephants in Africa, is currently facing a number of threats (anthropogenic and natural). In view of the issues mentioned above, the region's needs in terms of cross-border cooperation must be centred on the promotion and exchange of information, zoning and rules for animal husbandry and movements, so that they are in harmony on both sides of the border.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize its inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Intervention area, Gossi pond. © Direction régionale des eaux et forêts de Mopti.

Further Reading

- Ardesi, A., & Rakotomamonjy, B. (2014). *Patrimoine culturel et enjeux territoriaux en Afrique francophone: appui aux politiques locales*. AIMF.
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