

Living on the Edge: protecting and restoring ecosystems in the Sahel

Title

Birds and people depend on natural resources for their survival. The intricate link between people and their environment is especially apparent in the Sahel, with its millions of people (and hundreds of millions of goats), its unpredictable rainfall, and the increasing pressure on wetlands, trees and grasslands which are also used by billions of migratory and Afrotropical birds. Can development and conservation really be achieved simultaneously? This is the proposition currently being implemented and tested in the project Living on the Edge, in which two European and three African BirdLife Partners are collaborating at 12 sites in four Sahelian countries.

The BirdLife Partners in Burkina Faso and Nigeria have long experience in working with rural communities. Their approach is to establish Local Conservation Groups at the community level, which facilitate a participative process for more sustainable management of natural resources. This process results in a programme of concrete actions and identifies capacity needs, for which training and materials are provided by the project. Experiences and lessons learned are exchanged between sites and communities, both in-country and regionally. BirdLife Partner the Nigerian Conservation Foundation has successfully implemented this approach in Sahelian wetlands, and is now moving to dryland savanna and forest habitats. Mohamed Boyi, project manager at NCF, says that people are willing to cooperate and take action once they see advantages in adjusting their use of natural resources. “We have set up nurseries of both indigenous and economically attractive exotic tree species, to replant degraded areas and provide alternative incomes. Existing natural woodlands are conserved by establishing zones for firewood collection and cattle grazing, and promoting new community forests for resource use. Training for chicken and duck farming provides income and reduces hunting pressure on wild birds.”

In Burkina Faso, new boreholes for livestock watering are being constructed away from wetlands, protecting the lakeside forests from overgrazing. Regeneration and replanting of *Faidherbia albida* is underway. This native tree is favoured by both birds and people because of its reversed leaf-shedding, offering shade in the dry season and nutrients in the wet season. The Local Conservation Groups are trained by scientists to undertake both ecological and socio-economic monitoring of the impacts of these interventions. Georges Oueda, Head of Conservation at NATURAMA, the BirdLife partner in Burkina Faso, says that conservation

starts with listening to the local people. “Only by addressing livelihoods issues can biodiversity conservation be achieved sustainably, and only by using our environment more sustainably can we alleviate rural poverty.” *Bernd de Bruin/Vogelbescherming Nederlands*