



Community stabilization, elephant protection and regional security: peace, reconstruction, and elephants for Mali – update August 2015

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Background on the role of the Mali Elephant Project (MEP)

The MEP has been working with the elephants of Mali since 2002 when the WILD Foundation raised a grant of \$300,000 from the Department of State to conduct 3 years of research, followed by protecting the elephant migration route through the establishment of community resource management systems. The engagement and trust of local populations meant it was able to continue operating throughout the conflict (the only project/organization to do so). During this time it mobilized local people to protect elephants, and prevented the recruitment of young men by jihadists and armed groups by providing an occupation with status.

The MEP has at all times worked closely with the Mali Government as a trusted ally to take the lead in elephant conservation in the Gourma. This involves working closely with local communities to halt the environmental degradation that is increasing competition for resources, reducing social and environmental resilience, and undermining several types of security. Post-conflict the MEP is actively promoting the community solidarity and reconciliation required for stabilization, and the creation of an armed anti-poaching presence to respond to a rapidly escalating poaching threat from international trafficking networks and improve physical security.

There are two big current challenges in the Gourma region of Mali, both intrinsically linked to security.

- 1) This year there has been a dramatic escalation in elephant poaching with three times as many elephants lost in 2015 as in the three previous years (i.e. since poaching began).



Map showing the location of the elephant migration route (in brown) and the Niger river (in blue)

This is the result of a new development - the aggressive targeting of the elephant range by well-organized international trafficking networks which, for the first time, have contacted local people directly by mobile phone to try to persuade them to act as accomplices¹.

The other huge problem is the bandits who hide in the thickets of the remoter parts of the elephant range and seem to be those who joined the armed groups but cannot return to their communities for fear of being handed over, and so subsist through thieving. Camps have also been discovered with land mines and explosives in the elephant range.

To provide an immediate response to the elephant killings of December-January, the MEP worked with high-levels of the army to arrange patrols and the poaching reduced, but these did not continue when troops were re-deployed to deal with attacks elsewhere in the country, and poaching increased again. It is clear that anti-poaching activities increase local security, and that these are popular locally as people feel safer. It seems to have symbolic presence that sends an important message to these dispersed rural communities, as when certain people think that lawlessness will return they are more likely to act individualistically, and engage in illegal activities. If they think that the rule of law is present, they act in a way that supports that, because fundamentally everyone is tired, very tired, and just want to get on with their lives.

Through community meetings and collective resource management, the MEP is spending a great deal of effort in reinforcing community solidarity, and this works for the vast majority of people who are receiving many types of security benefits from elephant conservation (see <http://www.wild.org/blog/locals-benefit-elephant-protection/>) but anti-poaching operations are required for the few who want to act in their own self-interest to the detriment of others, and raising the funds required represents a significant drain on MEP resources.

The MEP brigades are able to collect a great deal of information. This has already led to the apprehension of bandits, arms caches, and prevented attacks, when they have been able to give it without fear of retribution assassinations. For this reason we are careful to protect their identity and activity by not publicizing it.

It is therefore important to have an operational forester force that can mount patrols, conduct investigations and pursue poachers. The MEP has worked to strengthen the government's capacity to deal with elephant poaching. Ten new forester posts were created in 2014, 50 new foresters were recruited by the government, and a radio-communications system provided by the MEP is about to be deployed. The government is paying the foresters' salaries and the costs of arms, ammunition and uniforms. The MEP has provided anti-poaching/security training, and is working with MINUSMA (the UN peace keeping presence in Mali) to supplement this training. They will be ready for deployment in 3-4

¹ Local word suggests at least some ivory moves out through Gao, although it has been pointed out that might be deliberate mis-information.

months, but it is very important that they have the means to operate as soon as they are deployed, in order to maintain morale and strengthen their sense of control and effectiveness.

The MEP has raised money for two vehicles already but the escalating poaching situation means they will need five vehicles and 10-15 motorbikes plus the costs of fuel and maintenance.

In the meantime, the MEP has received basic funding from the Elephant Crisis Fund (<https://elephantcrisisfund.org/>) to ensure routine military patrols occur until the new foresters are ready for deployment in 3-4 months time.

The MEP understands that there may be a possibility of support from AFRICOM-Stuttgart.

2) Water-infrastructure repair to protect water and forage resources for humans and elephants alike

The provision of water has environmental and social ramifications. There are two, inter-related focus areas where a relatively small intervention can have large impacts across the elephant range and beyond.

The first of these is the repair of the small dam/bridge which has drained the lakes of the 100km Gossi corridor and thereby reduced the capacity of this critical zone to support herders and elephants. The users of this area are locals and people/livestock from the river zone, who are then forced to use the pastures and water of the critical zone of Lake Banzena (see map in Annexe). Responsibility for this repair was given to local AFRICOM staff 18 months ago and a meeting with local community took place in September, but there has been no further action. Raising local expectations without follow-through is a grave danger.

The second key focus point is Lake Banzena. This is the only water accessible to elephants at the end of the dry season. Before the conflict the MEP team worked with the local community to arrange conditions for a voluntary relocation from Lake Banzena to a new area outside the elephant range with good pasture, through sinking three boreholes (one of which was funded by the US DOD). These solar panels have been repeatedly sabotaged and so the MEP is seeking to sink a well (or maybe two) instead. This will allow the population to relocate, leaving Banzena for the elephants. It will also greatly facilitate military operations in apprehending bandits at the end of the dry season who are currently hiding among the local population and posing a huge threat to elephants and people.

USAID

The MEP has met with USAID in July and it was clear that there was much mutual understanding, and that the philosophy and approach were congruent. The MEP has identified two existing USAID initiatives that have common goals with those of MEP: opportunities for out-of-school children and youth, and improving hygiene and access to safe drinking water for the region of Timbuktu. It will be attending the partner meeting in September and hopes that these initiatives might be something USAID would be able to support.

Annexe - map of the pressure on resources April, 2014

