



RESOLUTION #32



TITLE:

Reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction in the Gourma region of Mali: protecting elephants, their habitats and the natural resources of the Gourma

WHEREAS

The Gourma Region of central Mali is the home to a unique population of desert-adapted elephants that undertake the longest annual migration on record of African elephants (a range of around 40,000km²), within and amongst an array of diverse, multi-ethnic, local communities. In an area beset by drought, land degradation and increasing human populations, this elephant population, numbering an estimated 350-700 in 2004-2005, faced an uncertain future due to conflicts with human pastoralists and agriculturists and a lack of protection for key habitats. Government resources were wholly inadequate to protect this vast area: a different approach was needed.

The Mali Elephant Project has, since 2002, been successful in bringing together and empowering diverse rural communities—in cooperation with national and regional governments—to protect elephants, their habitat, and their migration route, forge a common understanding of the resource-related issues they face, and create effective, long-term solutions. Building community cohesion and solidarity is a crucial first step to establishing the necessary systems for elephant, habitat and natural resource protection and management.

Many of these local communities are facing division by the trauma of coping with the onslaught of external forces and multiple conflicts: the arrival of foreign Islamist insurgents, a national military coup, the rise of drug trafficking across the Sahara, the return of mercenaries from Libya, and the re-ignition of the Tuareg rebellion. Such conditions generated lawlessness and have the potential to impede progress of the Mali Elephant Project.

The Gourma society was already complex, bearing the scars of past rebellions, previous resettlement of refugees, and other operations that have seldom taken into account the area's socio-cultural situation (multi-ethnic social relations taking precedence over scarce natural resources and optimal siting of wells, and the erratic movements of people and livestock).

Important strategic questions need to be answered concerning management of reconciliation, reconstruction, the return of refugees and displaced people, and general rural development. It is crucial to avoid reigniting tensions or sowing the seeds of future problems that would be difficult to control. It is also important to learn from the past and avoid interventions that increase environmental degradation in the future, thereby undermining the livelihoods of the local population, and fuelling social strife, as has happened before.

Currently, this complex social landscape is characterized by numerous conditions:

- many different categories of refugees and displaced persons;

- general deterioration of the social fabric that is the main challenge to successful reconstruction;
- the need for interventions to address this if they are to succeed;
- insecurity from the absence of government structures;
- a lack of understanding of the complex social context, creating a scattered and confused approach to reconstruction..

THEREFORE

WE COMMEND the Government of Mali for launching an initial process whereby all involved come together to understand the social context of the Gourma, correctly target aid and development interventions, involve local communities in these initiatives, and ensure that such interventions do not exacerbate the situation and create future problems.

WE APPLAUD the Government of Mali specifically for:

- recognizing the uniqueness and value of this unique herd of elephants
- recognizing the importance of social cohesion in the protection of these elephants, their habitats and their migration route;
- recognizing the dual importance of employing local young men in elephant, habitat and natural resource protection as a means of promoting social cohesion;
- acknowledging the importance of recognizing the existing social complexity in any future interventions;
- emphasizing the need for dialogue as a pre-requisite for aid and reconstruction in the Gourma that will support elephant conservation, natural resource protection and ecosystem rehabilitation;
- understanding of the social context as fundamental to the delivery of these goals;
- requesting the Mali Elephant Project to work with them to design and implement a three-day workshop for the top levels of national and regional Malian government, together with representatives of local communities, and the national Reconciliation Commission to address the question: *How can essential and urgent humanitarian assistance be quickly deployed to alleviate the present suffering, without further aggravating the social and environmental imbalances that are already posing a threat to a sustainable and peaceful future?*

RESOLVED

To call upon all those concerned with aid and reconstruction in Mali — the Mali Government, local authorities and associations, their partners, local communities, and all those active in the Gourma — to support this vision and to recognize that:

- the desert elephants of Mali have are a resource of singular value and importance for Mali and the world, and can generate benefits for local communities and all citizens of Mali
- reconciliation within and between communities is a pre-requisite for aid and reconstruction activities;
- efforts should aim for the reconstruction of communities as they were pre-conflict;
- conservation of habitat required by elephants must remain a national priority;

- local communities must be involved in the design of post-conflict aid and reconstruction to ensure that these activities are correctly targeted, achieve the desired results, and do not exacerbate social tensions and environmental degradation;
- community-based natural resource management is a means to unite communities, provide employment for young men; and to conserve and restore the ecosystems on which local livelihoods depend.

Further, to call upon all those concerned with aid and reconstruction in Mali to enhance and strengthen their efforts by:

- actively engaging in this process initiated by the Government of Mali and the Mali Elephant Project;
- attending the follow-up workshop in November, 2013 and subsequent strategic planning and training workshops as deemed necessary by the Mali Government;
- reaching out to all other agencies and organizations to create a mutually supportive and coordinated effort focused on reconciliation and local community engagement in aid and reconstruction.

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