

FINAL REPORT

PROJECT

Education for Conservation of Migratory Waterbirds in Ramsar site 1018

Introduction

Today, hunting and population growth are the cause of the extinction or scarcity of many species of wild animals in Africa. In Benin in particular, many formerly common and abundant species have disappeared or are severely threatened with extinction. Animal habitats have been reduced by 65% for agriculture and livestock, or as a result of overexploitation of fuelwood. Constant pressure is being exerted on the rest because of the growing impoverishment of rural populations. The latter derive most of their subsistence from natural ecosystems.



Given the density of the human population in the wetlands of southern Benin and the high demand for bushmeat from urban populations, the exploitation of game is one of the main conservation constraints on wildlife in general and birds in particular. Nowadays, the African skimmer population (*Rynchops flavirostris*) in Benin is declining and even more so in the South. Migratory waterbirds in general, which occur in the wetlands of Benin, are unfortunately without protected areas. From this situation, the wild population of *Rynchops flavirostris* is disappearing in Benin with its status as a species already threatened on the red list. Habitat loss is one of the greatest threats to wildlife. Following the erosion of traditional values and the weakening of local authorities that once governed the traditional conservation of nature, natural resources, in general and in particular birds, are under constant threat, while hunting and fishing and destruction of vegetation cover is becoming more and more sophisticated. We thus witness the gradual disappearance of certain types of habitats even in the already fragile and marginal wetlands of South Benin. Faced with this situation, sustainable resource management is essential. To achieve this, only good knowledge and awareness of the sustainable use of natural resources by local communities are needed.

Reminder of the project context

The conservation of migratory birds and biodiversity on Lake Nokoué requires environmental education of children in school settings to reach a wider level of awareness of local community of Sô-Ava to sustainably safeguard and protect of mangrove vegetation that provide habitat for birds and other aquatic animals. According to results of a study of the Office of Sustainable Development, Basic Education, Office for Africa, and sponsored by US Agency for International Development (USAID), the children are natural activists and programs that take advantage of their enthusiasm, profit their communities and the cause of conservation.

Indeed, for centuries, mangrove forests have been used to maintain traditional cultures of local populations, as fish sources, game, fodder for livestock ... and they have permitted the development of industries that use them as a source of raw materials. Alas the mangrove ecosystems and other forest surfaces are disappearing at a rate of about 100,000 hectares per year, and thousands more hectares are degraded by overfishing and other human activities, with the destruction of bird habitats, especially that of *Rynchops flavirostris*. In addition to this habitat destruction, *Rynchops flavirostris* is subject to high anthropogenic threats and enjoys no protection in Benin. It is hunted as a game bird and the population appears to decline sharply in Benin. This led to the recent reclassification of *Rynchops flavirostris*' conservation status as a "Near Threatened and Endangered" species. *Rynchops flavirostris* feeds on fishery resources (especially fish) and through conflicts with humans, particularly the fishermen of Nokoué Lake, is threatened with extinction. These threats have reached such seriousness that this species and other migratory birds could disappear in Benin, if nothing is done to protect them.



Besides protecting the bird community, the project will reduce threats on water resources such as fish, crustaceans, molluscs, etc. and on the environment, by breaking the destruction cycle of mangrove forest in disappearing, to fight against poverty and advance the perspectives of risk reduction of environmental degradation. Also, fishing is the main activity of the Sô-Ava communities, while disappearance of mangroves entails destruction of shelter and habitat for many aquatic animal species, including fish, molluscs, crustaceans, etc. that use wetlands for shelter and support. The stilts of mangroves also serve as supports for oysters and perches for birds. The judgment of degradation of forest and its sustainable management will cause the loss of carbon density and significantly will help to avoid emissions of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs), water resources conservation and prevents flooding, runoff reduction, and control erosion and decrease siltation of rivers and fisheries protection, while preserving biodiversity. The project will promote the economic, cultural and ecological functions of Nokoué Lake and will improve the living conditions of Sô-Ava communities and those of Benin in general.

Financial Partners

The project has received financial support from **Avifauna Nature Tours**, through **African Bird Club (ABC)** and material support from **IDEA WILD**.

Practical Phase

A total of four (04) major phases marked the implementation of this project, namely:

- Workshop of exchanges;
- Capacity building for teachers;
- Environmental education of children;
- Sensitization and reforestation, through the celebration of the World Day of Migratory Birds and a National Day of the Tree.

1- Workshop of exchanges

This workshop is the first phase of the project. It brought together all stakeholders to discuss the state of degradation of wetland ecosystems of Benin in general and of the Ramsar 1018 site in particular, expert selection for the development of the teacher training module, the choice of a reforestation site, the choice of nurseries to plant and proposals for ideas. Thus, it allowed maintaining a crucible to discuss the subjects during the period of the project.



It was attended by experts, local authorities, NGO leaders and local communities.

Among the participants, we can mention among others:

- Mr. Bienvenu HOUSSOU, 2nd Deputy Mayor of the Sô-Ava Town Council, representing the Mayor of Sô-Ava
- Professor Toussaint O. LOUGBEGNON, expert biogeographer, ornithologist
- Mr. Fawaz Deen HOUNKPONOU, representing Nature Tropicale NGO (NT- NGO)
- Mr. Arnaud ADIKPETO, representing the Benin Environment and Education Society (BEES- NGO)
- Mr. Hubert S. CLOTOE, representing Sô-Ava local NGO "SONAGNON- NGO"
- Mr. Eugène G. AHISSOU, representing Sô-Ava local NGO "ADVOCACY-NGO"
- Mr. Péguy AYINA, representing IDID-NGO

- Mr. Thomas DOSSOU, Director of the Primary Public School of Sô-Ava Centre (Group A)
- Mr Enock A. SEZONLIN, representing the local communities of Sô-Ava (Parent of student), etc.

During this workshop, three important points were raised:

- Where we are? This question allowed participants to assess the current state of natural resource management in Sô-Ava.
- How to improve? This question allowed the participants to go through the experiences of the NGOs that are better off in the field and working on Lake Nokoué, the communal plan for managing natural resources, the results of studies, etc.
- What to do? This question has suggested a plan of action taking into account the specific context of the locality.



During the discussions, **Professor Toussaint O. LOUGBEGNON**, expert in ornithology, mentioned that the best conservation of biodiversity and birdlife of Lake Nokoué in particular must take into account Man and his activities. **Professor Toussaint LOUGBEGNON** strongly recommended that AMAF-Benin / African Bird Club-Benin must develop a multi-year conservation program which will integrate greening activities in schools during the first years, in order to give a habit of reforestation to Children. He finally asked AMAF-Benin to initiate the process of development of the Grand Nokoué. **Mr. Arnauld ADIKPETO** of the Benin Environment Education of Society (BEES NGO) wished that the actions be much more emphasized on the awareness of the conservation of the habitats for the avifauna. As for **Mr. Fawaz Deen HOUNKPONOU** of the NGO Nature Tropicale, he mentioned that this AMAF-Benin/ African Bird Club program is strengthened and perpetuated to integrate ecology into the behavior of children. **Mr. Enock A. SEZONLIN** representing local communities and **Mr. Hubert S. CLOTOE** of the ONG SONANGNON of Sô-Ava, as well as the directors and teachers of the public primary school of Sô-Ava Centre, appreciated the initiative and hoped that AMAF-Benin/ABC-Benin would multiply the project to all schools on Lake Nokoué.

2- Training of teachers and principals of schools

This training has encouraged and strengthened the capacity of 16 teachers and directors of Groups A and B of the primary public school of "Sô-Ava Centre", to the concept of

environmental education. The latter are the main actors in terms of the multiplication of knowledge for future generations.

This training, which lasted three days, resulted in three main modules:

- Introduction to the concept of Environmental Education: Forms of use and anarchic occupations of mangroves in Benin;
- Proposal for a new response to the conservation of mangrove ecosystems;
- Technique for the restoration and management of mangroves as a habitat for birds.

Given that conservation has become a major concern today as wetlands play an important role in the natural balance of the environments and knowledge of the functioning of this particular ecosystem so as not to have to undertake conservation actions which could jeopardize the ecological and natural balance of these areas.

In this mission, teachers are privileged partners, vectors to ensure environmental education. The aim is to share with teachers what environmental education means, how does it works and what role does it play for nature conservation and sustainable development.



Professor Toussaint O. Loubégnon, an expert in biogeography and an ornithologist in charge of this training, mentioned that "environmental education" is conceived as an ongoing process in which individuals and communities become aware of their environment and acquire the knowledge, values, skills, experiences and willingness to act individually and collectively to solve current and future environmental problems. According to Professor Toussaint O. Loubégnon, the mangrove regression projected impacts on the environment and the various activities in particular:

- ✓ Imbalance of lagoon and lake ecosystems
 - Mangrove dynamics affect other coastal ecosystems
 - It is estimated that the area of mangroves is now disappearing by at least 1.7 ha per year
- ✓ Impact of depletion of mangrove resources on socio-economic activities.

Professor Loubégnon, the training officer, considered that the causes of regression and degradation of mangrove ecosystems are overexploitation and anarchic occupation. He mentioned that teachers will be able to master the 6 pillars of the environment at the end of this training and will be able to pass on the knowledge to the future generation.

3- Environmental education of children

The Children are the main target of the project. A total of 291 children from the public primary school of "Sô-Ava Centre" benefit from this program. They are mainly children of C1, CE2, CM1 and CM2 of two groups (A and B).



AMAF-BENIN believes that the sustainable conservation of biodiversity should rest on the education of future generations to the knowledge of their environment and the natural resources of their localities. AMAF-BENIN also believes that any information that reaches children can easily reach their mothers who can play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity, and in turn, all the communities in their localities. It is therefore important to instill in children a habit of reforestation and protection. This phase is still in progress.

It is important to note that during this project we participated in the program of enumeration of migratory waterbirds in collaboration with the Focal Point of African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), the General Directorate of Forests and Natural Resources, Wetland International and others.

We will give you more details in our final report as soon results of bird counts are available.

4- Education based on action and awareness

The implementation of this project made it possible to celebrate World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) and National Tree Day (NTD), by raising the awareness of children and local communities in the protection of birds.

This activity was attended by Lieutenant DOHOLI and Lieutenant Nassirou BRISSO, representing the forestry administration and the AEWA focal point in Benin. They have educated and sensitized children on the importance of protecting the environment and biodiversity. Lieutenant Nassirou BRISSO, representing the AEWA focal point, mentioned that conservation of bird species could contribute to the economic development of So-Ava and Lake Nokoué in general, as birds attract tourists.

4.1. Information & Awareness Campaign

As part of the celebration of the World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) and the National Tree Day (JNA), an information workshop on the importance of bird conservation was held in the Town Hall of Sô-Ava, and was followed by reforestation activity with the children of the public primary school of "Sô-Ava Centre". Mr Fataï AINA, Executive Director of AMAF-BENIN and representative of African Bird Cub (ABC), said that the trees are flyways for birds.



The objective of this workshop is to advocate with local authorities and inform opinion leaders about the application of the law No. 41 of November 25, 2011 and their involvement in the project.



This activity was held on June 1, 2017, in Sô-Ava in the presence of several actors involved in the field of the environment in Benin. It was crowned with an awareness-raising session and supervision of the children of the public school of "Sô-Ava Centre" to a reforestation activity.

4.2. Installation of information panels

Two (02) information panels, including a banner (tarpaulin) and an iron plate, were created to inform and raise awareness about the project. The banner is displayed in front of the public primary school of "Sô-Ava Centre" and the iron plate is installed on the immediate edge of the bank to the east of Lake Nokoué.



All of these activities have been covered by the media, including the print media and traditional channels of communication; More than 3,000 inhabitants through Sô-Ava were able to be informed about the conservation of birds.

5- Results obtained :

- The local authorities of Sô-Ava and the Organizations intervening in the area are informed and undertake to initiate actions for the benefit of birds;
- Forty-two (42) teachers and school principals are trained and provide durably the environmental education of children from their schools ;
- 291 students children are equipped and committed to raising awareness among their parents and their communities, on the communal decree No. 41 of November 25, 2011 and at the need to protect birds and their habitats ;
- - 873 households are informed and sensitized to the conservation of birds;
- Two major communication panels (Including a banner) were made, including the logos of African Bird Club, Avifauna Nature Tours and IDEA WILD, with strong messages, one of which is displayed in front of the public primary school in Sô-Ava Centre and one on the Sô-Ava landing stage to inform and sensitize the community of Sô-Ava and nationals and foreign tourists, on the project and on the mission of African Bird Club (ABC) and Avifauna Nature Tours.

6- Difficulties

Some difficulties have arisen in the implementation of the project. These include financial and social difficulties that have impeded the implementation of certain activities, including:

- The setting up of the consultation framework, which will serve as a permanent community monitoring mechanism. It would take several sessions outside the exchange sessions on conservation strategies to identify and designate the actors who will make up the framework for consultation. There is a need for consensus within local communities to minimize some of the risks that may hinder the project. This requires the involvement of key actors such as traditional and religious leaders, leaders of groups of fishermen and hunters, etc. ;
- The T-shirts production for children for the awareness campaign as part of the celebration of World Migratory Bird Day and National Tree Day.

Production resources for T-shirts and certain documents were allocated to the organization of a second workshop for participatory advocacy, information and sensitization of opinion leaders. Also, these resources were also allocated to offset the difference in the costs of realization of certain materials and tools that have increased. This will facilitate the setting up of a consultative framework for the future.

It is important to clarify that there was no plan for a consultative framework in the project, but the realities on the ground require it and measures must be taken to achieve it.

7- Opportunities

- Strong involvement of local and communal authorities in activities and their willingness to integrate the project into the local initiative for the greening of natural areas;
- The commitment of the authorities to take account of the conservation of birds in the management and development programs of natural resources;
- Knowledge of African Bird Club (ABC), Avifauna Nature Tours and IDEA WILD and their missions by Lake Nokoué communities and tourists;
- The willingness of municipal authorities of Sô-Ava to sign a long-term partnership with AMAF-BENIN.

8- Recommendations

Some recommendations were made at the end of the project. These recommendations take into account:

- The development of the project so as to cover all the schools located on Lake Nokoué, including the lower Ouémé valley;
- Install information panels in key areas to reduce pressure on birds;
- Provide sessions to improve knowledge of Lake Nokoué fishers, hunters, farmers and traditional therapists (traditional medicine practitioners) in order to involve more communities that are responsible for bird capture and chemicals product proliferation that threaten the life of the avifauna;
- Prioritizing long-term environmental education to prevent bird-related problems.

Conclusion

In view of the threats to birdlife in the wetlands of South Benin, particularly at Ramsar Site 1018, it is important to take into account the recommendations made by communities and local authorities; And put in place a long-term action strategy for the ongoing monitoring of species. This requires the setting up of a consultative framework (platform) that will bring together local actors as a mechanism for community monitoring of biodiversity, particularly avifauna. It is also important to develop a participatory management plan which will be the basic document and guidance for the consultation framework and local and communal authorities for the conservation and monitoring of bird species.

Various

Finally, it is important to remember that during this project, our AMAF-BENIN Organization participated in the program of Counting of Migratory Waterbirds in collaboration with the Focal Point of the African Eurasia Waterbirds Agreement (AEWA), the Directorate General for Forests and Natural Resources (DGFRN), Wetland International and other National Organizations.

We have not yet received the images and the report of this activity. We will send them to you as soon as they are available.