



MALI ELEPHANT LANDSCAPES

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Location: Mali
Wilder Rangelands Case Study

*Rangelands Working Group,
Global Rewilding Alliance*

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Photo credits: Carlton Ward Photography



Overview

The Global Rewilding Alliance has convened Alliance Partners — including Mali Elephant Landscapes — and cross-sector experts through its Rangelands Working Group to launch the Rewilding Rangelands Initiative: a coordinated effort to restore ecological function and foster coexistence across the world's rangelands.

Mali Elephant Landscapes (MEL) operates within the vast Gourma region of Mali, working across million of hectares to foster **ecosystem resilience**. Their initiatives extend into a complex landscape characterized by savannas, dry forests, and seasonal wetlands, which are critical, yet often overlooked, habitats.

These landscapes support a **unique desert-adapted Elephant population, diverse ethnic groups, and traditional livelihoods**. By integrating community empowerment with extensive management of human impact, habitat protection and ecosystem restoration, MEL addresses the dual challenges of environmental degradation and socio-economic vulnerability in a conflict-affected region.



Photo credit: Mali Elephant Landscapes

Mali Elephant Landscapes focuses on restoring ecological functionality and fostering coexistence through a participatory and livelihood-linked approach, with Elephants as a unifying species.



APPROACH:

Elephant-Centred Community-Led Natural Resource Management (EC-CLNRM)

Community-led natural resource management alongside Elephants and local communities

MEL's core model, EC-CLNRM, empowers local communities to sustainably manage the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend. This involves establishing management committees and youth patrolling teams that set **land-use practices, protect Elephant habitat, and regulate resource use.**

The organization works across 17 communes (spanning 6 million hectares), and has supported **over 800 communities** in designating 170,901 hectares of community protected areas. Their work is deeply rooted in understanding local attitudes and traditional governance systems, building upon Mali's decentralization legislation to create inclusive, transparent, and equitable structures. This grass-roots action is supported by governance structures at multiple administrative levels, including the 2021 Gourma Biosphere Reserve covering 4.2 million hectares.



Meeting of brigades and the management committee (in Sartatane).

Photo credit: WILD Foundation



APPROACH:

Elephant-Centred Community-Led Natural Resource Management (EC-CLNRM)

Community-led management

Recognizing that the prosperity of communities and that of the ecosystem are intertwined, MEL's approach aims to yield multiple benefits. A restored, more diverse, stable, productive ecosystem - as represented by a recovering elephant population - is able to **support more life and deliver benefits** that include improved livelihoods, opportunities for youth and women, enhanced social cohesion, and the effective management of Human-Elephant coexistence.



Women's association harvesting bourgou. Photo credit: Nomba Ganame

Human-Elephant coexistence in a complex landscape

MEL's work directly addresses human-Elephant conflict by engaging the entire community affected by conflict in understanding the issues and developing collaborative solutions. These consider the problem within the wider context, **setting aside key Elephant habitat and migration routes, while finding ways to accommodate livelihoods**. Furthermore, MEL works with the government to create a multi-level environmental governance system, including the establishment of the **Gourma Biosphere Reserve**, which provides a framework for managing human impact and promoting coexistence. Their efforts have contributed to reducing poaching incidents significantly, thereby enhancing the safety of both local populations and the Elephants.



APPROACH:

Elephant-Centred Community-Led Natural Resource Management (EC-CLNRM)

Ecosystem restoration

A key strategic goal for MEL is to increase the area under restoration to support **the rewilding of 198,000 hectares of degraded land and key habitat** to ultimately enhance the resilience of the Gourma ecosystem. As well as setting aside areas for protection and planting endangered multipurpose species, this involves training community members in locally-adapted regeneration techniques, including Assisted Natural Regeneration.



*Lake Banzena - key late dry-season water accessible to elephants.
Photo credit: Carlton Ward Photography*



Outcomes & Impact

Mali Elephant Landscapes' sustained engagement and unique approach have yielded significant and measurable outcomes:

- **Elephant Population Recovery:** The desert-adapted Elephant population has shown signs of recovery, with numbers approaching pre-conflict levels. In 2025, 473 elephants were counted, an increase from 316 in 2023.
- **Restoration of Degraded Ecosystems:** Significant areas of the Gourma landscape are being managed and restored. This includes the establishment of the Gourma Biosphere Reserve (4.2 million hectares) and the designation of 170,901 hectares of community-protected areas. The 5-year plan aims to support the restoration of an additional 198,000 hectares of degraded land.
- **Adoption of Community-Led Governance:** 17 communes covering 6 million hectares are actively committed to EC-CLNRM. This demonstrates local recognition of the impact of these community-led structures, which includes the establishment of a network of 1,472 unarmed, community ecoguards.
- **Measurable Biodiversity Gains:** The recovery of Elephant numbers and the restoration of habitats are indicators of improved functionality. The EC-CLNRM approach inherently aims to support diverse ecosystems.
- **Increased Human-Elephant Coexistence:** Poaching incidents have been reduced to an average of 1.6 per year over the last five years, down from a high of 83 in 2015.
- **Strengthened Community Livelihoods and Resilience:** Direct benefits have reached over 179,237 people, with enhanced livelihoods, improved social cohesion, and increased agency for women and youth. The focus on sustainable resource prevents over-exploitation and directly supports community well-being and resilience to environmental and climate change.
- **Strengthened Institutional Capacity:** Multi-level governance systems have been created and reinforced, involving collaboration between local communities, regional bodies, and national ministries, evidenced by the creation of the Gourma Biosphere Reserve and governance structures to ensure accountability.
- **Long-Term Sustainability:** The community-centric model, establishment of governance structures, and local stewardship underpin the long-term sustainability of ecosystems and conservation efforts beyond project timelines.



Outcomes & Impact

Mali Elephant Landscapes demonstrates that effective rewilding in complex, human-dominated, and conflict-affected landscapes depends on aligning ecological recovery with community needs and governance.

Their EC-CLNRM model highlights how integrated approaches can simultaneously support biodiversity, climate resilience, local traditions (such as pastoralism) and livelihoods, creating space for both people and nature to thrive.

Learn more about them [here](#).



Ecoguard counting Elephants. Photo credit: WILD Foundation

Part of a larger effort

These case studies are part of the the **Rewilding Rangelands Initiative** — a collaborative effort to restore ecological functionality and uplift coexistence across rangelands through coordinated action across disciplines, sectors, and geographies.

A growing coalition of the Global Rewilding Alliance, Alliance Partners and experts have joined the Rangelands Working Group.

Explore other [case studies](#) and learn more about the [Initiative](#).

ABOUT THE GLOBAL REWILDING ALLIANCE

The Global Rewilding Alliance is a worldwide organisation catalysing the rewilding movement by bringing together an active network of over 290 partners, working on every continent to help nature heal herself and secure a thriving future for people, nature and planet.

Our mission is to mainstream rewilding in science, policy and practice.

The core support of our Global Rewilding [Champions](#) is enabling us to build the hopeful, growing, global rewilding movement.



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