

# Jihadist groups threaten the conservation of a key west African world heritage site, researcher says

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The Mekrou river near Point Triple in the W National Park. Rainy Season.  
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Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger share a biosphere reserve known as the

[WAP complex \(W-Arly-Pendjari\)](#), which spreads across the borders of the three countries. The first part of this 3 million hectare [Unesco](#) world heritage site was declared in 1996 and it was extended in 2002. It's intended to protect species that are highly threatened in the region, including elephants and cheetahs, as well as important [wetlands](#).

The three states signed an agreement in 2008 to manage the reserve's natural resources together, for the purposes of local, national and regional development.

The territory has been afflicted by violence and insecurity for some ten years. This trouble has spilled over from the "three borders" area shared by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where armed Islamist groups have been operating.

Due to the steady encroachment of non-state armed groups, the conflict is threatening to engulf the reserve. Forest resources are being [plundered](#) and people who live near the [protected areas](#) are being displaced.

As part of a study of causes of migration in and from the region, I [investigated](#) the local impact of armed groups, focusing on [W Park](#), part of the WAP complex. I interviewed local people about the implications of poaching activities and the use of violence in forest reserves.

My opinion is that an "economy of armed groups," which can be called a "jihadism of protected areas," is being set up. It is dangerously disrupting environmental protection.

The armed groups have opened trafficking routes and launched attacks on local communities. They have taken over activities such as gold panning, hunting and fishing and targeted forest eco-guards. All this has had a direct impact on people and led to deteriorating social conditions. Authorities need to coordinate national responses to safeguard the

reserve and restore social cohesion among [local communities](#).

## **Serious threat to protected forest areas**

The transboundary area came under multiple pressures decades ago, such as harvesting wood, hunting, poaching, fishing, collecting [medicinal plants](#) and illegal mining. The level of exploitation was threatening the ecosystems. In response, the countries adopted a regional approach to coordinate national policies. Local people were to participate in the common management of resources. This approach was outlined in the 2000 [Tapoa Declaration](#) and again in 2008.

But another form of pressure has also grown. Today, armed groups seriously [threaten](#) the future of the reserve, its conservation and the sustainability of its activities and development. They have "colonized" this natural geographical area, living inside the remote uncontrolled protected areas and exploiting resources. [They often commit abuses on unprotected populations](#).

The armed groups are not the sole causes of this current situation. Based on my [field research](#) in the region over the years, I argue that it is also the result of the political management by the three states.

Contributing to the political and social instability are:

- land grabs in the areas surrounding protected [forest areas](#)
- a pastoralism crisis which increases competition with crop farmers
- inconsistency in the distribution and regulation of [forest resources](#) between [local residents](#) and state representatives
- a poorly integrated approach to the biosphere.

## War entrepreneurship

Since 2018, the Katiba Ansar-ul Islam and the Katiba Serma have been the two [armed groups most visible in northern Benin, south-eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger](#). A kind of "war entrepreneurship" is being set up. It [draws](#) on natural resources (wood, rare plants, illegal fishing, gold panning), but also causes forced migration in already vulnerable populations. Protected areas have become sanctuaries for recruiting local fighters and planning attacks. According to most of the people I interviewed, the armed groups also consider the forest eco-guards as predators who have oppressed the local populations since the colonial era. Some guards have been killed, others recruited into the armed groups.

The armed groups rely on income from forest products exploitation, illegally extracted gold and *zakat*—taxes demanded from locals. They also force local people to pledge allegiance to their cause and make them move from their places to remote areas such as the protected reserves. There, migrants also exploit the natural resources.

What has developed is a parallel political economy in areas controlled by armed groups.

## Way forward

Among the initiatives to combat non-state armed groups, our policy report suggested the following solutions:

- make forest villages inaccessible to two-wheeled motorcycles, the main means of transport for [armed groups](#)
- set up forest tunnels or corridors where people can hide when under threat

- re-adopt an integrated and inclusive approach to forest ecology, animal protection and cross-border security
- strengthen social cohesion between communities in Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger by defusing the driving factors of insurgency and restoring mutual trust.

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