



Guinea designates six large Ramsar sites in the upper Niger river basin

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Guinea



Ramsar and WWF celebrate Guinea's new designations

On 16 February at the summit meeting of the Heads of State of the nine-nation Niger Basin Authority in Abuja, Nigeria, the Prime Minister of Guinea announced the designation of six new Wetlands of International Importance, all located in the headwaters of the Niger River. Totalling over 4.5 million hectares in area, these new sites are of extraordinarily great significance because they represent Guinea's recognition of the vital importance of sustainable management of the entire vast catchment of the Niger Basin and help to ensure adequate water supply downstream.

For the past two years, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Ramsar Convention Bureau, and the Niger Basin Authority have been developing a remarkable Niger River Basin initiative for freshwater conservation in the West African subregion, and, in efforts supported materially by the Living Waters Programme of the WWF, the designation of this suite of Ramsar sites can be seen in the context of a basin-wide effort for the wise use and sustainable management of the entire system, similar to ongoing Living Waters/Ramsar work in cooperation with the Lake Chad Basin Commission reported elsewhere on this Web site.

Here are brief Annotated Ramsar List entries for the six new sites, drawn from their Ramsar Information Sheets.

Niger-Mafou. 17/01/02; Kankan, Faranah; 1,015,450 ha; 09°53'N 010°37'W. Réserve naturelle gérée. A very large area of permanent and seasonal rivers and freshwater marshes, with irrigated and seasonally flooded agricultural land, located between and around the rivers Niger and Mafou. Large areas of primary dry forest support a high level of unusual biodiversity, and the area has been little altered by human intervention. The threatened endemic fish *Arius gigas* is supported, and a number of waterbirds visit the site annually. Moreover, the site is situated in a migratory corridor for large mammals between Guinea and neighboring states, with abundant water resources for them throughout the year. Water quality is good, but increases in cotton-growing and the use of pesticides may offer a threat - moreover, the mahogany tree *Azalia africana*, highly prized in woodworking, is now menaced with extinction. Traditional fishing is economically important, as is agriculture and grazing, but losses due to clearing and deforestation are not negligible, and the use of explosives in fishing is diminishing fish stocks. The numerous ponds figure prominently in cultural life, with family and village festivals and rituals said to bring moral and material happiness. Ramsar site no. 1163.

Niger-Niandan-Milo. 17/01/02; Kankan; 1,046,400 ha; 10°30'N 009°30'W. Réserve naturelle gérée, National Park. A very large flat expanse of permanent and seasonal rivers and freshwater ponds and marshes, a critical link between the upstream and downstream portions of the Niger Basin, including within the site the Upper Niger National Park. The site is extremely important for its hydrological functions and for its fish biodiversity, with more than 200 species noted. The forest of Mafou and the pond of Baro are particularly rich in folklore. Professionalization of fishing activities is

lessening the effects of irresponsible practices, such as the use of dynamite and chemicals to cause massive fish mortality. The construction of a hydroelectric barrage is in planning stages but is not expected to affect the ecology of the site adversely. Ramsar site no. 1164.

Niger Source. 17/01/02; Faranah; 180,400 ha; 09°20'N 010°40'W. Réserve naturelle gérée. Covering the headwaters of the river Niger from its source near the frontier with Sierra Leone northward to Bandéya, the site is marked by savannah and forest vegetation with marked dry and rainy flood seasons. An extraordinarily important site, since the enormous basin of 4,660km river depends upon the quality and quantity of its flow, it also supports an impressive biodiversity, including the threatened endemic freshwater catfish *Arius gigas* and a number of migratory waterbirds. Subterranean circulation of water in parts of the site aids in groundwater recharge and merits further study. Traditional fishing, grazing, and agriculture are practiced within the site. Ramsar site no. 1165.

Niger-Tinkisso. 17/01/02; Kankan; 400,600 ha; 11°20'N 009°15'W. Réserve naturelle gérée. An extensive area of river and freshwater ponds and marshes between and around the Tinkisso river and the Niger as far as the frontier with Mali, centering upon Siguiri, particularly representative of the most important wetland types of West Africa. The Western Giant (or Derby) Eland, thought to be extinct in Guinea, has been rediscovered within the site but remains threatened, and appreciable number of both waterbirds and molluscs are reported. Water quality is generally good, but the effects of mining (particularly gold mining) and pesticide runoff from cotton culture will bear close watching. Ramsar site no. 1166.

Sankarani-Fié. 17/01/02; Kankan; 1,015,200 ha; 10°25'N 008°30'W. Réserve naturelle gérée. The basin of the Sankarani river west of the country's frontiers with Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, characterized by savannah and dry forest and enormous floodplains along the length of the river. The area is the most productive of fish in the region, especially important as a spawning ground because of its calm and deep currents protected by gallery forests - the taste of the fish of the river Fié is said to be particularly prized by connoisseurs. Hippopotami have become numerous within the site because of water retained by the Sélingué dam. Ramsar site no. 1167.

Tinkisso. 17/01/02; Faranah, Kankan; 896,000 ha; 11°13'N 010°35'W. Réserve naturelle gérée. The upper reaches of the Tinkisso river from the highlands near Dabola and Dinguiraye downstream toward the plains near Siguiri, with a climate characterized by two seasons, rainy from June to October and dry from November to May with the strong dry east-to-west wind called the harmattan. The site supports manatees, which are gravely threatened in the region, as well as the Palmyra or ronier palm (*Borassus aethiopum*), which has been seriously over-exploited, particularly for making palm wine, and will disappear in the region unless steps are taken. Ramsar site no. 1168.

See also WWF's press release, 16/02/02.

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