

CASE STUDY 6

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BURKINA FASO

Organization: Tin Hinan Association (ATH)
Region: Africa

In Darkoye Kel Essouk, northern Burkina Faso, Tamasheq pastoralists and some Fulani families live on 30,218 hectares of arid lands shaped by the proximity of the Sahara desert. The territory includes prairies, shrub savannah, meadows, limited farmland, and Lake Darkoye, a Ramsar wetland that regulates water, sustains biodiversity, and provides essential resources for local livelihoods. For generations, communities have governed this land through customary practices rooted in sustainability, cohesion, and peace. Women play a vital role in land use and ecosystem management, despite the region's difficult environmental and political context.

The pressures on the territory are severe. Climate change intensifies recurrent droughts, water scarcity, and desertification, while local practices such as overgrazing, over-harvesting of timber, artisanal gold panning, poaching, and unsustainable farming accelerate degradation. Communities observe shrinking water resources, declining tree cover, and changes in fish populations in Lake Darkoye. In addition, insecurity linked to terrorism has forced the displacement of communities, abandonment of productive activities, and neglect of natural resources. Armed groups exacerbate these threats by destroying resources directly, burning crop-lands and forests, and kidnapping community members.

The quantitative impact reflects this convergence of pressures. Of the 30,218 hectares, nearly 28,000 hectares remain as natural or semi-natural grasslands critical to pastoralist systems[36], but parts of the territory have been abandoned and left vulnerable to degradation. The area overlaps with the Key Biodiversity Area of Lake Oursi–Lake Darkoye, underlining its ecological importance beyond the local scale.[37]

Despite these challenges, communities continue to apply traditional ecological knowledge and governance. Local practices emphasize ecological balance and protection of biodiversity, including ponds, which are treated as critical indicators of ecosystem health. These ponds are safeguarded through selective digging and careful maintenance to preserve water quality and prevent drying, while medicinal plants and sacred sites are protected under customary norms.

Land governance in Darkoye is guided by customary and religious law, where land is seen as a collective good managed in the public interest. Families retain intergenerational rights even within nomadic lifestyles, and women hold usufruct rights to cultivate land. Customary authorities—canton chiefs and land chiefs, oversee land allocation, conflict resolution, and the safeguarding of sacred places. Integrating these governance systems into state planning is recognized as essential for stability and sustainable management.

Recent innovations have reinforced women's roles in land custodianship. For the first time, customary leaders granted three hectares to women's groups on a permanent basis, acknowledging their knowledge and contributions to ecosystem management while promoting economic empowerment. With support from ATH, communities have also engaged in participatory mapping of the Darkoye territory, strengthening recognition of their governance systems and rights.

Environmental monitoring relies on local indicators, such as the presence and quality of water and plant cover near Lake Darkoye. However, communities emphasize the urgent need for additional support, human, material, and financial resources, as well as capacity-building and information exchange, to respond to escalating insecurity, displacement, and climate threats. Strengthening integration of customary practices into broader climate and land governance strategies is viewed as key to protecting Lake Darkoye, its ecosystems, and the pastoralist livelihoods that depend on them.

36 Parente, L., Sloat, L., Mesquita, V., et al. (2024). Annual 30-m maps of global grassland class and extent (2000–2022) based on spatiotemporal Machine Learning, Scientific Data. ***http://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-024-04139-6***

37 BirdLife International (2025). Digital boundaries of Key Biodiversity Areas from the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas. Developed by the KBA Partnership: BirdLife International, International Union for the Conservation of Nature, American Bird Conservancy, Amphibian Survival Alliance, Conservation International, Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, Global Environment Facility, Global Wildlife Conservation, NatureServe, Rainforest Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Wildlife Conservation Society and World Wildlife Fund. Available at ***http://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/site/requestgis***