Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Exploring Desirable Futures for the Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve in Benin and Togo, West Africa.

Report from the Future Ecosystems for Africa Visioning Workshop.

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Acronyms

MTBR: Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

IPLCs: Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

ILK: Indigenous and Local Knowledge

IPBES: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

1. Background

The Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve (MTBR) is a part of the RAMSAR 1017 site in the Benin Republic. This unique and regional biodiversity hotspot brings together a mosaic landscape of the natural ecosystems of southern Benin and Togo. A key motivation for establishing the MTBR was to preserve and sustainably utilize coastal resources to enhance coastal resilience, particularly emphasizing mangroves. The integrated biosphere approach of natural, social, economic, and cultural knowledge has facilitated the combination of ecosystem conservation measures and the well-being of the local communities. As a result, several initiatives have been implemented in the MTBR by academic research institutes, environmental protection NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), private consulting services, Benin and Togo governments, with the active participation of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs). However, the efforts from different stakeholders have been relatively constrained due to a lack of including local knowledge from IPLCs in the reserve. This not only violates their right to participation, but also neglects the crucial contribution that their associated knowledge can make towards sustainability.

Indigenous and local peoples in Benin and Togo share the same cross-generational knowledge and are well known for their traditional beliefs and cultural practices, which are applied to the quest for sustainability and maintaining ecosystem services. Their knowledge, encompassing the spiritual dimensions, beliefs, and practices grounded in Vodoun principles, is applied at the community level for diverse conservation decision-making processes in the MTBR. Recent studies have demonstrated the perceived effectiveness of indigenous practices in forest conservation (Djagoun et al., 2022) and sustainable use of mangrove ecosystems (Gnansounou et al., 2024) in the reserve. At a global level, for instance, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), through the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Programme (LINKS), explores the ways that ILK contributes to understanding, mitigating, and adapting to climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss (UNESCO, 2017). More recently, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) recognizes that ILK contributes extensively to sustainability across Africa (Hill et al., 2020). Today, conserving mangrove ecosystems without associating local knowledge systems with which they are intertwined is merely a short-term solution in the quest for sustainability.

Creating a future where we can rely on indigenous knowledge and practices to sustain mangrove ecosystems and restore their ecological function in the reserve is crucial, as this could bring about the transformative changes that are necessary to move local communities and peoples toward a more sustainable environment. Such changes require identifying pathways and scenarios needed to interact with the future and bringing about solutions toward sustainability. Scenarios are powerful tools for addressing uncertainties and creating desirable outcomes in the future. However, the existing approaches in scenario development frequently focus on adverse trends and factors instead of recognizing desirable or preferable futures for both nature and humanity (Lundquist et al., 2021). Those existing approaches often fail to highlight various alternative pathways to achieve the desirable futures. To address these shortcomings, this work linked the Nature Futures Framework (NFF) to the Three Horizons Framework (THF) to capture diverse scenarios and pathways for shaping the desirable futures for indigenous and local peoples and mangrove ecosystems in the Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve. The NFF and THF were applied and experienced for the first time in coastal and marine ecosystems during a visioning workshop in Benin, which engaged key stakeholders and knowledge holders from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, experiences, ages, and genders.

This report documents the methodological approach used to identify the different initiatives that have been operating in the reserve in enabling transformative change, the participants, and the workshop on linking NFF and THF for the desirable outcomes. It presents the results as desirable futures for indigenous and local peoples and mangrove ecosystems in the Mono Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, captured in the form of artworks, and highlights key indigenous pathways to reaching such a future. It shares some challenges and concludes with an urgent call for the need to further integrate indigenous and local peoples and their associated knowledge in scenario development.

2. Methodological approach

2.1. Identification of Seeds Initiatives in the MTBR

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 53 indigenous and local people from March to April 2024 in the MTBR. The interview's objective was explained to all interviewees, and both verbal and written consent were received prior to their participation in the interview. The information collected included interviewees' demographic and socio-economic profiles, interviewees' interaction and use of indigenous knowledge within the

reserve, and interviewees' affiliation or knowledge of any current or existing initiatives that encourage positive change using indigenous and local knowledge (ie seeds). A total of nine seeds were recorded by all interviewees in the MTBR. Those seeds are either exclusively led by indigenous, non-indigenous, and local people with a connection to indigenous practices or not; or led and implemented in the MTBR by the government, local and international organizations, and academia. Among the interviewees in this study, only 34 % mentioned seeds that are connected to indigenous practices and exclusively led by indigenous and local communities, and 66 % mentioned seeds that are not connected to indigenous practices in the MTBR. All nine seeds were translated into their mature condition to feed the visioning process exercise (Table 1). This study received ethics approval protocol number H23/08/37 from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa.

Table 1. Mature conditions of the identified seed initiatives in the MTBR

NFF Group	**Seeds**	**Mature conditions**
Nature For Nature (La prise de conscience une connexion durable avec la nature)	1. Restauration ecologique-EcoBenin 2. Système lagunaire-Agbozegue 3. Sensibilisation des populations locales-Bybn	The ecological restoration of the mangrove ecosystem has facilitated the thriving growth of the planted mangrove seedlings in the designated areas, leading to the colonization of various fish species in the reserve and an increase in their overall weight. Fishermen have ceased using the banned fishing nets, and the illegal harvesting of mangroves has ended. Awareness is an effective means to influence the behaviour of young people regarding the natural resources within the reserve.

Nature For Society (Les femmes au service de la société à travers la nature)	1. Femmes dans la conservation-Agro-Tourisme & Environnement 2. Inclusion du genre dans la conservation-Rescue Nature 3. Education environementale-Corde	Women are pioneers in ecotourism, which contributes to community development, and the profits generated help women sustain their socio-economic activities. The voices of indigenous and local women are now being heard, and they are engaging in the restoration of mangrove ecosystems through reforestation. Meanwhile, the children are learning fundamental concepts of mangrove conservation to prepare them for future conservation challenges.
Nature as Culture (Quand les divinités locales assurent la conservation des mangroves)	1. Les croyances et tabous-Zangbéto Gbèta 2. La sacralisation des mangroves-Acp Doukpo 3. Djowamon-Grabe	The use of traditional beliefs and taboos has significantly reduced the advanced degradation of the reserve's mangroves. The sacred still has its place, and the prohibitions pronounced by the local deities, in particular the deity Zangbéto, are respected by the populations. Visibility on indigenous and local knowledge, its respect, and its promotion for mangrove conservation are effective.

2.2. Participant Selection

Participants for the workshop were selected to represent a diversity of key stakeholders and knowledge holders with a diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds, experiences, ages, and genders. Those stakeholders were scientists, ecologists, local NGOs representatives, local community-based organizations, environmentalists, activists, journalists, government officials,

and the private sector. The aim was to maximize diversity within the workshop and create a fertile ground for rich and diverse narratives of the future. An invitation letter with a workshop information sheet was sent to them via email after a prior discussion with them about the project. All participants were selected based on their interest in ecosystem sustainability. It is important to highlight that throughout the selection process, every effort was made not to reveal too much about the content of the workshop, as this helped in preventing the likely biases of participants' expectations. Indigenous and local peoples, mainly village chiefs, cultural guardians, and Vodoun priests, from the in-depth interviews, were also invited to the workshop. A total of 19 participants, 4 facilitators, 2 artists, and 1 writer were at the workshop (See details in the annex).

2.3. Workshop Process

2.3.1. Introduction and Setting the Scene

The workshop started with an icebreaker exercise that was designed to inspire participants. Participants were given a before-workshop survey where they were asked to introduce themselves based on the content by highlighting how they feel about something that they value the most, including their fears and hopes, and what their expectations are about the visioning workshop. Participants also expressed a preference for being addressed formally, as this helped create a safe environment for creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. After the introductions, the participants were given a presentation on the seeds and scenario approaches, as well as the power of visions to reimagine the future, using the Nature Futures Framework and the Three Horizons Framework.

2.3.2. Unpacking the Nature Futures Framework

The Nature Futures Framework (NFF) is a flexible tool that supports the exploration of desirable futures for people. It provides a heuristic tool that captures diverse, positive values for people-nature relationships in a triangle-shaped space (Pereira et al., 2020). The study conducted by Bai et al., (2016) considered desirable futures as futures that improve the chances for societies to surmount the current crises, which are influenced by disparate human values and aspirations. Moreover, Kuiper et al., (2022) have qualified desirable futures as a system we want to transform towards. Exploring such futures can influence people's behavior and help change how people understand mangrove ecosystems in the MTBR and what solutions are needed in times of crisis.

The NFF is based on the three nature value perspectives. The intrinsic Nature for Nature (NfN) value perspective, which expresses the viewpoint that nature has value in and of itself, should be able to function autonomously, and the preservation of nature's diversity and functions is critical. Nature is valued primarily for its human benefits in the instrumental value perspective of Nature for Society. In the relational Nature as Culture value perspective, humans are seen as an integral part of nature, where societies, cultures, traditions, and faiths are intricately intertwined with nature.

2.3.3. Three Horizons Framework

The Three Horizons Framework was used as a complementary tool for exploring the future. It is a graphical approach where stakeholders are invited to discuss future visions and pathways to achieve them. As such, the three horizons present a unique opportunity for participants in the workshop to address mangrove ecosystem-related challenges and solutions in considering near-, medium-, and long-term futures.

2.3.4. Nature Futures Framework Icebreaker

Participants were invited to an outdoor exercise where they were asked to self-select one corner of the NFF triangle based on their experience, values, and interaction with the value perspective. Their motivation for choosing each value perspective was shared within and among the groups. For instance, participants from the Nature for Society Group reported that “It is very challenging to navigate the differences between Nature for Society and Nature as Culture. We feel like they share some key elements together.”. After the exercise, the participants split into three pre-established NFF parallel sub-groups. The participants in each group were randomly selected based on their interest in nature, their backgrounds, and experiences.

Photo 1: NFF Icebreaker outdoor exercise.

2.3.5. Future Wheels – three wheels per group from mature seeds

In each group, participants were asked to position the mature condition of each seed in the centre of the flipchart and start identifying the direct impacts of the seeds using hexagonal sticky notes. The primary, secondary, and tertiary impacts of these mature seeds in terms of social, technological, environmental, economic, political, and value dimensions were identified by the participants. This same exercise was repeated for the three mature seeds in each group, and impacts were linked to each other by labeling with numbers to see complementary, contrasting links between them in order to create the future wheels. Based on what was developed from the three mature seeds and the impacts and links, participants were asked to create a scenario skeleton that describes and visualizes the type of future of the Mono Transboundary Biosphere that is emerging in each group. The description of each group is presented in the results section.

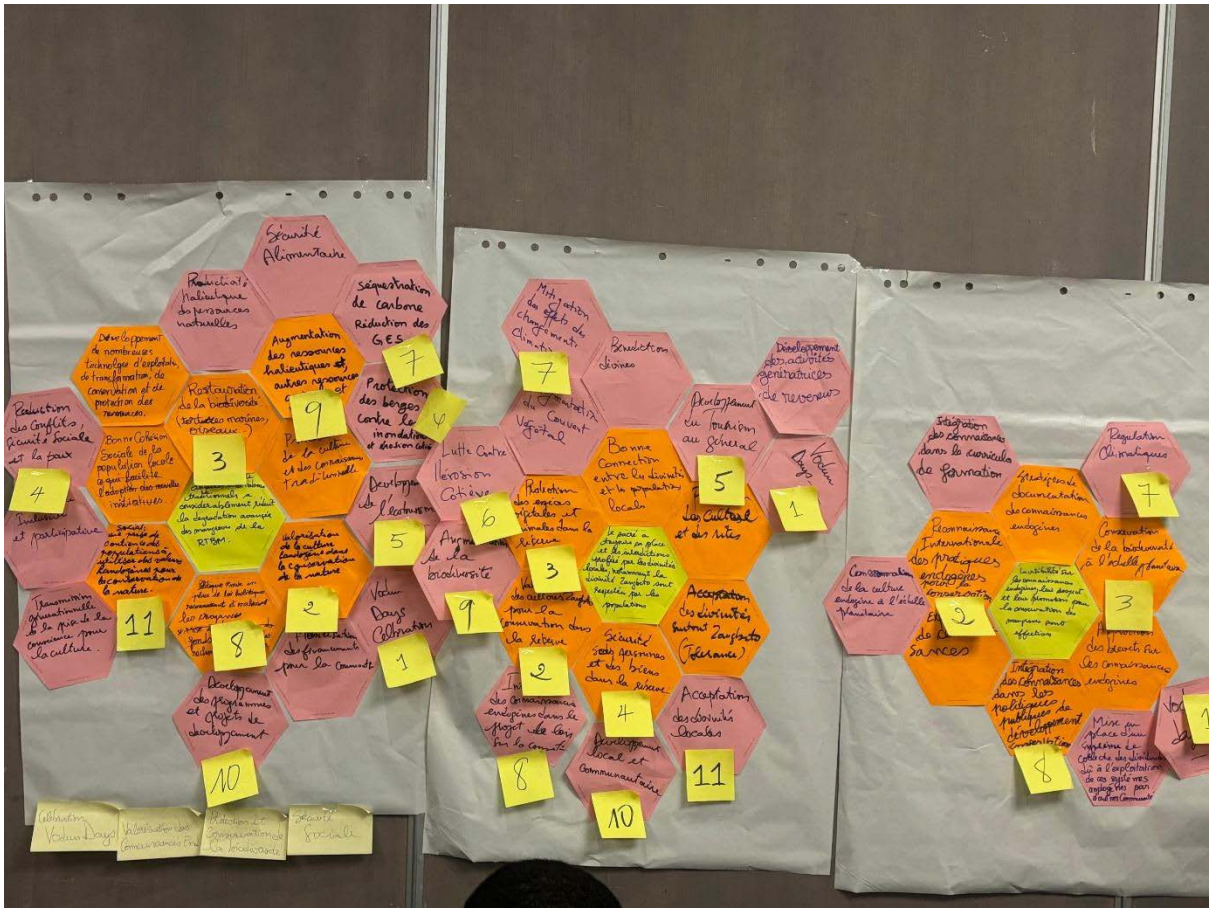


Photo 2: Future wheel exercise

2.3.6. Garnishing the Three Horizons Framework (THF)

In the Plenary session, we started with the ‘‘First Horizon’’ by asking the participants to think of signs, patterns, or systems of the present that are no longer working or fit for the future (pink sticky notes). The main questions were “What does the current system look like?” and “What in the current system needs to be phased out?”. This step was important to do in plenary to make sure that all participants understand how it works (Photo 3). All participants were now invited in their respective breakout groups to continue the same exercise with the ‘‘Third Horizon’’ and ‘‘Second Horizon’’ (Photo 4).

Photo 3: Plenary session “First Horizon”

Participants filled in the “Third Horizon” to capture their diverse imaginations of the desirable futures by responding to the main question, “What does a desirable future of MTBR look like?”. Here, everyone worked on capturing the key points of the desirable futures and their key characteristics on sticky notes (green). The Third Horizon is mainly about what visions of the future are there referring to their wheels - and what values and practices emerge in this future vision, etc, while the Second Horizon is about what needs to change to grow, what innovations, what behaviours and practices, and even values etc. Participants filled in the “Second Horizon” by responding to the main question, “What is changing?”, “What shift in social, technological economic, environmental, and political value elements are going to be game changers.?”

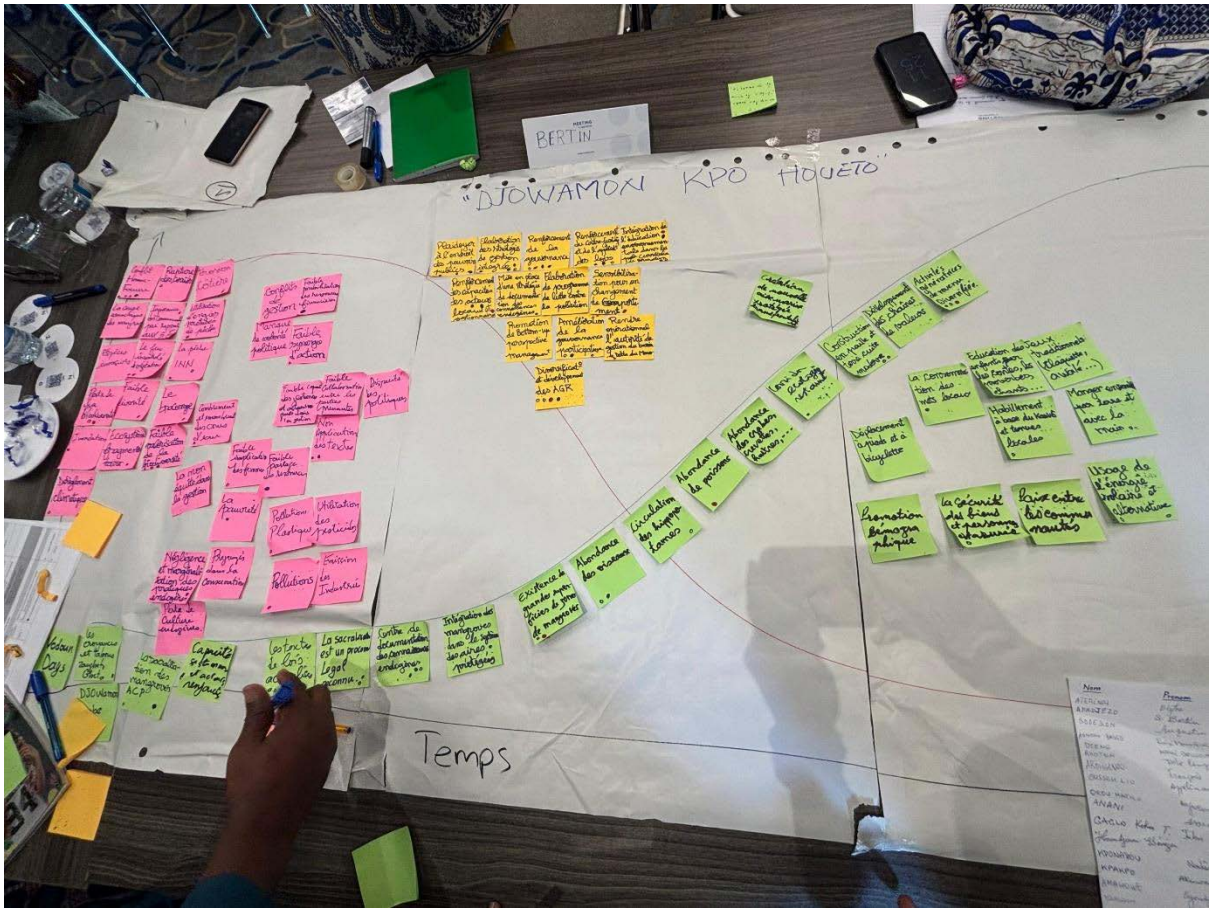


Photo 4: Populating the Third Horizon

After the exercise, each stakeholder group present at the workshop was given stickers to prioritise actions to unpack into mini pathways to the plenary group.

3. Results

3.1. Vision “Reigne des Mangroves” for Nature for Nature perspective for the MTBR

The habitat is being restored with snakes, lizards, and caimans living in co-existence. The ecological balance is restored, with large fish, in large quantities, which can be caught on the fly. Oyster cultivation continues by men and women. The reserve is full of a wide variety of animal species: birds (egrets, swallows, kingfishers, sparrowhawks), reptiles, fish, and primates. Places of worship and meditation in the woods have been set up. Sacred places with Vodoun are identified in the reserve, where local deities are celebrated. People of all ages work together to maintain ecosystem services. Scientists who participate in these activities.

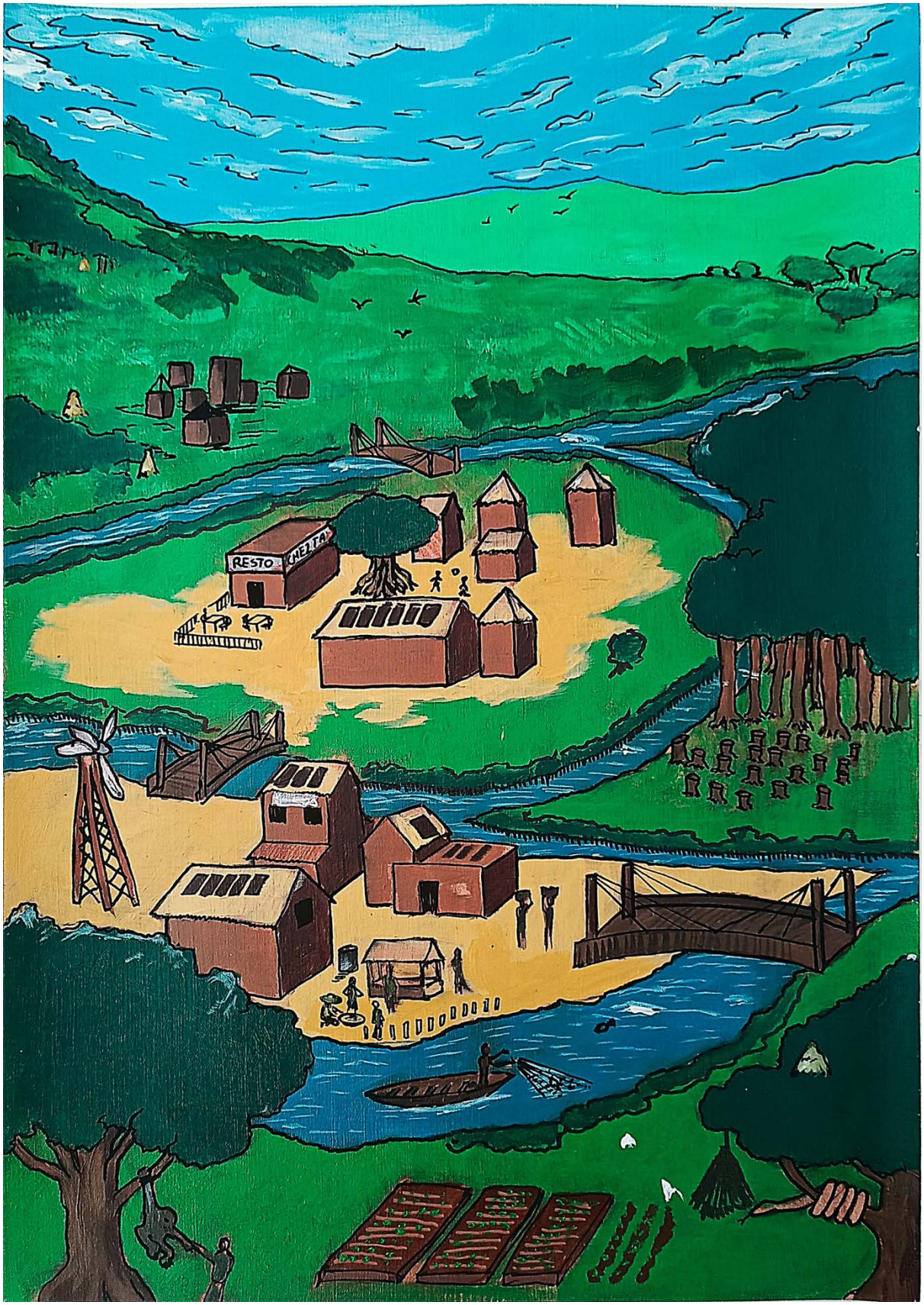
Humans live in harmony with nature (e.g. people live with monkeys, feed them, collect seeds, and replant them). No motorized boats. Teachers use this environment as outdoor classrooms for their students. Environmental issues are taught through extracurricular activities for young

people. The reserve is a place of sustainable tourism with people practicing rowing, canoeing, and water sports, which allow a connection with nature, in small groups. These activities are carried out as part of a circuit to connect communities and their culture (today, focus on nature/biodiversity). Tourism plays a role in the restoration and conservation of mangroves.

There are restaurants, and people from Cotonou who come to enjoy it. However, there is no hotel-type infrastructure, in particular, because the area of mangroves needs to be restored, and this is not compatible. The infrastructures are inspired/based on nature. Liana bridges could serve as connectors between communities or certain areas of the reserve.

Some elements of innovation that will be carried away into the future are the improvement of energy sources in favor of better living conditions (no longer using mangrove wood), but keeping traditional infrastructures (straw and wood houses). Use of wood with calorific capacity (acacia).

As far as the activities in the reserve are concerned, women have a lot of knowledge about resource conservation; they need to be integrated into fishing activities. They are the ones who process fish products in particular. However, illegal fishing and hunting are controlled. Other activities in the reserve include agriculture and food trades. Community consumption is responsible, sustainable, and local to ensure food security (especially mobilizing young people).



Artwork 1: “Reigne des Mangroves”

3.2. Vision ‘‘Mikplé Alodo’’ for Nature for Society perspective for the MTBR

The Mono Delta Reserve is now a model of sustainable management where women and children play a key role in conservation and local development. Women run agricultural cooperatives, processing units, and ecotourism initiatives that generate income while preserving the environment. Children receive an education focused on biodiversity and sustainable practices, ensuring that ecological knowledge is passed on to future generations.

Mangroves have been restored through reforestation campaigns led by local communities and supported by environmental organizations. The anarchic cutting of wood has been replaced by the use of alternative energies and the promotion of improved stoves that reduce wood consumption. Fauna and flora develop in harmony, supported by strict protection measures and the establishment of ecological corridors. Traditional conservation practices are reinforced by indigenous rules, taboos, and totems that protect certain areas considered sacred.

Ecotourism is structured and respectful of the environment, with infrastructures integrated into the landscape and guided tours by locals trained in hospitality and cultural mediation. Surveillance technologies, such as drones and environmental sensors, can prevent threats and optimize the management of natural resources. Water, soil, and air are protected by strict ecological standards, reducing pollution and ensuring a healthy living environment for the inhabitants.

The governance of the reserve is based on a participatory model where local authorities, women's committees, and young people make strategic decisions together. Economic opportunities are diversified, including the sustainable exploitation of natural resources, local crafts, and fair trade circuits. Access to health and education has improved thanks to the income generated by responsible ecotourism and agricultural activities. The reserve is a place where nature and human development coexist in balance, ensuring a prosperous future for present and future generations.

Artwork 2: ‘‘Mikplé Alodo’’

3.3. Vision ‘‘Djowamon Kpo Houeto” for Nature as Culture perspective for the MTBR

We dream of a demarcated mangrove forest [with native species eucalyptus, coconut palms, bamboos...] with a main entrance. At this entrance, there is a village called HONTOGBO, composed of houses on stilts built with eucalyptus wood, and the roofs of the huts are made of straw.

Solar energy and alternative energy are those exploited in the enclosure. The women and men of the village serving as tourist guides for visitors are the ones who allow entrance. The inhabitants live from fishing, animal husbandry, agriculture, and beekeeping. They adopt a local style of dress, especially based on the "Kanvor" and eat local dishes. Without distinction of age and gender, they eat together on mats in the same dish with their hands to symbolize the union and harmony recommended by Vodoun Zangbéto.

In this village, harmony reigns between people, vegetation, and animals. Indigenous rules, particularly those related to the protection of biodiversity, are respected and taught to the youngest through tales, proverbs, and legends. The Zangbéto always represents the guardian of the forest; It ensures security and the maintenance of peace and ensures the prohibition of all activities aimed at degrading the natural environment, such as oil exploitation, mangrove cutting, and hunting. Thanks to these established indigenous rules, taboos, totems, and customary laws, we observe the return of monkeys, the passage of hippopotamuses, the regularity of rainfall, a corridor dedicated to birds, and marine torture. Within the village, there is a documentation center for indigenous knowledge that welcomes trainees and researchers. The reserve is internationally recognized for its crucial role in the conservation of biodiversity based on sacralization, and the inhabitants of the village collaborate well with local and government authorities.

In terms of infrastructure, the hotels are made of local materials, such as straw and clay, which are built there. There are equipped spaces used as workplaces. Fun activities in this environment are awalé, swimming, bountou, water-shutter, traditional dances, songs... The inhabitants move by bicycle and by pirogue.

Artwork 3: ‘‘Djowamon Kpo Houeto”

3.4. Priorities to unpack into mini pathways

The three main priorities addressed by the participants in the visioning workshop are summarized as follows.

Table 2. Priorities

NFF Group	Three main priorities
Nature for Nature "Reigne des Mangroves"	1. Indigenous practices are respected and valued. 2. Governance is inclusive, participatory, and representative. 3. Stakeholders have access to the necessary financial resources.
Nature for Society "Mikplé Alodo"	1. Mangrove ecosystems are restored with excellent human-nature interactions. 2. Women have an active role in the governance of mangrove ecosystems. 3. Children from an early age are educated on the preservation of the environment and develop respect for nature.
Nature as Culture "Djowamon Kpo Houeto"	1. Sacralization is an effective tool legally recognized for its conservation efforts. 2. Valorization of indigenous knowledge and practices in human-wildlife management. 3. Diversification of alternative sources of local livelihoods for local communities in the MTBR.

4. Challenges and Recommendations

NFF and THF: These tools were first applied to a coastal reserve in West Africa, and breaking them down for the understanding of the diverse group of participants was challenging. However, participants recommended that the scenario development process be expanded in multilevel case studies to test its relevance in various ecosystems and geographical regions in West Africa.

Gender participation: The workshop recorded a few women's participation, and no indigenous women at all expressed their opinions or voices about the future. The five women who were present at the workshop as participants are not part of indigenous and local people living in the

MTBR but rather scientists, researchers, and NGOs representatives who work closely with indigenous women. In the MTBR, women have limited access to information due to traditional barriers. This is a serious consideration that needs to be addressed if gender equality- goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals- is to be achieved.

5. Next steps

A validation workshop is scheduled for June/July 2025 in the Benin Republic with all participants. The goal is to validate the outputs from the workshop and assess the way forward for their ongoing contribution to the project in the long term. The second artist is to deliver graphical visual content that displays the desirable futures of the MTBR and a speculative-fiction story that will be written.

6. Annex

6.1. Poem written by “Règne des Mangroves”

In the kingdom of the mangroves, where the trees rise,
A unique habitat, where life flourishes.
The roots sink into the salt waters,
A refuge for wildlife, which finds shelter there.

Migratory birds come to stop there,
Fish swim there, in the crystal clear waters.
Crabs and shrimps find their food there,
The turtles lay their precious eggs there.

Mangroves are a cradle for marine life,
A breeding ground for aquatic species.
Corals grow there, in the warm waters,
A rich ecosystem, where biodiversity reigns.

Men live there, in harmony with nature,
Respecting the sacred places, where the ancestors rest.
The local communities find their livelihood there,
Breakfasts of fresh fish with rare and fragrant spices,
Without the shade of GMOs, with natural fertilizers.

Or the spirits are guided, by the monkeys that dance there,
Uttering strange sounds with familiar looks.
Which since the dawn of time have haunted us, for the future
To meet again.

In the mangroves, they have found their raison d'être.

The reign of mangroves, is a promising future,
From the city and elsewhere, colors and technology mingle,
So that man and nature can meet as brothers.

I hear the children laughing,
Ongoing under the shade of the branches.
I hear the women singing,
Returning to the village with the water of wisdom,
To feed the population, residents, and visitors.

Villagers and tourists contribute to the maintenance,
With a supportive, and supportive government,
Initiatives and guards that protect
Plastics and fire.

I welcome you, to the kingdom of the mangroves,
A place of beauty, where life flourishes,
A vision of the future, a future to be realized.

7. Annex

7.1. List of participants

Tiles	Names	Surnames	Gender	Occupation	From (Institution)	Country
Mr	Juste	Djagoun	M	Project Coordinator	Eco Benin NGO	Benin
Mr	Mars-Ares	Agnoun Basso	M	Executive Director	Benin Youth Biodiversity Network	Benin
Mr	Appollinaire	Oussou Lio	M	Executive Director	GRABE NGO	Benin
Mr	Ebenezer	Houndjinou	M	Executive Director	CORDE NGO	Benin
Dr/Capitaine	Augustin	Matilo	M	IPBES/CBD Focal Point	Ministry of Living Environment and Sustainable Development	Benin
Dr/Colonel	Fiacre	Ahononga	M	Coordinator "Mangroves and Resilience Project in the MTBR"	Forestry and Water Department Benin	Benin
Dr	Ariane	Houetohossou	F	Lecturer/Researcher	Laboratoire LABEF/University of Abomey-Calavi	Benin
Dr	Donalde	Deguenon	F	Lecturer/Researcher	Laboratoire LEA/University of Abomey-Calavi	Benin
Mle	Nadia Vihoutou	Kponadou	F	Scientific Journalist and Environmental Activist	Independent/Private sector	Benin
Mr	John	Gaglo	M	Executive Director	Agbo Zegue NGO	Togo
Mr	Bertin	Amadjezo	M	Executive Director	Morinja NGO/Bopa Centre Community	Benin
Mle	Tété Pérugine	Akoton	F	ECR/Project Officer Wetlands and Mangrove Ecosystems	Rescue Nature NGO	Benin
Mle	Akuwa Ewoe	Kpakpo	F	ECR	Laboratoire LEE/University of Lome	Togo
Dr	Ghislain	Akabassi	M	Executive Project Officer "Mangroves and People in the MTBR"	Wildlife and Wetlands Department Benin	Benin

Dr	Ogoudje	Amahowe	M	Regional Technical Coordinator RAMPAO	Regional Network of Marine Protected Areas in West Africa	Senegal
Mr	Augustin	Sodekon	M	Cultural Guardian/Village Chief Representative	Dohi Community	Benin
Mr	Francois	Akowanou	M	Village Chief	Nanzoume Community	Benin
Mr	Assion	Anani	M	Community Representative	Agbanankin Community	Togo
Prof	Laura	Pereira	F	Researcher/ Workshop Lead Facilitator	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
Mr	Marius	Deguenonvo	M	Environmentalist/Workshop Facilitator	University of Abomey-Calavi	Benin
Mle	Cyrielle	Lam	F	Project Coordinator/ Workshop Facilitator	Ocean and Climate Platform	France
Mr	Yannick	Sonon	M	Artist	Ecoblog	Benin
Mr	Blythe	Atemenou	M	Artist	IMMS	Benin
Mr	Mame	Bougouna Diene	M	Writer	Independent	Senegal
Mr	Sènankpon	Tcheton	M	Researcher/ Workshop Facilitator	University of the Witwatersrand	Benin

7.2. Workshop Photos


FEFA FUTURE WORKSHOP