He is afraid neither of God or of the Prophet... Neither is he afraid of lightning bolts nor of lightning, because he is their master and unleashes them at will. He comes during times of storm, dressed all in black. He announces the tempest following him. When the storm explodes, he is crazy with happiness. He screams facing the sky, against which he is seen in profile, his two arms outstretched. One of his favourite slogans is... “Baana, if the sky rumbles, it is because you have unleashed the lightning by beating your chest.” And, people add “If the rain falls, it’s also thanks to you, Baana.”

Description of the Geni Baana from Gibbal’s Genii of the River Niger

Living Waters
Conserving the source of life
The River Niger

The Niger River traverses four countries, though the whole basin covers nine countries of West Africa that together represent a kaleidoscope of cultures and landscapes. The original name of the river “egerou n-igereou”, which means the “river of rivers” was given by the Tuareg, expressing the exceptional character they attributed to it.

River of rivers

IGBP landcover

- Barren or sparsely vegetated
- Shrublands
- Grasslands
- Natural/human vegetation mosaic
- Savannas
- Woody savannas
- Forest
- Permanent wetlands and waterbodies
- Urban and built-up

Geographic information based on 1-km AVHRR-Satellite data spanning April 1992 through March 1993

Along its journey from Guinea’s Fouta Djallon Mountains to the river’s volatile delta in Nigeria, the Niger River – Africa’s third longest – passes through both a vivacious “Inner Delta” as well as the southern limits of the Sahara along the upper bend in the region of Timbouctou.
In the floodplains and delta wetlands along the river, a specialised flora has evolved that is adapted to extreme fluctuations in water levels. These communities also support a wide variety of fascinating animals. Black-crowned cranes, a regional symbol of beauty and authority, rely on floodplain wetland habitat throughout the basin. In addition, the braided wetlands that form Niger’s “Inner Delta” in Mali support hundreds of thousands of transmigratory birds. Manatees can still be found in several pockets of suitable habitat that still remain along the river. Mythology indicates that these gentle giants appeared on Earth when a woman bathing by a river was startled by strangers and jumped into the water to hide. Hippopotami and crocodiles are still present in the Niger, and can sometimes pose danger to those who trespass unaware. The river’s true delta in Nigeria contains West Africa’s largest mangrove forest.

A Landscape Under Pressure

A combination of human population growth, unsustainable resource use and development, and desertification are threatening the Niger River’s ability to supply crucially needed natural resources to the people of West Africa. River flows in the basin are decreasing at the same time that fishing pressure is increasing, leading to drastic declines in the productivity of the Niger’s fisheries. The effects of deforestation and farming of fragile soils is leading to sedimentation of river channels. The Niger, which is the third largest river in Africa, dried up completely for several weeks in 1985 at Malanville in the Benin Republic.
Habitat alterations are also threatening the rich tapestry of the Niger River ecosystem. These include dams, which drastically alter the flow and sediment regimes of the rivers in the basin in addition to directly fragmenting and destroying aquatic habitats; irrigated floodplain agriculture, which displaces productive habitat for fish, livestock, and wildlife; and increasing discharges of sewage and other anthropogenic pollutants into the rivers. The combination of these changes in the Niger’s aquatic environment are creating ideal conditions for the spread of the water hyacinth, an invasive species which choking the river channels and increases evaporative losses from reservoirs by up to ten-fold. Future water development in the basin is likely to generate political tensions as the basin nations compete for control of an increasingly important resource.

With a regional strategy for sustainable use and development of the Niger River and related resources, this vital and productive ecosystem can continue to support the need to feed, clothe, and shelter the growing population of West Africa, whilst conserving its exceptional natural values.

Towards a Secure Future for the Niger River Ecosystem

The environmental, economic, and social security of much of West Africa depends largely on the sustainable and equitable management of the Niger River and related resources. Fortunately, Nature has provided a robust model for the river’s management in the historic patterns of water flow and sediment transport through the system. Restoring natural flow regimes in the river, and associated sediment dynamics, could go a long way towards relieving the pressures on the Niger’s ecology without exacerbating regional tensions over control of water, fish, and related resources.

Activities that can contribute to this objective include:

Restoration of Habitat. Restoration of the Niger River ecosystem should start in the river basin with management practices that increase vegetative cover and reduce soil erosion. The restoration of floodplain wetlands and bourgou pastures are invaluable elements in optimising the river’s productivity.

Adaptation of Economic Activities to the Natural Rhythms of the River. Intensified human use of the Niger River floodplain is vulnerable to regional cycles of flood and drought. Much can be learned from traditional resource use patterns that provided resilience through diversity.

Operation of Existing Dams to Replicate Natural Flood Pulses. Water releases from existing dams can be timed to mimic natural flow patterns, resulting in benefits for food production and biodiversity conservation.

Awareness of the river’s rich natural value. Crucial to other practical measures will be building awareness among diverse communities – including decision-makers – of the range of natural functions and values of the Niger River.

Living Waters
Conserving the source of life
WWF’s mission is to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

– conserving the world’s biological diversity
– ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
– promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

Conserving the source of life

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