



Tourism in the Hombori region (Mali)

Mission Report 2009

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Abstract

The objective of this mission report is to examine the recent development of the Hombori region as a tourist destination in Mali. Building on previous comparative research done within the framework of the Hombori Project, the report more particularly analyses the profiles of the tourists visiting the region and the transformations brought to Hombori by the increase of tourism.

Keywords: Tourism; Development; West Africa; Mali; Hombori

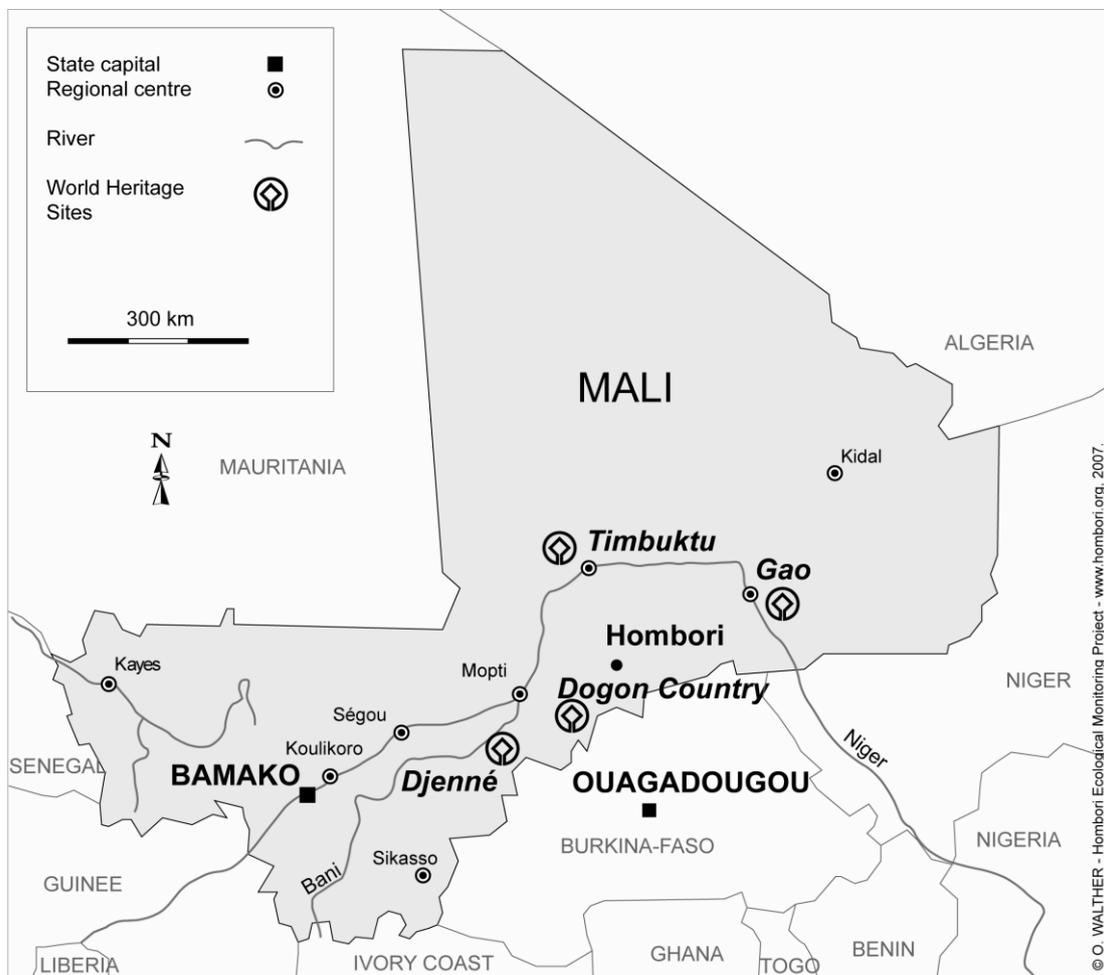
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The Hombori Project

The Hombori Project is a multidisciplinary research project whose aim is to contribute to the long-term biodiversity monitoring and locally supported protection of the Hombori region in Mali. Several field researches have been conducted so far in order to characterize the biological diversity and study the impact of human activities on biodiversity. Research done by geographers have, in parallel, studied the emergence of Hombori as a tourist destination and examined the potential threats and opportunities that tourism could bring to the region. For more information about the Hombori Project, please visit our web site <http://www.hombori.org> or contact the Project Leader, Dr Jonathan Kissling at jkissling@hombori.org.

Map 1. Mali: Hombori and World Heritage Sites



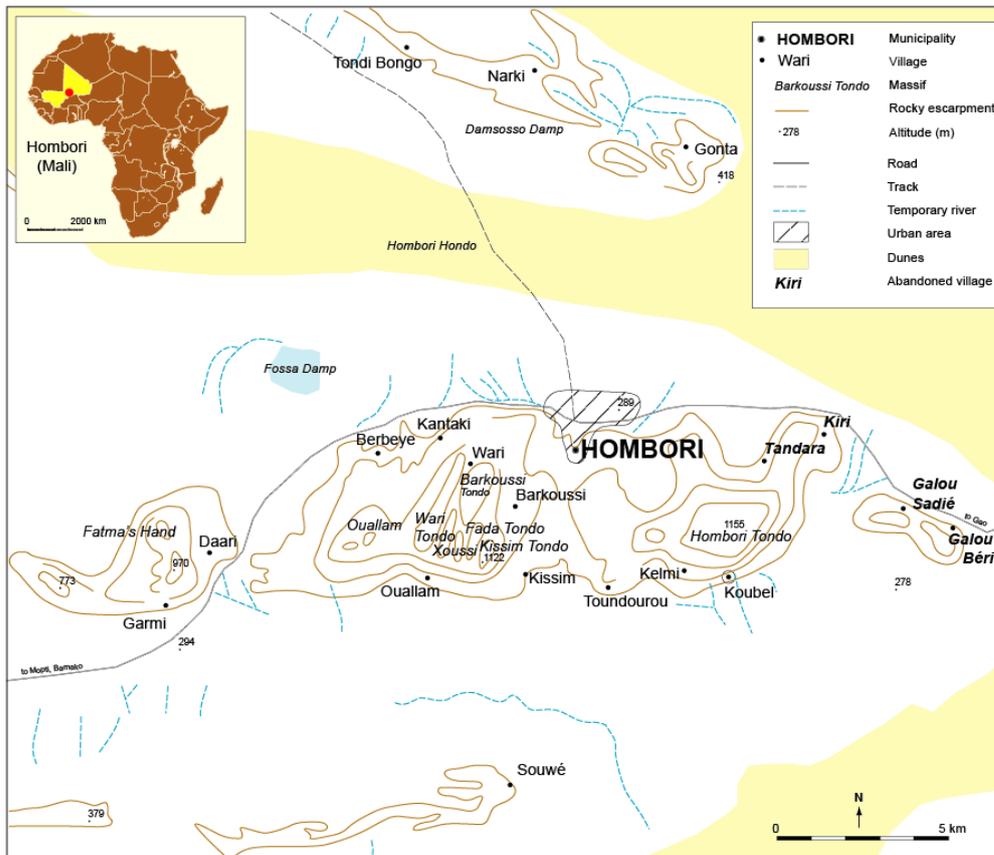
Source: Walther, 2010

1. Introduction

Tourism in Mali has developed spectacularly over the last 15 years. The country is now one of the most favourite destinations in West Africa, with a tourist expenditure of 116 € million in 2009 according to the Malian Office of Tourism. Several reasons explain the increase of the phenomena, including (relatively) political stability and a large variety of cultural and natural sites. Some of the Malian tourist sites have been internationally acknowledged as major destinations for decades, such as Timbuktu or the Dogon Country for example (Ciarcia 2003; Doquet 1999; Doquet and Le Menestrel 2006), while other sites are still in their early stage.

The Hombori region is one of these emerging destinations. Even though the number of tourists visiting the region is still limited compared to Djenné or the Dogon Country, Hombori is of interest for the study of tourism. The region was recently found to be highly valuable in terms of biodiversity (Ioset et al. 2004; Kissling et al. 2004). The summit of Mount Hombori – the highest mountain in the country – was more particularly identified as a Sahelian refuge for rare species but the plain surrounding the mountains with its seasonal lakes as well as the sand dunes populated by wild elephants are also noteworthy.

Map 2. The Hombori region in Mali



Source: Walther, 2010

The region also shares several cultural characteristics with the Dogon Country nearby, most notably villages built on high cliffs to survive the nomad slavery raids that attract mountain-based adventure tourists. Because of these features, the Hombori region is likely to experience a significant increase of tourism arrivals in the near future. One of the most crucial issues facing the region is to know how to combine the conservation of this outstanding biological site with the development of tourist activities.

Against this background, the main objective of this mission report is to examine the recent development of the Hombori region as a tourist destination in West Africa. Building on previous comparative research done within the framework of the Hombori Project (Walther 2006; van Beek, Lemineur and Walther 2007; Walther, Renaud and Kissling 2008), this report more particularly analyses the profiles of the tourists visiting the region and the transformations that are brought to Hombori by the increase of tourism.

2. Methodology

Fieldwork took place from October until November 2009 in the Hombori region (see Map 1). Different methods were used to collect information.

Firstly, a questionnaire was addressed to all the tourists staying at the Mango Bagni camp in Hombori city. The tourists staying at the other camps were not included because they were not open at the beginning of the study, and they generally host a lot less tourists than Mango Bagni. The questionnaire included questions about the personal profile of the tourists (age, nationality, education, profession), as well as their motivations to travel to Mali in general and, to Hombori in particular. In total 161 persons have been interviewed (76 women and 85 men), which approximately correspond to 15% of the tourists visiting Hombori every year according to the only estimates available (Walther, Renaud and Kissling 2008).

The questionnaires were addressed from the 27th of September to the 15th of November 2009. The period covered by the survey only includes the start of the tourist season, not the main season that starts at the end of December and lasts until the end of February (see Walther 2006 for more details).

Furthermore, several incidents could have had a significant impact on the tourist frequentation in Mali in 2009. On the 16th of November, a group of rebels is reported to have burnt an airplane to hinder the identification of this drug transportation vehicle in the north of Gao. On the 26th of November, a French expatriate was kidnapped at the border between Mali and Niger. Finally, on the 29th of November, three Spanish citizens were taken hostage on the border between Mauritania and Morocco. Consequently, several embassies advised against travelling in the region and ordered their expatriates working in the north of Mali (including Hombori) to return to Bamako. According to local actors, several reservations made by groups were cancelled because of the political situation.

Secondly, eight semi-conducted interviews were conducted with a sample of local tourist guides from Hombori, *campements* owners, and local actors potentially interested in the protection of the area. Interviews were conducted according to the following procedure: (1) Presentation of the survey and the Hombori Project, (2) Information about the name and function of the interviewees, (3) Questions about the evolution of tourism in the region over the last years, (4) Questions about the impact of tourism in the region, (5) Question about the expectations of the local actors *vis-à-vis* tourism.

3. Visiting Mali and Hombori: results of the survey

With 143,000 annual arrivals in 2005 according to the World Tourist Organization (2006), Mali is far from being a major international destination. However, the country is well recognised as a niche market. Previous studies have shown that tourists visiting Mali are usually attracted by cultural expeditions organized by European travel agencies (Fouchier and Hoang 1989; Walther 2001, 2003). Factors detailed below show how the tourists visiting Hombori fit into this general picture.

3.1. The profile of tourists

Table 1 shows the proportion of the interviewed tourists according to their nationality. One out of two visitors is French, which is not surprising considering the historical ties between Mali and France. The Italians (11.2%), Dutch (9.9%) and Spaniards (7.5%) are the main tourists. Tourists from North America (3.1%) as well as from the other continents are poorly represented.

Table 1. Nationality of tourists visiting Hombori

Nationality	Number	Percentage
French	78	48.5
Italian	18	11.2
Dutch	16	9.9
Spanish	12	7.5
Belgian	7	4.3
Polish	7	4.3
Australian and New Zealand	5	3.1
American	5	3.1
Swiss	4	2.5
Others	9	5.6
Total	161	100.0

Source: authors' survey, 2009

The average age is relatively high with 45 years that confirms that Hombori is a

target for adults and senior tourists. As far as education is concerned, tourists interviewed in Hombori seem to be well educated: almost 70.0% of the sample had been to university (or to a technical university). Only 18.8% and 10.5% of them attended college/high schools or apprenticeship, respectively (Table 2).

Table 2. Educational level of tourists visiting Hombori

Education	Number	Percentage
University and technical university	59	69.4
College or high school	16	18.8
Apprenticeship	9	10.6
Primary school	1	1.2
Total	85	100.0

Source: authors' survey, 2009

More than a third of the tourists, visiting Hombori during the period of survey, work for the public sector (37.7%). Within this category, teachers are well-represented (18.5%). Tourists from the medical (16.6%) and technical (12.6%) professions also seem to be attracted by the destination.

Table 3. Classification of tourists visiting Hombori according to profession

Profession	Number	Percentage
Public servants	57	37.7
<i>Teachers</i>	28	18.5
Medical professions	25	16.6
Technical profession	19	12.6
Economist, banker, consultant	16	10.6
Retired	15	9.9
Student	7	4.6
Designer, journalist	5	3.3
Geologist, biologist, mathematician	4	2.6
Unknown	3	2.0
Total	151	100.0

Source: authors' survey, 2009

Overall, Hombori seems to attract senior people with a high level of education from the middle class. Even though no information is available on the personal wealth of the tourists, one can reasonably suppose that this category of tourists can easily afford the relatively expensive costs of travelling to Mali. According to the latest data available from the World Tourism Organization (2006), the receipt per arrival in Mali

(930€) is one of the highest in West Africa, well above the average of the continent (450€).

3.2. The reasons to travel to Mali and Hombori

The reasons for the choice of Mali as a tourist destination are various. Among the 161 tourists that were interviewed, more than 65% of them mentioned that they wanted to “meet the inhabitants” of this country, while 56% mentioned the “cultural heritage”, and 48%, “beautiful landscapes”. The remaining responses accounted for 31%, and included various interests such as “meeting with friends or relatives”, “visit Timbuktu or the Dogon country” or “work for a humanitarian project”.

Despite the fact that Hombori shares many cultural characteristics with the Dogon country, the tourist’s expectations towards Hombori are predominantly influenced by the “natural elements”. Most of the tourists (97.5%) mentioned that “nature” was their main interest for visiting Hombori, while 50.0% mentioned “culture”, and 24% mentioned “sports” (several reasons could be given to support these premises). In the words of the tourists, “nature” in Hombori mostly refers to “beautiful landscapes” and “elephants”.

One-half of the tourists that were surveyed (50.3%) indicated that they have heard about Mali through their relatives. 25.5% of the tourists were motivated to travel to Mali by travel agencies, while TV and radio accounted for 18.0% of them, and newspapers a mere 10.6%. Other sources of information are statistically important (40.4%) and include “music and movies about Mali”, “internet”, “at work”, and “at school”.

Among the surveyed persons, only 26.1% reported to have travelled individually and 73.9% through a tour operator. The importance of organised travel in Mali justifies the attention paid to the diversity of the travel agencies that work there. As shown in Table 4, the majority of the tourists (44.5%) travel with a French travel agency, usually located in Paris, and in some cases with a subsidiary in West Africa. African travel agencies are also well-represented (24.4%). It is interesting to note that several travel agencies working in Hombori are specialised in a niche sector, whether it be adventure (e.g., Hors Traces), trekking (e.g., Allibert), sustainable development (e.g., Sawadee Tours) or fair tourism (e.g., Point Afrique).

The average duration of stay, according to the interviewed tourists, in Mali is between 15 and 16 days, which is likely to be due to the frequency of the flights from Europe. In comparison, the average duration of stay in Hombori is very short: 61.5% stay only one night and 35.4% spend two nights there. The percentage of tourists staying longer than two nights is negligible (3.1%). These results indicate that Hombori is, in contrast to Djenné, Mopti, the Dogon country or Timbuktu, not really considered as a destination of its own.

Table 4. Travel agencies working with the interviewed tourists

Tour operator	Number	Headquarters
Allibert	19	France (Paris)
Point Afrique	19	France (Paris)
Hors Traces	13	France and Burkina (Ouagadougou)
Sawadee Tours	13	The Netherlands (Amsterdam)
New Business Travel Service	9	Italy (Turin)
Couleurs d'Afrique	8	Burkina (Ouagadougou)
AFRICA Line	7	Poland (Warsaw)
Fulani Travel	5	UK (Gwynedd)
Geotours	5	Mali (Bamako)
Akanoute	4	West Africa
BAHIA voyage	3	Unknown
Hogon Voyages	3	Mali
Mali Horizon Aventure	3	Mali (Douentza)
Azalai	2	Niger (Agadez)
Mali Experience Tours	2	Mali (Mopti)
Mamby Sissoko	2	Mali
Maison de l'Afrique	1	France (Paris)
Nouvelles Frontières	1	France (Paris)
Total	119	/

Source: authors' survey, 2009

The Hombori mountains, however, offer diverse tourist circuits, that are proposed by the local guides. Most of them take place between the Hand of Fatma in the west and Galou in the east (see Map 2). Table 5 presents a sample of these tourist circuits as well as their geographical coordinates. The visits of the old villages in the cliffs, hiking in the Hand of Fatma and the visit to the Elephants Reserve – managed by the Gourma Biodiversity Conservation Project, a Malian government project funded by the World Bank – are the most popular tourist activities among the tourists surveyed (Table 6). Only a limited number of tourists climb to the top of Mount Hombori or the Hand of Fatma. According to the local guides, the climbing season starts in December and lasts until February. Therefore, the surveyed population in this study does not adequately represent this phenomenon. However, the interviewed local guides also indicated that a maximum of 40 persons really climb to the top of Mount Hombori every year², while the Hand of Fatma is considered as a more interesting

² Interviews conducted so far give a mixed picture of the frequentation of Mount Hombori. Some other local guides, who were previously interviewed, mentioned the number of annual visitors to be between 80 and 120.

spot for climbing.

Table 5. A selection of tours in the Hombori region

Tours		Coordinates	
1	Visit of old Hombori (Royal Palace, Houbéri Door, Bonseigney, etc.)	N 15°16'47.6"	W 001°41'59.4"
2	Hand of Fatma tour (hiking or climbing)	N 15°14'57.2"	W 001°48'15.2"
3	Elephants natural reserve	miscellaneous	
4	Pink Dunes (hiking or skiing)	N 15°18'50.4"	W 001°40'43.2"
5	Mount Hombori (hiking or climbing)	N 15°15'14.8"	W 001°40'55.3"
6	Hombori Waterfall (hiking or climbing)	N 15°16'39.2"	W 001°41'22.8"
7	Hiking in the cliffs (1, 2, 3 or 4 days):		
	Kiri (village)	N 15°16'36.2"	W 001°38'34.2"
	Kelmi (village)	N 15°14'18.5"	W 001°40'51.6"
	Toundourou (village)	N 15°14'38.8"	W 001°42'14.4"
	Kissim (village)	N 15°14'40.1"	W 001°43'11.2"
	Ouallam (village)	N 15°14'29.4"	W 001°44'44.9"
	Daari (village)	N 15°14'46.4"	W 001°47.41.9"
	Berbey (village)	unknown	unknown
	Kantaki (village)	unknown	unknown
	Wari (village)	unknown	unknown
8	Galou (abandoned villages)	N 15°15'29.1"	W 001°36'56.8"

Source: authors' survey, 2009

Table 6. Major tourist destinations in the Hombori region

Visits	Number	Percentage
Old Hombori	90	57.0
Hand of Fatma (hiking only)	64	40.5
Elephants reserve	57	36.1
Villages in the cliffs (hiking only)	12	7.6
Dunes	10	6.3
Mount Hombori (hiking only)	1	0.6
Others	2	1.3
Total	158	100.0

Source: authors' survey, 2009

4. Hombori as a tourist destination - the recent development

There is no doubt that tourism has affected the community of Hombori (Walther 2006; Walther, Renaud and Kissling 2008). However, tourism is not solely responsible for the social and economic change in the region. The purpose of this section is to first, document the general evolution of tourism by referring to a sample of local actors that work in the field, and second, to examine how contemporary changes that are not primarily linked to tourism also contribute to the urban and socioeconomic transformations.

4.1. A general evaluation of tourism from local actors

According to the interviewed local guides, the number of tourists visiting Hombori has gradually increased over the last few years. There are more travel groups than before, i.e., there are more travel agencies that select Hombori as a site to visit during a planned trip. Even though Hombori seems to become an emerging tourist destination, the interviewees agreed, that investments in tourism, such as the construction or renovation of tourist camps remain risky. Tourism is said to be a fragile source of income in Hombori because the tourist season is very short (3 months), and estimating the number of tourists that are likely to visit the region is difficult to evaluate for the concerned people.

The overall impact of tourism is mainly judged as positive. Especially as a source of income, tourism is said to benefit the local population. The primary beneficiaries of tourism are the owners of the camps, the guides, the carriers, the handicraft producers and the shop owners (bakery, gas stations, grocery stores, etc.). People from the surrounding villages are said to benefit in an indirect way from tourism, as they find employment in Hombori, most notably in the renovation and enlargements of tourist infrastructures such as hotels. One conversation partner also listed the potential positive impact of tourism on the local municipality. Tourism could be a source of income for local authorities that are willing to develop public infrastructure. However, as previous studies have shown (van Beek, Lemineur and Walther 2007; Walther, Renaud and Kissling 2008), the benefits of tourism for the local authorities are likely to remain very small because of the absence of income tax, civil responsibilities and tax-free jobs.

One of the most unfortunate impacts of tourism in the region has to do with children begging or following tourists instead of going to school. Because they contribute, in this way, to the family income, some parents even encourage them to do so. Another impact is said to be linked to the consumption of alcohol within the *campements* and the general emancipation that tourism could eventually bring to the (young) members of the local community. Pollution is also a concern since no real solution exists for dealing with the waste material that are brought in by the tourists, especially when the tourist chooses to camp in the countryside. Tourist groups that arrive with their own guides, cooks, food and equipment are negatively judged because they do not spend money on the spot.

The informants are in favour of an increase in the number of tourists and, more importantly, the overall spending of the tourist in the region. They recommend targeting richer, older, and culturally interested tourists or those who pay well for climbing. To increase the advertisement for the Hombori region, mainly via the internet, is considered as necessary to attract those people.

Change in tourism alone is not enough. The interviewees also agreed to consider that the local population and the guides should be more aware of the potentials of tourism in the region. Awareness campaigns with children in schools and the local population in the villages is considered as very important. Informants generally consider that the local authorities should play a more active role in the development of tourism. The main decisions about taxes, protected zones, renovations of cultural heritage should involve the local authorities, in collaboration with the local and national stakeholders of tourism, such as the Malian Office of Tourism, and possibly developmental agencies.

4.2. Social and economic change of the city

Tourism is not the only factor of change in the region. In recent years, the little town of Hombori has experienced a number of urban and socioeconomic transformations. Connections by road with other urban centres in the country, the introduction of electricity by generators, or the distribution of mobile phones have helped reduce the isolation of the city, which is still located more than 400 km from the regional centre of Mopti. Hombori is not a special case: Bandiagara experienced a similar evolution in the Dogon country over the last years. Two recent transformations are, however, likely to change the character of the city.

First, a number of residents who have temporarily migrated elsewhere in Mali or in West Africa have built “luxury” houses in old Hombori. Very often, the architectural style of such construction is different from the old buildings that could potentially lead to affect the contemporary architectural homogeneity of old Hombori.

Another potential change could come from the recent decision to develop a cement factory in the area. The contract to build the factory was signed in November 2009 between the Ministry of Industry and Mandé Construction Immobilière, an investment company, and the production of cement is planned to start in 2012. It is said that this industrial development will electrify the entire city and a certain number of jobs. It is of course too early to know exactly what the impact of this factory will be in biological and touristic terms. In the rural area, the production of cement is likely to take place within the migrating path of wild elephants and this could possibly affect the flora and fauna of the region. In the urban area, the proximity of the factory to the old city of Hombori will certainly change the image of the tourist destination.

Conclusion

While the development of tourism in Hombori is new, it has several interesting features. As shown by the results of our survey, based on a limited number of visitors, the typical tourists visiting Hombori are mostly seniors from the middle class with a high level of education and a strong interest in natural landscapes. These results are somehow contradictory with some claims that suggest that Hombori would need to attract richer, older and more educated visitors in order for it to develop. Because the majority of these tourists come to Mali within the framework of an organised tour and because Hombori is usually not a destination in isolation, the profile of the visitors in Hombori reflects the general profile of the tourists visiting the country.

At the national scale, recent figures show that there is certainly a market for such a niche sector, based on adventure tourism and culture. One of the most crucial questions for the people engaged in tourism now is how to build a coherent and diversified touristic image of Hombori. Our results suggest that the major motivation for visiting Hombori is to be found in the natural characteristics of the region. It suggests that the touristic image of Hombori remains underdeveloped, contrary to the Dogon country that has positioned itself as both a natural and cultural heritage site.

This study also confirms the previous analyses conducted within the Hombori Project that indicated that tourism did not represent a major threat for the biodiversity of the summit of Mount Hombori. Indeed, tourists climbing up to the summit of Mount Hombori are relatively rare and do not seem to behave inadequately. The relative uninteresting and long access to the summit leads the climbers to prefer the nearby Hand of Fatma.

These are encouraging results for those who wish to contribute to the locally supported protection of the biodiversity of Hombori because it means that a strategy of valorization of the destination could be built on two main pillars. On the one hand, the exceptional richness of the local biodiversity could lead to a locally rooted approach of conservation based on the specificities of places. Several degrees of protection could be offered to the Mount Hombori summit (where biodiversity is the highest), the surrounding cliffs, lakes, dunes, or the plains where wild elephants live. On the other hand, a cultural strategy of development could be implemented. Stressing the cultural richness of Hombori and the developing cultural activities in the region would certainly contribute in attracting more visitors, and, more importantly, give them a reason to stay longer in Hombori.

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