

VOICE OF AMERICA

[VOA Home](#)[VOA English](#)[Regions/Topics](#)[Subscribe to E-mail](#)[Select Language](#)[About VOA](#) LISTEN TO VOA[Latest Newscast](#)MP3  [News Now Live](#) [VOA Africa Live](#)  REGIONS[Africa](#)[Americas](#)[Asia](#)[Europe](#)[Middle East](#)[U.S.A.](#) VOA IN-DEPTH[American Life](#)[Health & Science](#)[Entertainment](#)[News Analysis](#)[Special Reports](#) PROGRAMS A TO Z[Shows by Name](#)XML [VOA Mobile](#) [POD Podcasts](#)[Webcasts](#)[Correspondents](#)[Broadcast Info](#) LEARNING ENGLISH[Articles in](#)[Special English](#)[Pronunciations](#) EDITORIALS[Read Editorials](#)

Desertification Taking Toll on Africa's Sahel

By Nico Colombant

Dakar

31 July 2006

[Colombant report - Download 594k](#) [Listen to Colombant report](#) 

In West Africa's Sahel region, which has had poor rain over the past few decades, scientists and human rights activists are hard at work trying to combat some of the many negative effects of desertification - the process by which fertile land turns into desert.



IRD photo

Jean-Marc Duplantier has a map showing how new types of desert rodents have traveled southward over the past 15 years from Mauritania to Dakar, Senegal's seaside capital.

The gerbil-like rodents ravage crops, including one of Senegal's only cash earners, peanuts. They also transmit diseases to humans through ticks.

Gerbil-like rodents ravage crops

He says it is all a result of desertification.

"The development of these desert species of rodents is brought about through a degradation of the environment. Their arrival has caused a type of human illness called borreliosis to progress southward," said Duplantier. "It is a disease of recurrent fevers. Doctors often confuse it with malaria and give the wrong medication. Some people talk about resistant malaria when they actually have this other disease caused by the presence of rodents."

Diseases in Africa used to be mostly water-borne, but with desertification that is

changing.

To combat these rodents, Duplantier is studying them at his laboratories in Dakar.

He shows off different types of rodents who were caught just last week.

"Our research allows us to understand the dynamics of these rodents who do damage in the Sahel region. If we can establish models of their comings and goings, we can maybe determine how high the risk will be to humans and crops, and how best to stop them," he added.



VOA photo - J. Bauer

Hungry children in Niger

Another scientist based in Dakar, university professor Samba Sylla, is trying to boost the capacity of crops to grow within a context of degrading soil due to poor rain and improper usage.

He says it has been done in Canada and around the Mediterranean through a process he describes as inoculating seeds with fungi and bacteria.


Related Stories

- [Desertification a Growing Concern](#)
- [Despite Small Successes, China Struggles to Contain Spreading Deserts](#)
- [Pakistan Combats Growing Environmental Menace](#)
- [Egypt Uses Water Resources to Make Deserts Bloom](#)

Top Story

- [India Considers Pulling Back Peacekeepers From Lebanon](#)

More Stories

- [Sudan's Ruling Party Rejects UN Draft Resolution on Darfur](#)
- [Germany: Iran's Response on Nuclear Issue 'Not Satisfactory'](#)
- [US Raid Kills 7 Suspected Al Qaida Militants in Eastern Afghanistan](#)
- [Six More Hostages Released in Nigeria](#)
- [Senior Thai Officer Fired Over Alleged Bomb Plot Against Prime Minister](#)
- [China-North Korea Relations Tested as Reports Say Kim Jong Il to Visit Beijing](#)
- [Sri Lanka Fighting Forces Families From Homes](#) 
- [Rights Group Says Corruption in Bangladesh Brings Lawlessness](#)

Sylla explains how the procedure is being tested in his laboratory and outdoor plots and greenhouses on various plants.

He says the critical mass of scientists and universities was not there before in Africa, but that, with more funding, partnerships and better knowledge of microbiology and other sciences, there is now hope.



Senegal crops

IRB photo

He says partnerships have also been established with local farmers, and that his experiments will soon be carried out in real conditions.

Desertification has also exacerbated tensions between herders and farmers, due to the competition over land.

A program director with the British-based group Oxfam is trying to help the region's pastoral communities.

Mohamed Ali Ag Mattahel, himself a member of the nomadic Tuareg ethnic group, says nomadic herders are often accused of worsening desertification. Because of this, they are sometimes prevented from carrying out their traditional migratory way of life.

"We are working in order to help these pastoralists to have ways to do very smoothly this movement," said Mattahel. "If I take for example in Niger, when it is raining, when it is the first rain, the pastoralists are obliged to move to the north and sometimes they cannot have pastures for their animals in the north, so this can be a problem for pastoralists. Now we are working with the local policy, to see how they can stay more time along the river, but in specific spaces where they can find pastures before they can move. They are going to move only when we are sure there are some pastures in

the north."

He says by moving around and leaving behind natural fertilizer, nomads actually help land regain vitality.

"I think it is a good kind of system to fight against desertification, because we are giving time to the pastures to grow and when the pastures grow and reach maturity, we can have seeds for the next year and it is very important," explained Mattahel.



VOA photo - N. Colombant

Animals grazing near roadside

Mattahel is also trying to encourage dialogue between herders and farmers to avoid massive displacement and violence between communities, which have often been the fallout from desertification.

 [E-mail This Article](#)

 [Print Version](#)

[FAQs](#) | [Terms of Use & Privacy Notice](#) | [Broadcasting Board of Governors](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Link to Us](#)
| [Contact Us](#)