Bouncing over sand dunes and brushing past acacia trees, our driver picks a path across the unforgiving Senegalese bush. Using the brake lights of the car in front to guide him, he navigates through the dust, eyes narrowed in concentration. Excited by the rare sight of cars, children run from villages to wave at our passing convoy, while bemused shepherds look up from shady spots beneath the trees. Through the dust I spot horse-drawn carts transporting giant inner-tubes of water from wells to nearby villages. Welcome to the Sahel.

Stretching across the African continent from west to east, the Sahel borders one of the wildest, most inhospitable places on Earth: the Sahara Desert. It is a place of feast and famine, but mainly famine; for three months of the year the heavens open and for the other nine this land doesn’t receive a drop of rain.

Despite the lengthy droughts, though, this delicate ecosystem supports an abundance of wildlife and millions of inhabitants, who eke out fragile lives as subsistence farmers. However, their knife-edge existences are under increasing threat from a phenomenon known as desertification.

And that’s what has brought me to the Sahel: desertification. The UNFAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) had invited me on this field trip, along with politicians from across Africa, to see what the continent is doing about the problem. But first of all it’s time for some myth busting.

“Contrary to what some people think, desertification in the Sahel is not about the advancing of the Sahara Desert,” explains Nora Berrahmouni, Forestry Officer for UNFAO, as we bounce over another dune. “It is about land degradation - bad practices that turn the land into desert.”

Typically, says Nora, these bad practices come in the form of intensive farming and deforestation, which have turned once fertile land across the Sahel into dust.

The idea of fighting desertification with a ‘green wall’ was first mooted back in the 1980s, but it took decades to conduct the necessary research, develop strategies and secure funding for the project.

Finally, with financial backing from the African Union, European Union, World Bank, UNFAO and other investors, planting began in 2011. The first seeds were sown here in Senegal, in Green Wall pilot sites such as Tesskeré, which is our first port of call on this dusty road trip. My first impression of the 600-hectare site, located near the village of Widou, is that it doesn’t look particularly green. Nevertheless, the work seems to be having the desired effect.

“Wildlife has returned,” beams Elimane Diop, Chief Lieutenant of Widou, walking me around the site. “We have seen antelope, hyena, porcupine and guinea fowl here.” These species, he says, were largely absent before the vegetation was planted. That’s great news for local wildlife, but for the project to succeed it will also need to benefit people living along the Sahel, which is why Nora is keen to emphasise that the Great Green Wall is not simply a reforestation programme.

“It goes beyond planting trees,” she says. “The Green Wall is more of a mosaic, a mosaic of sustainable land practice, which includes the sustainable management and restoration of forests, agroforestry, agriculture and pastoral systems.”
Far from sounding the death knell for farming and pastoralism, says Nora, the Green Wall is simply trying to steer agrarians away from unsustainable land practices which have destabilised this fragile ecosystem. Education will play a crucial role in that respect. But more important than anything else will be the project’s ability to benefit local communities directly. In other words, the Green Wall must be worth more standing than felled.

Planting fruit-bearing vegetation will add value to the wall, but so will trees such as the acacia, which is one of the dominant species in the Green Wall. Native to the Sahel, it contains a remarkable substance called gum arabic, which is used as an additive in almost everything from cigarette paper to fizzy drinks.

World demand for gum arabic, which is extracted from the tree by cutting into the bark, is currently outstripping supply, and this could provide local communities with a valuable source of income.

But to avoid creating a local economy entirely dependent on gum arabic, Green Wall coordinators are looking for other potential revenue streams. Tourism is one option being considered. "One of the main objectives of the Green Wall is to improve the livelihoods of people living across the Sahel," says Paola Agostini, Senior Environment Economist for the World Bank. "And I think that ecotourism could definitely help do that."

Burkina Faso, Niger and Ethiopia are among the nations developing ecotourism along the corridor, and while the Sahel might not have the pulling power of, say, the Serengeti you’re not going to see the Big Five here), Paola believes its appeal lies within the people and culture.

"This is an amazing part of Africa," she says. "The Great Green Wall follows an ancient trade route, and one of the most interesting things about this route is its tradition of pastoralism - it's an astonishing way of life."

Pastoralism is also one of the main causes of desertification, but advocates of the Green Wall claim that revenue from tourism could help ease the pressure on agrarians and the land they have been overworking.

Back in the 4WD we reach for the seatbelts as our accelerator-happy driver leaves Tessekeré and takes us further into the Sahel. It’s late afternoon and the sun is spilling rich orange hues across the landscape, which gradually becomes denser with trees. I'm surprised to spot a lake. We stop briefly to take photographs of the resident pelicans.

After an hour traversing the seemingly endless plain, we arrive at the village of Mboula, where we are mobbed by local children. They don't see many visitors here and our arrival has generated an excitement bordering on hysteria; elbowing each other out of the way, the kids pose for photographs and demand to see the snaps on the screen of my camera. Their faces light up when I show them their portraits.

We have come to Mboula, a charming village scattered with small thatched dwellings, to talk to the Vice-President of the Regional Council, Mustafa Ba. His region has always been one step ahead of the Great Green Wall, before the project was even approved, his people had already begun restoring the local drylands. They cultivated seeds, planted trees and tried to find more sustainable ways of working the land, although Mustafa says their job has been made easier since the Green Wall initiative began.

"We knew we had to protect the land, but the Great Green Wall..."
DESERIFICATION
PROTECTING OUR NATURAL RESOURCES

programme has provided us with technical assistance to do so,” says Mustafa, as we sit on a mat in the centre of the village, surrounded by what appears to be the entire population of Mboula. “Instead of feeling alone facing this huge challenge of desertification, we feel connected to the rest of Africa and the outside world.”

LOOKING AHEAD
Like Tessekeré, Mboula has been earmarked as a suitable site to develop ecotourism and it’s easy to see why. Although we can’t converse with the villagers without a translator, the warmth they show us transcends any language. They have a brilliant sense of humour too: after saying goodbye to everyone, I return moments later, red-faced, having forgotten my flip flops, which generates uproarious laughter.

Although the people of Mboula offer us unbridled hospitality, that wouldn’t necessarily be the case elsewhere along the entire Green Wall, which snakes through areas of Africa that have become new fronts in the so-called war on terror.

The government in neighbouring Mali, for example, can’t operate along much of the Green Wall corridor, let alone develop a tourism industry, thanks to armed jihadists who control vast swathes of the country. “The Green Wall goes through six regions in Mali, but we can only work in three,” says a candid Kouloutan Coulibaly, national Director of Forestry. “The other areas are red zones.”

Climate change is another issue facing the project: how does the Green Wall expect to survive in an area that’s set to get ever hotter? Well, with technical support from Kew Gardens in London, seed banks in Burkina Faso and Niger are giving it the best possible chance by cultivating seeds from the hardiest, most drought-resistant plants in the Sahel.

Other detractors worry about the management of the project. “When you plant a tree, who does it belong to, who is going to look after it, who is going to harvest the crop?” asks Ced Hesse, a Drylands Researcher for the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

He adds: “The Green Wall project is run from the top down and depends on external management and external funds, which doesn’t necessarily marry well with what’s happening on the ground.”

The UNFAO rejects this and remains confident that the Green Wall, through enfranchising local communities, will fulfil its objective of reversing desertification, alleviating poverty and improving biodiversity across the Sahel. Only time will tell.

We return to Widou and camp outside the village hall. As the call to prayer echoes from the village mosque, I think about the vastness of the Sahel. I think about the pastoralists and the wildlife and the waving children who live along this fragile land. And then I think about the spindly acacia branches of the Great Green Wall, groaning under the weight of all their hopes, dreams and expectations.

FAST FACTS
- The Great Green Wall will pass through 11 African nations, from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east.
- Planting has started in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali.
- The Great Green Wall corridor will stretch some 4831 miles across the continent.
- More than 20 African nations are involved in the initiative, bound by a determination to combat desertification and alleviate poverty.