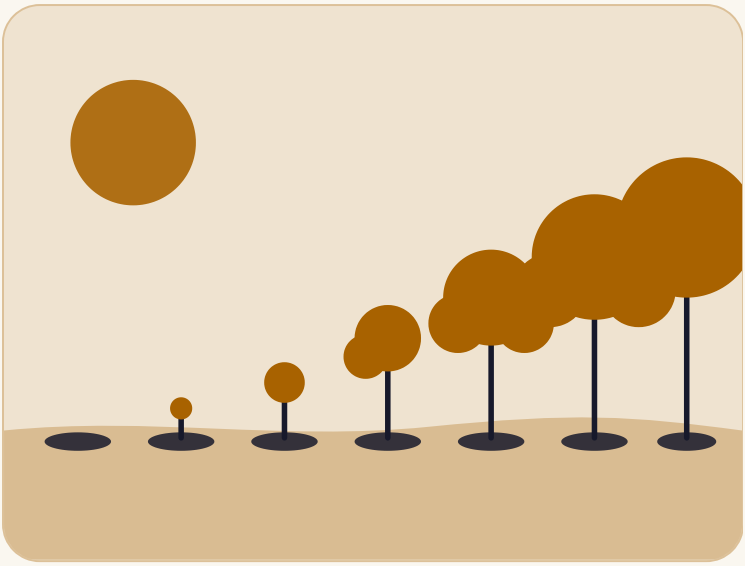

BURKINA FASO

The farmer who dug a forest

Everyone called him a fool for digging holes in dead land. Decades later, people came from other countries to learn from his forest.

WHERE	Gourga, near Ouahigouya
WHO	Yacouba Sawadogo, a farmer and former market trader
WHEN	1946 to 2023

5 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Yacouba Sawadogo was born in 1946 in Gourga, a small village in northern Burkina Faso. His father was a farmer. As a boy, he was the smallest in his class at Koranic school, and he was picked on for it.

As a young man he opened a stall in the market of the nearby city, Ouahigouya. He sold motorcycle parts. He was a trader, not an environmentalist.

Then the rains began to fail. Drought and famine hit the region in the 1970s, and the land around his village turned hard and bare. The desert seemed to creep closer every year.

Around 1980, Yacouba made a choice that confused his neighbours. He gave up trading and put his time into saving the land.

He did not invent a new machine. He took an old local farming method called **zaï** and made it better.

HOW ZAÏ WORKS

1. Dig small pits in the hard ground during the long dry season.
2. Fill them with manure and other waste, then plant seeds, crops and trees.

3. When the rain comes, each pit holds the water, and the seeds get a real chance.

Many people in the province thought he was a fool. Village chiefs mocked him. But Yacouba kept digging.

Year after year, trees grew where there had been bare ground. Slowly, the land around Gourga turned into a forest. According to the Right Livelihood Foundation, it holds more than 60 species of trees and bushes.

And he did not keep his method to himself. Twice a year he held “Market Days” on his farm, where anyone could come and learn zaï. Farmers came from across Burkina Faso and beyond. The method spread into Niger and Mali.

c.1980	60+	77
the year he quit trading	tree and bush species	his age at death

The hard years

Success brought trouble too. A relative told the Boston Globe that the forest was set on fire several times in the 2000s.

Then came a quieter threat. The city of Ouahigouya grew toward his village, and a new land plan claimed his forest and fields. In 2011 he told reporters the plan would even cut his father's grave in two.

Later, the charity Tree Aid worked with him on a forest management plan and a local land-ownership charter, to help protect what he had built.

Recognition, late

A 2010 documentary, *The Man Who Stopped the Desert*, told his story. In 2018 he received the Right Livelihood Award, often called the "Alternative Nobel Prize." In 2020 came the UN Champions of the Earth award.

Yacouba Sawadogo died on 3 December 2023 in Ouahigouya, aged 77. Until the end, pupils, students and researchers visited his forest every year to learn from him.

How it unfolded

1946	Born in Gourga, northern Burkina Faso.
1970s	Drought and famine across the region.
c.1980	Leaves trading to restore the land.
2000s	The forest is set on fire several times.
2018	Right Livelihood Award.
2023	Dies on 3 December, aged 77.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Yacouba did not wait for money, permission, or a brand-new invention. The method already existed. He improved it, proved it on his own land, and let the trees do the talking.

OUR TAKE

What makes it rare is the last step. He taught everyone who asked. One man's "crazy" project became a method used by farmers in several countries.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Improve what already works

Zaï was an old local method. Yacouba added manure and trees to it.

Try this: Before building something new, ask what already works nearby and what one thing you can add.

2 Prove it on a small plot first

He tested his ideas on his own land instead of arguing about them.

Try this: Pick one cheap experiment this week. Write down what you did and what happened.

3 Let results answer your critics

He was mocked for years. He never needed to win the argument, because the trees grew.

Try this: When someone doubts you, don't debate. Come back in three months with a number or a photo.

4 Teach what you know

His Market Days turned one farm into a method used across borders.

Try this: Write down one process you are good at, and teach it to one person this month.

5 Protect what you build

Fire and a land plan nearly cost him the forest. A written land charter helped protect it.

Try this: Check that your business, contracts or property have ownership and agreements on paper.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A forest is a long habit: one pit dug, one seed planted, repeated until the doubters are standing in the shade.

Sources

Right Livelihood Foundation
The man who stopped the desert receives 2018 award

The Boston Globe, 23 Dec 2023
Obituary: the farmer who held back the desert

IPS News, 2011
Report on his forest and the land dispute

Tree Aid
Yacouba Sawadogo: a great defender of nature

Fact-check note: Sources disagree on the forest's size, from about 15 to about 40 hectares, so no single figure is given. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.