



the *Mpingo Conservation Project*

Fair Trade for African Blackwood



The **Mpingo Conservation Project** is a Non-Government Organisation based in Kilwa, in south-eastern Tanzania. We aim to conserve the endangered forests in this region in which mpingo (East African Blackwood) grows. These forests are not only an important habitat to many plant and animal species, but play a major part in the livelihoods of many rural communities.



Mpingo heartwood is renowned in the musical instrument manufacturing industry as the finest of all timbers, and it is a favourite amongst African carvers. However there is a threat that the supply of high quality wood will soon become exhausted. We work with rural communities to set up and manage Village Forest Areas in which the timber is sustainably harvested under Tanzania's Participatory Forest Management programme.



We are aiming to get the community forests certified as well managed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Then communities can sell the timber from these forests into the international market at a premium. Villagers will benefit by ensuring a long-term income from the logging licence fees, whilst international musical instrument manufacturers, by supporting the trade in certified blackwood timber, can ensure a continued supply of high quality wood.

Village Management Plans given the go ahead

In July of this year the first Village Forest Management Plan in the area was approved by Kilwa District Council. This is a significant achievement which is essential for the success of the project. Once a Village Forest Management Plan has been approved the villagers own all the rights to the timber trees, including mpingo, within the Village Forest Area. The villagers are then able to benefit from the forest management programme as they are able to claim the logging licence fees. They will be empowered to restrict logging within the area and thereby sustainably manage the forests. It is from these areas that the certified timber will originate.

The first management plan to be approved was for a forest in Kikole village, one of the four pilot areas in which we are developing our programme. Councillors were impressed by the strong support for the project demonstrated by the village communities. Also approved were management plans from three villages around Kitope Forest Reserve. These plans focus on biodiversity conservation of the endangered East African Coastal Forests.



Photo: With help from the MCP villagers from Kikole surveyed their forest to determine what would be a sustainable cut of mpingo.

Sawmills interested in certified mpingo timber

Maintaining the interest and cooperation of sawmills and loggers is crucial for the success of the project; if the sawmills refuse to buy mpingo timber from the community managed forests then the villagers will not reap the benefits of the programme and will gradually abandon forest management. We hold regular meetings with **Uwambali**, the Lindi Region Loggers' Association, and have been in communication with



Photo: Hand-sawing mpingo logs at Sameja sawmill in the Lindi region of Tanzania

various sawmills. Although this is a sensitive area of the project, we have been making good progress and a couple of sawmills have shown interest in buying timber from sustainably managed forests in the future. We will continue to maintain effective channels of communication with loggers and sawmills as we get further towards producing a harvest of mpingo wood certified as legal and sustainable.

Awareness campaigns lead villagers to demand better price for mpingo



We have been running a series of awareness raising campaigns within the villages so that the communities are aware of the high value of the blackwood timber. Under the old system villagers received only 100 Tanzanian shillings per log, which is about US \$0.80, plus a small fee to the labourer who felled the tree. However under Participatory Forest Management villagers can get around TZS 10,000/- per log. Once the villagers had realised that blackwood is a valuable asset, they began to turn away loggers who would not offer more than TZS 100/- per log. Although they are still not getting a 'fair' price, it is still a step in the right direction, and not only are villagers more inclined to manage the forests sustainably, but it has also made the logging companies more aware of the project's activities and goals.



As part of our awareness campaign, we have produced a number of leaflets in Swahili which we distributed in the villages. These include an educational booklet entitled *Our Forest for Our Community*, on forestry and environmental issues, and a leaflet written to help villagers, particularly those on the Village Natural Resources Committee, to understand the processes of setting up and managing a Village Forest Area. We are also involved in children's education and we have arranged various activities in the village schools. Awareness raising and education such as this is very important for any conservation project working with local communities. When villagers do not understand the aims of the project they may become fearful and angry. But working with community members in this way allows them to see the benefits that the project offers, leading to cooperation and enthusiasm.



We have achieved a good working relationship with village members, and we endeavour to ensure that all members of the villages are aware of our work and what Participatory Forest Management involves.

Photos, clockwise from top left: splitting mpingo logs prior to sawing; children's environmental education; school children in Ruhatwe.



The Mpingo Conservation Project in press

Over this last year there has been increasing interest in the work of the **MCP**, both within Tanzania and internationally. In Tanzania there has been particular interest in how Participatory Forest Management (PFM) is helping ordinary people, and also the interaction of the PFM programme with local Community Based Organisations. In the last four months alone, work of the **MCP** was featured in articles in various Swahili papers, a programme on a state radio station, and also in a state television programme on the environment.

Back in the UK, following the project's 10 year anniversary in November last year, the project founder and coordinator Steve Ball appeared in an interview with BBC Radio 3 in January 2006. Publicity such as this is just the first step in encouraging musicians to consider the source of the wood used to make their instruments.

Get involved!

Help save this beautiful wood and at the same time help poor rural communities and endangered species in the forests of East Africa.

Visit www.mpingoconservation.org or email enquiries@mpingoconservation.org to see how you can help.



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