



TANZANIA'S BLACKWOOD PLAYS NEW CONSERVATION TUNE

Southern Tanzania is holding on to a natural resource that is not only abundant in its uses, but has great potential to positively impact the areas where it is grown. The African Blackwood, found mostly in Tanzania and Mozambique, holds a range of value from ecologic importances to sociological significance. With the help of new government regulations and international support, the tree is now aiding in poverty alleviation, a sharp contrast from previous exploitative practices.

Dalbergia Melanoxylon, commonly referred to as the African Blackwood or Mpingo, has been used for centuries to provide high quality timber for the production of musical instruments and decorative carvings. In previous years, those felling the wood knew little about its potential in commercial trade and often times felled without thinking through future environmental implications.

Blackwood is a fitting description for the tree. Though the bark is grey in colour, and the outer sapwood pale, the heartwood is dark, dark brown, at times appearing black. The wood is rich in oil making it an ideal material for musical instruments. It offers

Right:
Blackwood in section

Right facing:
Blackwood in section and carving

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natural protection from splitting despite the repeated application of saliva applied to its surface. It is commonly used to make woodwind instruments such as flutes, clarinets, oboes and bagpipes.

Its use in woodcarving originated with the Makonde tribe. The carvings are strong and often portray both the colour of the outside bark and the inside wood to give an outstanding contrast, catchy to any artistic eye. It has a variety of other ways in which it can be used, including making furniture, firewood and household implements. Local people also use its leaves for many medicinal purposes, from curing abdominal pain and dysentery, sore throats and toothache, to treating menstrual cramps, and a tonic for pregnant women and newborns.

However, with new support from the government, local attitudes are now focused on protecting the resource and aiding in preventing its extinction.

The tree is native across sub-Saharan Africa, thriving in seasonally dry areas. Like other hardwoods it sinks in water rather than floats. The timber is incredibly tough, requiring specialist saws and drills for processing. The tree itself is small, typically standing between 4 and 15 metres high. Despite its short height, it takes between 70 to 100 years to reach harvestable size. The ideal size for commercial use is around 35 cm in diameter. Once it has reached this stage it can be

harvested but must be dried out for a year or more before being made into an instrument.

Managing a slow growing tree like this is not easy; over-harvesting can rapidly lead to exhaustion of stocks. Plantations are difficult to start and maintain, though one project near Kilimanjaro is seeing some success. The African Blackwood Conservation Project (ABCP) is a non-profit organisation that was started in 1996. The project aims to raise at least 20,000 Blackwood seedlings per year and has been successful in offering free seedlings to nearby communities in northern Tanzania. As a result of special bacteria growing in its roots, the Blackwood tree increases nitrogen content in the soil.

Because of this characteristic and the small amount of shade it offers, Blackwood is ideal for planting intermittently in croplands. By providing seedlings for free, ABCP is encouraging locals to join the project. The ABCP is incredibly active in community involvement within schools, villages and women's groups. They have won numerous awards that are helping to fund their expansion. Though their task is difficult and unfathomable to many, perhaps they will play a small role in the conservation of the species.

Bringing wild harvesting within sustainable bounds and reducing illegal logging is critical, as commercial plantations take a long time to reach fruition and will only replenish a small proportion of

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existing stocks. It is estimated that between 2004-2005, 96% of timber felled in southern Tanzania was illegally obtained. WWF reported that, “organised illegal timber crime is causing millions of dollars worth of timber revenue to be lost each year in Tanzania.” Blackwood has been eradicated in Kenya for commercial trade due to overuse and is threatened in Tanzania, where it is the national tree.

In the 1980s forestry in Tanzania suffered from a lack of resources and frequent conflicts between forestry officials and local communities. To resolve this, the government of Tanzania devised a strategy of Participatory Forest Management. The aim was to involve local people by empowering those living in vicinity of the trees to benefit from their existence. The strategy was codified in the 2002 Forest Act that provided a legal framework for communities to preserve nearby forests as Village Land Forest Reserves (VLFs).

The Tanzanian Government outlines that this strategy will “improve forest quality through sustainable management practices, improve livelihoods through increased forest revenues and forest products, and improve forest governance at village and district levels.” The forests, if properly cared for, will naturally regenerate.

The Mpingo Conservation Project (MCP), spearheaded by Steve Ball, was initiated in 1995 to help promote the sustainable use of African Blackwood and forest conservation. Based in Kilwa District, MCP is playing a critical role in enabling communities to benefit from Participatory Forest Management. In order to distinguish timber from properly

managed community forests apart from other, possibly illegally felled Blackwood, MCP supported local communities to attain certified status. The certification scheme, run by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), is the global gold standard in responsible forest management. Wood from certified forests, and products made from it, can be labelled with the FSC logo, thereby allowing consumers to differentiate instruments on ethical grounds.

This is a collaborative approach that aims to combine habitat conservation and local development. Kikole and Kisangi, both villages in Kilwa District, are the first two communities to take part in the initiative. They were certified in early 2009 and have become the first community-managed forests in Africa to receive FSC certification! The first certified harvest of Blackwood recently took place but due to the long drying period, certified instruments will not be ready on the market until 2011. Musicians worldwide will then benefit from the opportunity to buy FSC labelled instruments.

Though a label may seem small, the impact it is making is massive. Before MCP began working in Kilwa, villagers received around 8 US cents per log. Now they receive \$19 dollars per log of Blackwood. Communities are thus already earning 250 times more from their forests – by managing them responsibly – than they have done previously. Eventually MCP expects consumer preference to yield substantial further price increases, and estimates that income to villagers in these areas has the potential to exceed \$100,000 per year. Money made from the project is given to the village government. It is the village government’s responsibility to pay off the costs of management and then use the profits to benefit the whole community. Kikole, for example, aims to use its first profits to improve the road to the village.

Because the profit has potential to reach the entire community, villagers are eager to try and protect larger forested areas. Kikole village began its project on 454 hectares of land, but is already working to increase this by a further 4,000 hectares. Work has commenced in two other communities, Liwiti and Nainokwe, whose VLFs are expected to cover some 6,000



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hectares and 20,000 hectares respectively.

These communities hold power to protect an ecologically and socially important species. Their cooperation is setting an example across the entire continent. Worldwide there has been success in several other trade initiatives dealing with coffee, bamboo and other commodities. Further exploration shows that projects driven by local people hold far greater potential and sustainability than those managed by foreign corporations.

In the case of Mpingo, musicians can play a role by buying new instruments that incorporate an FSC label. It is the responsibility of citizens to find out where products come from and whether or not there is a more ethical and environmental friendly option available. The people of Tanzania have stood up to take responsibility of conserving their local forests; hopefully instrument manufacturers and buyers will follow suit. ●