

Project Update: October 2003

The Limpopo Province of South Africa can boast of its biodiversity – rich savannas in terms of flora and fauna. Until recently, it used to be the Northern Province and is now named after the River Limpopo. The isolation of most indigenous communities from biodiversity conservation in South Africa is however undermining the appreciation of nature for its role in the environment and for humanity. Most rural people depend largely on key resources from forests and woodlands for their livelihoods. The new sustainability science calls for the active involvement of indigenous people and respect for their knowledge in resource management.

As part of our team's project to evaluate the diversity and richness of tree-plant species in communal rangelands and implications for sustainable resources use and livelihoods, there have been several exciting engagements with communities. We bring you highlights from one of the Limpopo sites in the village of "Finale". In Finale, there were community gatherings to discuss the project and to receive comments from the people. This was very fruitful and positive because various generations of age groups in focus group discussions gave their opinion about the bountiful plant resources of the community. Whilst most of the younger generation up to the age of 30 years felt they do not derive much benefit from the woodland vegetation, the age group from 51 years upwards took time to outline benefits they have derived to date from the woodlands. That was very exciting and new source of lessons for the younger generation. It was a bright Sunday morning and one could feel the seed of conservation being sown by the elderly people and not by "outsiders".

In the woodlands, it was a different experience as opinion leaders explained why some parts of the vegetation still remained absolutely intact despite the absence of any enforcement. There were no signs of harvested plant parts for medicine, fuelwood, carving or housing materials. Fuelwood was only collected in the form of deadwood and the reason being that they see that part of the woodland as a guardian forest because their forefathers never harvested or removed live trees. Oops! A big relief and prospect for community-based conservation? A community – managed botanical reserve in the making? One could only ask such a question but that will take massive education but which can be done upon looking at the overwhelming support and hospitality our team received from the people, including the chief.

I wish to acknowledge a new and dedicated member of the team, Mr Marc Leroy who has MSc degree in Resource Conservation Biology and part of the Limpopo trip (marcl@biology.wits.ac.za). He is now ready to go into conservation in communal areas of South Africa. He personally confessed to have learnt a lot from the local people. Many thanks to the Rufford Small Grant programme!