

Mpingo Faces Uncertain Future

Woodcarving is an industry with uncertain future in East Africa. Mpingo has been in demand for centuries. This valuable blackwood tree, botanically referred to as *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, is widely used in the woodcarving industry and in the manufacture of musical instruments. It is in fact the most highly valued traded timber in the world and is of cultural, ecological and economic significance where it grows. This is particularly true for Tanzania and Mozambique, where the species is important at local, national and international scales.

Mpingo is of ecological importance in the African savannah because the nitrogen fixing properties of its roots add nutrients to the generally deficient soil in the regions where it grows. It also provides fodder and habitat for animal species. The local population uses the tree for subsistence needs, for medicine, fuel, building and ceremonial purposes. Mpingo timber has some unique characteristics, which make it the wood of choice for the manufacture of musical instruments. Its oiliness seals the surface thus prevents absorption of moisture and prevents metal fittings from corrosion, it has fine grains which make the finish beautifully smooth and it is durable and holds its tone well in different conditions. But, according to MCP's official Jasper Makala, the high rates of exploitation of this valuable tree has dramatically reduced the stock across the region. "The continuing commercial harvesting and increasing population pressure associated with fires and livestock grazing pose a serious threat to the African blackwood," he says. "And this is bad news" says James Harris an American ornamental turner, whose African Blackwood Conservation Project is also involved in conservation efforts. He says it is disastrous for American ornamental turners and Western classical music, as well as for local carvers who rely on it. The wonder tree is in trouble!

The case of mpingo, is a classic example of a species which although of local, national and international value and importance, is being largely neglected in terms of conservation. Few people have long been concerned about the future survival of mpingo. Because of its high value and demand, the trade and use of mpingo are not likely to stop, and without the implementation of carefully designed management plans the exploitation may continue until it is no longer economically viable, that is commercial extinction. This has already happened in Kenya where mpingo of commercial size is no longer available and carvers have to source the wood from Tanzania.

It takes an estimated 70 to 100 years for mpingo trees to reach timber size and this makes plantations unrealistic. So the trees must be conserved in the wild.

The Governments of Tanzania has come up with efforts to involve local communities in managing and conserving forests. This is implemented through the national Participatory Forest Programme (PFM). There are several concerned organisations, one supported by BP Tanzania –the Mpingo Conservation Project (MCP) – are frantically trying to search for the solutions too. Mpingo has been adopted by the MCP as a flagship species representing not just forest conservation in general, but in particular the management and sustainable harvesting of all valuable hardwoods that grow in the forest.

The MCP is a Tanzanian registered NGO based in Kilwa, southern Tanzania, working to develop PFM with a particular focus on sustainable management of mpingo and other high value timber trees. Kilwa District retains substantial forest cover relative to other parts of Tanzania, but is the target of intensive logging, and immigration from more highly populated parts of Tanzania over the next few years is expected to exert considerable pressure on the forests, leading to clearance for agriculture. Mr Makala and the BP Tanzania Public Affairs Manager, Frederick Kibodya, say the MCP aims to ensure poor rural communities benefit financially from their local forests, thereby giving them a strong incentive to conserve them. It works closely along side the district council and the national PFM programme. It also has a programme of awareness raising locally, nationally and internationally on the issues of mpingo and forest conservation in Tanzania.

Because mpingo is highly valued locally and internationally, says Makala “The MCP believes that it can be used as an economic tool to achieve successful forest conservation and contribute to improved livelihoods in poor rural communities in southern Tanzania.” He says the Mpingo Conservation Project believes this offers the best hope of avoiding decimation of the region’s forests over the next 10 years.