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SUCCESS STORY

Local Community Initiatives Lead to Regeneration of Native Woodlands in Malawi



Photo: ECODIT/Bruce Byers

Men of Nkhamayamaji Village with regenerating village woodland above them



Photo: ECODIT/Bruce Byers

Meeting in Mphalamando Village, Nkhotakota District

In Nkhamayamaji Village, a village in the border zone of Nyika National Park, a traditional leader persuaded people to stop cutting trees and allow natural regeneration to take place on the hill above the village. When they weren't cut and hacked so frequently, the resilient miombo woodland trees sprouted back from roots and stumps, and now, fifteen years later, the hillside above Nkhamayamaji is a thick young woodland.

Before, when the slope was mostly bare, said the village chairman, water would rush down into the village in the rainy season, carrying sediment, cutting gullies in fields, and sometimes even washing out houses. Now that doesn't happen – the water soaks into the woodland on the hill, and fills up the wells down in the village later. Another reason people were persuaded to protect the woodland above the village, he said, was because of all the wild products they could get from it without having to go into the national park. He mentioned firewood, thatching grass, poles for building houses and tobacco-drying sheds, mushrooms, wild fruits, and traditional medicines.

Nkhamayamaji Village had started its miombo woodland restoration and conservation through traditional village leadership and grassroots initiative. The USAID Kulera Biodiversity Project has identified these successful models of woodland regeneration in the border zones of the protected areas where it is working, and tried to support and replicate them through strengthening Village Natural Resources Management Committees, exchange visits, promotion of fuel-efficient cooking stoves, conservation agriculture, and tree planting programs. The Kulera Project has been implemented since 2010 by Total Land Care, a Malawi-based non-governmental organization, along with other partners.

A few days later we talked to people in Mphalamando Village, in the Nkhotakota District. Their village is less than a kilometer from the boundary of the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve.

In 2008, the village made a decision to allow native woodland to regenerate on its own customary land, because for years village women had been caught and arrested for gathering firewood and other non-timber forest products inside the Wildlife Reserve by guards from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife. Finally, after an especially unpleasant encounter, the community decided that in order to protect their women, they would restore an area of native woodland on their own land. With the consent of the chief, help from the Department of Forestry, and the support of the Kulera Project, they have made a part of their village land a designated "Village Forest Area." Thanks to the resilient miombo biodiversity, it is rapidly becoming a source of wood, mushrooms, wild fruits, traditional medicines, and other products once again. It is also providing ecosystem services, including allowing water to infiltrate the ground during the rainy season, feeding the water table that is tapped by village wells during the dry season.

It is women who gather firewood, cook food, fetch water. They also gather mushrooms, wild fruits, and often traditional medicines. Women's traditional roles in supporting their families put them on the front lines of contact with the ecosystem products and services they depend on. It is not surprising that women in these traditional villages are also on the front lines of defending the natural forests from which they derive these essential livelihood resources. Projects that seek to conserve biodiversity should recognize that women are likely to be allies and supporters, and make special efforts to work with and empower them.

Near Mulanje Mountain in southeastern Malawi we drove to Nantali Village on a rough dirt track leading toward the mountain. The USAID-funded MOBILISE Project, which stands for "Mountain Biodiversity Increases Livelihood Security," is being implemented here by the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT), along with other partners. The head of the village here was a woman, and her leadership, backed up by that of the headman of the local group of villages, and the even-more-powerful traditional leader, the chief or "traditional authority," had protected the woodlands in the Forest Reserve above the village since 2008. At that time, a wave of illegal charcoal-making was sweeping into the area from the northeast, threatening to clear the trees above them. They resisted, and chased away the charcoal makers. The old miombo woodland in the Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve here presents a striking contrast to the clear-cut slopes above a neighboring village whose leaders and members did not resist the illegal charcoal makers.

Leadership at the village level, and the voices of women, seem to be keys to successful woodland conservation in the communities around Malawi's protected areas.



Photo: ECODIT/Bruce Byers

Natural regeneration of woodland in the Mphalamando Village Forest Area



Photo: ECODIT/Bruce Byers

Woman selling mushrooms collected from miombo woodland



Photo: ECODIT/Bruce Byers

Sharp line of the Forest Reserve boundary above Nantali Village, Phalombe District, with resprouting miombo woodland in foreground