

Charcoal burning threatens shea nut

Practices. Bad practices such as cutting down of shea trees, mainly for charcoal burning and lighting bush fires during hunting, have resulted in loss of shea tree belts and low yields.

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OTUKE. In Otuke, one of the districts in northern Uganda, Ms Santa Alum, like several other women wakes up early morning to collect money-spinning shea nuts everyday.

The mother of three has been gathering the nuts for the last 10 years.

She extracts oil, which she uses to get high quality products such as cooking oil and body lotion.

In northern Uganda, the shea tree is an indigenous and restricted asset. The tree produces shea nuts (seeds) from which shea butter is extracted.

Formerly named *butyrospermum paradoxum* and now called *vitellaria paradoxa*, the shea tree has a useful fruit bearing life span of more than 100 years.

It grows naturally in the dry savannah belt of West Africa, from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, and on to the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands.

In Uganda, shea tree is mainly found in the eastern and northern regions.

It's a traditionally protected indigenous tree in these countries. The trees are not traditionally planted in a domesticated manner but rather selectively managed through agro-forestry systems. In terms of importance, its oil is second to palm oil.

Currently, both the shea nut and shea butter are international commodities, and constitute a primary source of monetary income for rural people.

"The reason why we have invested in shea nut is because of its economic and social importance to the people of these regions," Ms Agnes Atwongo, the Kidepo Critical Landscape project officer, a project under National Environment Management Authority (Nema) says.

Benefits

Shea butter is used as a moisturiser as it is rich in vitamin A, E and F, which soothes balances and hydrates the skin. It speeds up healing of wounds, promotes growth of healthy tissues in ulcerous wounds and it is used to treat baby circumcision wounds.

Shea butter is also used for frying and making of stew. The residue left after oil extraction is used to decorate traditional mud houses and also to harden the walls and make them stronger.

However, bad practices such as cutting down of shea trees, mainly for charcoal burning and lighting bush fires during the hunt for wild animals have resulted in loss of shea tree belts and low yields.

"It is a very strong tree that cannot even be eaten by termites. But for a long time, it has been destroyed for



Under threat. A police officer stands near a shea tree which was cut for charcoal burning in Otuke District recently.

PHOTO BY ISAAC OTIHO

charcoal. And yet this tree is rare. It does not grow anywhere! And for it to mature (enough) to give you fruits, it might take more than 20 years," Mr Frank Twinamatsiko, manager fundraising and special projects with Advance Afrika, says.

Mr Harry James Oyuru of International Institute of Human Security, says when people displaced by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgents left the camps and returned to their homes, they started cutting down trees indiscriminately for charcoal burning to get quick money.

Some residents, however, conserved shea trees in their gardens and the trees have now become a source of income.

"The people who cut their shea trees are now struggling for it and it's now becoming a new source of conflict. Many people now sleep in gardens to protect the shea nuts," Mr Oyuru says.

Mr Francis Okello Olwa, the Lira District community development officer, says conflicts will always exist in any area where there are resources such as shea trees.

Farmers say those who cut down shea trees for charcoal burning have now resorted to stealing shea nuts from their neighbours.

Shs1,000

THE COST OF ONE
KILOGRAMME OF DRY SHEA
NUTS IN OKWANG SUB-
COUNTY, OTUKE DISTRICT

In June, a man was reportedly beaten into coma after he was allegedly caught stealing shea nuts from a friend's garden.

In Okwang Sub-county, Otuke Dis-

Voice



"The reason why we have invested in shea nut is because of its economic and social importance to the people of these regions," AGNES ATWONGO, PROJECT OFFICER, KIDEPO CRITICAL LANDSCAPE

trict), a kilogramme of dry shea nuts is sold at Shs1,000, and a litre of shea nut oil goes for Shs17,000.

The shea trees bear fruit which takes four to six months to ripen. Each tree gives an average yield of 15 to 20kg of fresh fruits, with an optimum yield of 45kgs.

A kilogramme of the fruit produces around 400 grammes of dry seeds. The fruit, which is green in colour, has a fleshy edible pulp rich in vitamins and minerals and not lacking in protein either.

Mr Surjit Singh, the director of Guru Nanak Oil Mills, a company that buys and adds value to the nut in Lango sub-region, says shea butter and other products are becoming expensive worldwide.

Currently, the youth in Agago and

Otuke districts sneak to the neighbourhood at night, shake the shea trees and collect all the fruits.

Ms Stella Abeja, a farmer from Awito Village, Atang-gwata Parish, Ogor Sub-county, says: "When I plant crops under the shea trees, it means only my family members can pick the nuts whenever they fall off the tree."

Harvesting

According to the farmers in Otuke District, the fruits are harvested between April and August each year.

Interventions

The government through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with financial support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) initiated conservation and sustainable use of the threatened Savanna Woodland in the Kidepo Critical Landscape. The project is implemented by Nema on behalf of the government.

Under the project, Advance Afrika, a not-for-profit organisation, has built capacity of rural women producers and processors of shea tree products in Abim, Otuke, Agago and Kitgum districts in northern Uganda.

At least 80 trainees drawn from 16 different groups in the four districts underwent training on marketing strategies, post-harvest handling practices and conservation of shea trees, among others.

The National Forestry Resources Research Institute is in the final stages of domesticating the tree that grows wildly. It means one would be able to get seedlings to plant it.

Seed propagation has so far proved 70 per cent success rates, according to the researchers.

Currently, different shea tree species are being tested for genetic viability and there is a possibility of developing individuals with reduced fruiting period of four to five years.

Once this is done, the tree will be-

come commercially viable.

Also, most of the districts and sub-counties in the north have also put in place by-laws and ordinances to protect shea tree.

Today, heavy fines, including imprisonment are levied on anyone who tampers with a shea tree.

But critics argue that such laws are uncalled for.

Mr Okello Olwa, a resident in Otuke District, says once people begin reaping big from shea nut, "the trees are automatically protected because you cannot cut down what is bringing more money to you at household level."

"Instead of enforcement, we just let these people realise the real benefits, they get the best market; they will be automatically conserving the environment," he says.

Although shea tree has been threatened by human activities, it remains an important tree in the lives of rural women in Kidepo side, Lango, Teso, West Nile and Acholi sub-regions.

KEY ISSUES

Growing. Shea tree grows naturally in the dry savannah belt of West Africa, from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, and on to the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands. In Uganda, it is mainly found in the eastern and northern regions.

Stealing. Mr Francis Okello Olwa, Lira District community development officer, says conflicts will always exist in any area where there are resources such as shea trees. Farmers say those who cut down shea trees for charcoal burning have now resorted to stealing shea nuts from their neighbours.

Under test. Currently, different shea tree species are being tested for genetic viability and there is a possibility of developing individuals with reduced fruiting period of four to five years. Once this is done, the tree will become commercially viable.