

## SUCCESS STORY: Planting a million trees on the slopes of Kilimanjaro

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**Global warming threatens to destroy the snow capped glaciers on Mount Kilimanjaro in East Africa, and reduce the regular water supply on which the region's farmers depend, within 20 years. Deforestation could make the problem worse. But in the last few years a Tanzanian botanist has developed a tree planting project that has seen nearly 2 million tree seedlings planted by school children, and new laws passed to conserve the region's trees. This specially commissioned report, by Kenyan journalist *Denis Gathanju*, tells the story.**

A group of school children break into song and dance. The Swahili song explains the numerous benefits of trees and how they not only help protect and improve the environment, but livelihoods as well. The children come from the village schools on the edge of the Mt. Kilimanjaro Forest on the upper reaches of Moshi Township in northern Tanzania.



Members of Mali Hai Clubs

Members of Mali Hai Clubs at Singachini School in Sungu Village. Photo © Denis Gathanju

They are members of the Mali Hai Clubs of Tanzania, a youth movement that was initiated by Sebastian Chuwa to help conserve the sensitive ecosystem in the Mt. Kilimanjaro region as well as the African Blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), a threatened tree species popularly known as the musical tree. From its humble beginnings in 1985, Mali Hai Clubs has become a movement to be reckoned with in the entire Kilimanjaro Province of northern Tanzania due to its success in sensitising villagers to the conservation message.

Mali Hai are Swahili words that mean living resources since the trees that Sebastian helps plant in the region are alive and can be used by the communities to improve their economic well being.

"I chose to first of all work with young children because it is they who will inherit the future. My intention was to get the message through to them so that they could understand the benefits of preserving the environment," says Sebastian.

This way, according to him, the message would ripple forth to their parents and the entire community that the environment needed to be saved and taken care of and would in the end bring about responsible living for all.

The children would each be given a tree seedling to take care of during the duration of the school term and would be given the trees to plant in their homes and along village roads and foot paths once the school term came to an end.

### Environmental ambassadors

His new approach bore fruit many years on as some of the primary school pupils he educated on environmental matters have become pivotal in helping start Mali Hai Clubs in their villages and regions.

"Many of them went on to become environmental ambassadors in their respective villages and communities where they organized women's groups and spoke at schools and helped initiate environmental conservation classes at the end of the school programme," says Sebastian.

As the movement gained momentum, Sebastian and his army of village folk worked throughout the Kibosho East division planting fast growing indigenous trees along roads and pathways, along the river banks, in coffee and banana farms and along the climbing routes to the Mt. Kilimanjaro. So far, Sebastian and the people of Mweka Village have planted more than 20,000 fast growing trees along the Mweka climbing route.

To maintain the momentum of the school clubs, Sebastian offers various incentives to teachers and pupils by organising environmental days and competitions in the region with the best schools getting various tools like wheelbarrows, watering pipes and cans for the clubs.

Being a former conservator and tour guide in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, he also organises safaris to the parks for students and teachers, many of whom have never visited the parks before.

While his campaign has spread far and wide in Tanzania, Sebastian laments the fact that that most of the schools and households in Kibosho and most parts of Tanzania continue to use wood fuel for their cooking needs.

"On average, each school in Kibosho East Division uses about three tons of wood fuel a day. Use of energy saving stoves would settle the matter once and for all, but they are expensive," he says.

### Changing the laws

Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world with over 90 per cent of households depending on wood fuel.



Sebastian Chuwa

Sebastian Chuwa harvesting African Blackwood seeds near Moshi. Photo © Denis Gathanju

Popularly known by his village folks as Bwana Mali Hai (Mr. Mali Hai), Sebastian was pushed through the political electoral process to represent his native Kibosho East Division in the Moshi council where he has been able to draft and pass environmental by-laws to support his work.

"I took advantage of this political position to help bring about a legislative agenda in the council that would help the environmental conservation cause I had begun. This entrenched new by-laws in the council to consolidate the work I was already doing with the Mali Hai Clubs," explains Chuwa matter-of-factly.

This included new by-laws that criminalise wanton tree cutting, even on private farms, without the consent of the local village council of elders.

"If someone wants to cut down trees on his farm, they have to get a nod from the village elders after making satisfactory explanations on why he needed to do this. If a farmer wants to cut down trees to make money from the sale of timber and wood fuel to help cater for his immediate financial needs, then a small percentage of the projected proceedings must now go to a village account. Funds from the account are used for village development projects such as building of schools and dispensaries and education bursaries for needy poor students from the village."

The village farmer is also required to plant at least five new tree seedlings for every tree cut.

While general tree planting of fast growing trees has been a pet project for Sebastian, his other major task has been helping save and preserve the threatened African Blackwood tree, known in Tanzania as Mpingo.

### **Blackwood tree**

Though the African Blackwood tree is not endangered, it faces that risk because it continues to be over-harvested. It is currently listed under CITES Appendix II as a threatened tree species which could become extinct within a generation or two if nothing is done to help save it.



Blackwood carvings  
Blackwood carvings. Photo  
© Denis Gathungu

The hardy tree, the most expensive hard wood in the world - it retails at about US\$22,000 per cubic metre - is a slow growing tree that takes between 50 and 70 years to reach maturity.

James Harris, a Texan wood turner and his wife Bette Stockbauer who creates collectible wood art from many tree species including the African Blackwood helped raise funds for Sebastian's project in the United States after watching a telecast on his work. As a result, the African Blackwood Conservation Project (ABCP) was born enabling Sebastian to establish a major African Blackwood tree nursery on the southern reaches of Moshi Township where the weather conditions are right. Apart from making some of the world's best wind musical instruments including oboes and clarinets, the African Blackwood tree is also a prized piece of wood that creates some of the best wood sculptures. The Makonde sculptors of Tanzania make a handsome living from the sale of various sculptures to local and foreign tourists visiting the region.

Sebastian has donated some mpingo tree seedlings to the wood carvers who have planted them around their carving site and workshop in Moshi. So far, they have planted more than 3,000 African Blackwood tree seedlings, a respectable amount considering they cut down about 1,500 mpingo trees every year.

"I want them to plant 10,000 mpingo trees next year," says a beaming Sebastian.

### **Receding ice**

While the consequences of global warming continue to be felt in Africa, Sebastian hopes that his efforts, which culminated in planting more than a million trees in one recent year, will go a long way towards improving the delicate Kilimanjaro ecosystem.

Situated 370 km and three degrees south of the equator, Mt. Kilimanjaro is a rare glacier occurrence in an equatorial region. It towers in breathtaking isolation to 5,895 metres above sea level on the Kenya-Tanzania border making it the highest free-standing mountain in the world.

Its gradually receding glaciers are the strongest indication of how climate change is hitting Africa, the world's poorest continent and least environmental polluter. According to the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) Africa accounts for a paltry three per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions every year, but is the hardest hit region from industrial activities in developed and industrialized nations.

Apart from being rewarded with a seat in the Moshi council, Sebastian Chuwa has won international accolades for his environmental work. In February 2002 Sebastian Chuwa was awarded the Spirit of the Land Award that was

presented to him at the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City, Utah. The award was presented to Sebastian in recognition of his outstanding contribution to environmental education in Tanzania.

In 2007 he became the second African after Kenya's celebrated environmentalist and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Professor Wangari Maathai to receive the J. Sterling Morton Award.

Unlike Prof. Maathai, Sebastian has not been met with such stiff opposition, especially from the government circles. Prof. Wangari Maathai is best remembered for vehemently opposing the construction of a government building in Nairobi's Uhuru Park at the height of President Moi's dictatorship in the 1990s. She was also a vocal opponent of the massive forest excisions in the water catchment areas in Nairobi's Karura Forest and Mau Forest in Rift Valley.

Sebastian's long running affair with nature started at a tender age when he was encouraged by his father, a traditional Chagga herbalist to plant trees and plants of all species. He proceeded to learn more while he worked as a conservation officer in the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area in northern Tanzania. It is while he was at the Ngorongoro that he studied the negative effects of human activity on the flora and fauna in Tanzania, including his native Kilimanjaro region.

The discoveries fired his determination to change the way people viewed the environment and to start his tree planting efforts.



Women plant African blackwood seeds  
Women from the Faraja Women's Group plant African blackwood seeds at the Conservation Project Centre near Moshi. Photo © Denis Gathanju

In his quest to bring about positive change in and around the Mt. Kilimanjaro, Sebastian has been able to expand the Mali Hai initiative in his Kibosho rural region to 48 clubs and 116 clubs in the entire Kilimanjaro Province. This culminated in Sebastian planting the millionth tree in 2004. Today the work goes on with the help of his army of devoted Mali Hai Club members. They aim to reach the second million next year.

Sebastian's early problems, including a shortage of seedlings and of money for educational work, have been eased with the help of award money and a handful of donors. But the country's abject poverty has meant that people still rely heavily on wood for fuel, and some illegal tree felling in the Kilimanjaro Forest still goes on.

For Sebastian, the journey of a thousand miles began with one step. He believes that he has started a movement in his region that will, over time, positively alter the ecosystem in the Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain. He even hopes that his tree planting exercise will in the long run help overturn the adverse effects of global warming on the snow caps of the Mt. Kilimanjaro, which environmentalists and scientists predict could be wiped out in less than 20 years if urgent remedial measures are not taken.

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