Crafthood & Conservation

Improving livelihoods through responsible trade of Botswana baskets

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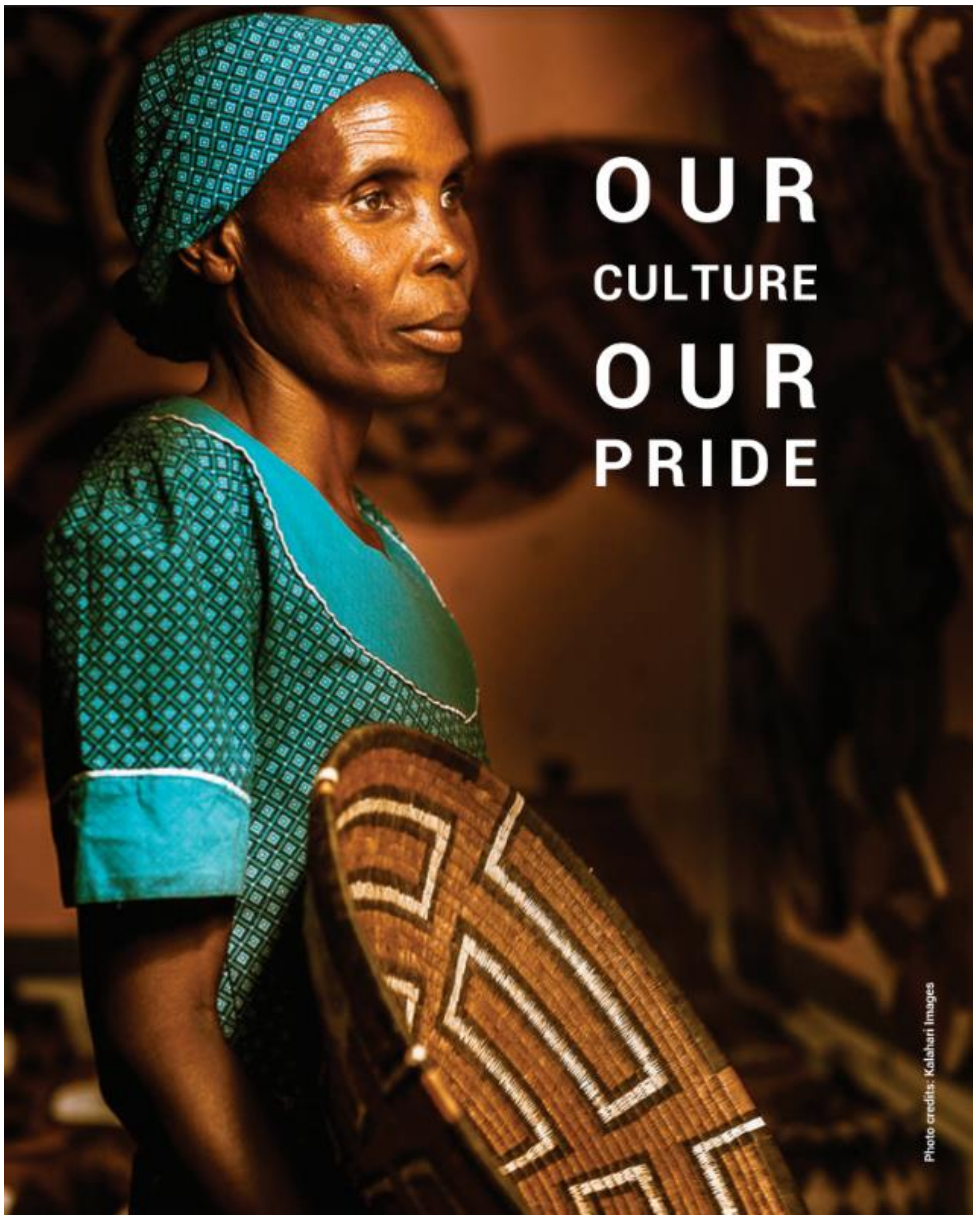


Crafthood

The Crafthood programme was launched by Travel for Impact with seed funding from Southern African Regional Environmental Program (SAREP) and is now jointly coordinated with Arts for Africa in a united effort to create a centralized marketing and sales platform for basket weavers along the fringes of the Okavango Delta. The aim is to support the weavers (and their families) in establishing independent, sustainable livelihoods by using the age-old tradition of weaving. Through the Crafthood programme, we have established close ties with 5 weaver groups and hundreds of affiliated crafters in a coordinated effort to stimulate responsible trade of their products on local and international markets.

The crafthood programme currently supports weavers through the establishment of quality standards and quality control, and through marketing and sales assistance. Crafthood has also

been involved in the construction / refurbishing of 4 Craft Centres. Since the start of the programme in 2015, Crafthood has seen a steady rise in basket production and sales.

Although rural communities currently benefit from this source of income, the long term success of the programme will depend on its ability to ensure the continued supply of the natural resources on which the basket trade depends. The assumed need for a conservation strategy has arisen from recent claims by some weavers that resource scarcity is an issue at times, especially when confronted with increased basket orders. These claims need to be taken seriously, even though the validity and geographic origin of these claims has not been thoroughly verified. Additionally, other evidence of resource scarcity during periods of surging basket production has been documented in various studies over the past three decades. In order to avert the environmental and economic implications of resource scarcity due to overharvesting, it is imperative that the Crafthood Programme adopts a sound and realistic conservation strategy.

Environmental considerations

The Delta is a biodiversity hotspot, constituting one of Africa's most pristine and important conservation areas. The delta is split up into numerous conservancies, community concessions and game reserves, attracting large numbers of tourists that are drawn to the regions extraordinary natural beauty and high concentrations of game.

The long term sustainability of these protected areas depends on the support of local communities. We believe that conservation of natural resources is futile without the support of resident communities. The only way communities will support and actively partake in conservation of natural resources, is if they are allowed to benefit from these resources and the tourists who come to visit them. For the crafters supported by the Crafthood Programme, this implies fair access to raw materials and opportunities to sell their crafts to tourists in safari camps and at local and internationally markets.

Basketry, (but also woodcraft and pottery) makes use of natural resources of the Okavango Delta. To ensure the continued supply of these resources, the programme must develop a strategy for promoting and facilitating sustainable harvesting across the region.

In the past, there have been a couple of interventions with planting of *Hyphaene petersiana* (Mokola palm), associated dye trees and other species used in wood-craft, but these initiatives have been sporadic and their effectiveness is questionable. A recent study (Motts 2013) suggests that the perceived difficulty in acquiring Mokola leaves may be attributed not so much to over-harvesting, but to other factors, such as browsing by elephants, the expansion of villages or women choosing to live closer to the main road and therefore further away from the Mokola harvesting areas. Also, according to this study, there are signs that over time, some communities have become more environmentally aware and have adopted more sustainable harvesting methods.

However, we cannot ignore the numerous studies presented over the last three decades that point to the depletion of Mokola and associated dye plans, especially during periods of increased sales of baskets.

Cunningham & Milton (1987) have already warned of the possible collapse of the basket industry, unless the use of these plant resources is controlled. According to this study, a temporary boom in the weaving industry during the early 80's has already had negative effects on the occurrence, population structure and leaf size of the Mokola Palm – especially in the vicinity of some of the Etsha villages. Additionally, plants used for dyes had also become increasingly rare. By 1984, approximately 1,500 Etsha women (at the time, 50% of the female population) were making baskets to supplement their incomes. In that year alone, over BWP 25,000 (which was then equivalent to 1 U$) worth of baskets was purchased. The following is a summary of their analysis:

Interviews in 1982 with the basket weavers of Etsha confirmed reports that it was becoming increasingly difficult for the craftspeople to obtain enough raw materials for their industry in the vicinity of the western swamp villages (table 1). From the Kgotla meetings, it was evident that the local scarcity of palm leaves on which their cash incomes depended has led to competition and friction between some of the people of Etsha. As the demand for the palm leaves grew, interviews revealed that Etsha villagers had to walk increasing distances (increasing over a decade from 1 hour to 5 or 6 hours from their village) before reaching suitable collecting sites.

Table 1. *Problems encountered by a sample of 64 basket makers at Etsha, Botswana in obtaining Hyphaene petersiana (Mokola)*

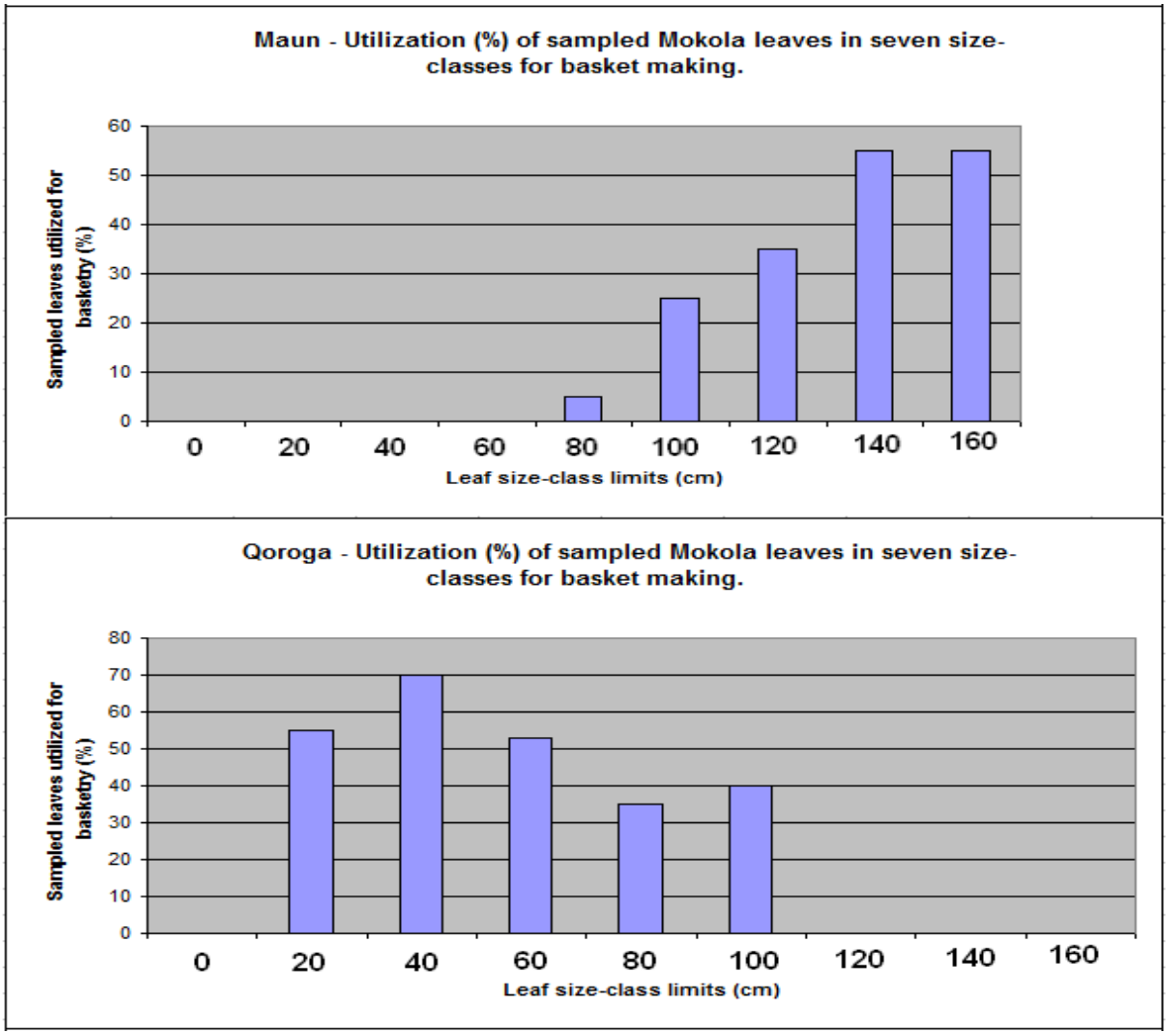
Problem	Number of replies	% of total
Distance from resource	38	59.4
Cost of Mokola	5	7.8
Thorns on Mokola	5	7.8
Swampy terrain	2	3.1
Too many collectors	2	3.1
No problems	12	18.8

Evidence from the field – A field study comparing Mokola palm populations at Maun, and Xomaxau, where harvesting was less intensive, with those at two other sites examined near Etsha where harvesting was more intensive, (Qoroga and Wabe) showed clearly that the intensive utilization of young leaf-shoots for weaving material had led to an increase in the density of sucker shoots but a reduction in the size and number of leaves produced by these suckers. This meant that the Mokola leaves of the size and quality required by the weavers became

increasingly scarce within a day's walk from the villages. For the palm, this level of utilization prevents suckers from reaching reproductive maturity and eliminates the possibility of regeneration through seeding.

Chart 1 below clearly shows that at the study site in Maun, which was less intensively harvested, the largest percentage of young leaves cut exceeded 120cm and there was only marginal utilization of leaves less than 80cm in length. At Qoroga however, where Mokola utilization was much more intensive, leaf utilization of much smaller size classes (20-60) was much more prevalent, indicating leaf scarcity.

Chart 1.

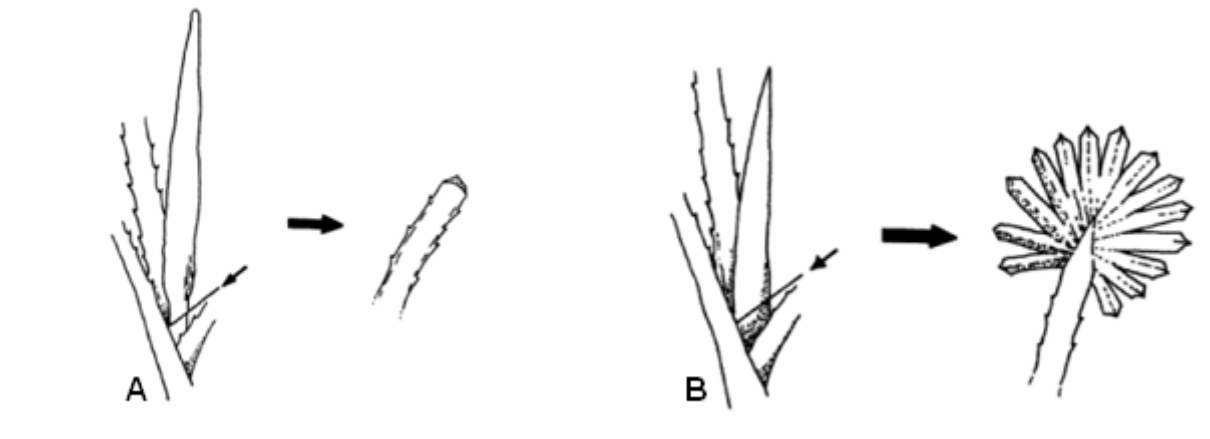


A single stemmed Mokola palm produces 24 leaves per year when over 2 m tall, but 8-9 leaves when 1 m tall, un-stemmed palms produce 6 leaves a year. Near Etsha (Qoroga), where frequent destruction of apical shoots reduces sucker leaf size to 40-80cm size classes, leaf production could be as low as 4 leaves per year. Buwai and Trlica (1977); McConnell and Smith (1977)

have shown that productivity can be sustained when there is an annual harvest of no more than 50% of the annual leaf production. The study showed that at Qoroga and Wabe, 40-50% of the annual leaf production was harvested, indicating that the Mokola at these sites was being exploited to the limits.

Gathering of unopened leaves for basket weaving involves the selection and individual cutting of the larger leaf shoots below the leaf base using a sharp knife. As supply diminished in the vicinity of the Etsha villages, cuts were increasingly being made across the emerging shoots before they had fully emerged (Figure 1), as much as 27% of shoots were harvested in this way at the Wabe study site.

Figure 1.



Two dye plant species were included in this study:

1) Euclea divinorum (gwarri) – a popular and colorfast dye source around Etsha are the roots of gwarri, known as mushitondo in haMbukushu and that yield a dark brown dye.
2) Berchemia discolour (birdplum) – another much used dye is the trunk and root bark of the birdplum, known as mukerete in haMbukushu. This dye is red-brown.

Only 17% of the Berchemia population studied had escaped damage by collectors and this undamaged fraction comprised mainly saplings. Traditionally, basket weavers did not ringbark or destroy dye plants, but the results of this study suggest that at the time, there was an opportunistic scramble for these dye plant materials used in the basket industry. As more species of dye plants are used for basket making, these findings may be applicable to other species as well.

Another report (Bishop, J. et al. 1994) published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), titled "The beer and the baskets: The Economics of Women's Livelihoods in Ngamiland", came to a similar conclusion. According to this study, over exploitation of Mokola and dye material has led to resource depletion, especially in the Wabe (used especially by Etsha 5 and 6 villagers) and Qoroga collecting sites, where non-selective harvesting was rife.

2001 and 2002 recorded another (temporary) surge in basket sales. According to Kgathi, et al. (2005), the Botswana Christian Council alone spent P336 000 and P400 000, respectively on baskets in the region (Botswana Christian Council, 2002). Botswana Crafts also spent P300 000 in both of these years on baskets. Soon thereafter, another assessment of natural resource scarcity in the Okavango Delta (Kgathi, et al., 2005) recorded depletion of palm resources around Shorobe, a basket weaving hub near Maun. This was based on a survey conducted in 2002, in which 63% of the interviewed women perceived scarcity of Mokola. Natural dyes were even scarcer and hence 79% of the weavers interviewed purchased dye plant material, collected elsewhere. The Kalahari Conservation Society in its "Every River has its People" research project also revealed the lack of Mokola palm resources by villagers interviewed in Etsha 6. Noteworthy, many of the basket weavers not only attribute the decrease in palm resources to over-harvesting, but also to destruction and browsing by elephants.

The evidence presented by these studies underlines the crucial importance of establishing and enforcing sustainable harvesting standards and methods. One such method may involve rotating or spreading harvesting out over a larger area. To some extent, the Crafthood programme already provides the logistical support required for such an undertaking – mainly during workshops or when visiting the basket cooperatives to purchase and collect basket orders.

To a large extent, the success of the Crafthood Programme in increasing sales of baskets will depend on its ability to involve and support communities in management of the resources on which the industry depends. Scarcity of resources due to over-harvesting in the vicinity of villages has a direct impact on the continuity of production, on which trade relationships depend. There is room for the industry to expand, if communities are given the knowledge and means to implement sustainable harvesting. Mokola is a resilient species, and availability of the leaf-shoots used for basketry will increase rapidly if harvesting is conducted in a sustainable manner. The tree species which provide dye materials (bark, roots) are slow growing and take considerably longer periods of time to recover from over-harvesting.

Crafthood and Conservation

In conclusion, there is a need to devise a sustainable harvesting strategy for Mokola palmleaves and associated dye plants used for basket weaving in the North-West of Botswana, to be coordinated and facilitated by the Crafthood Programme as part of its broader effort to facilitate responsible trade of Botswana Baskets (Chart 2).

To this end, the Crafthood Programme requires support for the following interventions:

1) Re-assessing the current effect of the basket-weaving industry on the Mokola Palm and associated dye plants in the region where Crafthood operates in North-western Botswana.

2) Establishing methods for communicating, facilitating and monitoring sustainable harvesting standards

Literature

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