

Manx Linksa series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about remarkable people they have met

I don't know if you have read the book "The Man who Plants Trees", an amazing little book with wonderful woodcuts in it? I sometimes think I'm married to that man! Whereas I attend meetings and sit on committees and generally encourage people to "get involved," Brian gets on and plants trees. Literally thousands of them; winning a schools conservation award, coordinating the Dalby Woodland Community scheme, and setting up tree nurseries in Lebanon. Little wonder then that when we were musing about remarkable people we have met, Tsofa, a fellow tree planter in Kenya, featured highly on Brian's list.

Having worked in Lebanon for a year we continued our mid life "gap" experience in 2004 volunteering for six months in Kenya. The meeting of Brian, who had worked as head of Environmental, studies at Castle Rushen High School, and Tsofa the Education Officer for A Rocha Kenya, was the meeting of like minds. Two apparently "quiet" men dedicated to hands on and practical environmental education, with a sense of humour that bubbles below the surface. Living within the local community with his wife Mercy and their three sons, Tsofa is respected as a man of wisdom and integrity. Tsofa, who had just returned from a health and safety training course in N Ireland, part of an overall package of cultural exchange, recounted with glee the "suitable clothing" recommended for a schools field trip, from the hard hat and safety jacket mentality of our

society! This to a man who teaches children who don't possess shoes, who use machetes as a matter of course, and who will happily spend the day involved in a task without provision for food or water. Tsofa had the ability to reflect our culture back to us in a very different light!

A Rocha is a Christian Conservation Organisation that has projects in over 17 countries in the world. Working in small communities they are recognised for their high standard of scientific research and study, community outreach and education. Believing that data collection and the study of wildlife can often be the first indicator of environmental degradation, A Rocha's focus is upon research and habitat conservation.

On this occasion Brian was not planting trees, but coordinating the reconstruction of a 260 meter suspended walkway over a mangrove forest to a bird hide. This was part of an Eco Tourism initiative set up by A Rocha Kenya, called ASSETS, working with the local community to help create income generating schemes.

The summer is the time that we all become migratory, we are all tourists at sometime in our lives and generally tourism is thought to be beneficial to communities. But, an often overlooked aspect of a growing tourist industry is the resulting population growth in an area and pressure on natural resources. ASSETS seeks to utilise the increasing tourism in the coastal region of Kenya to the

advantage of the local people. As the wildlife fights for survival, so do the people living around the forest and creek. By distributing funds raised through Eco-tourism to provide bursaries for secondary school children ASSETS promotes child education and seeks to alleviate poverty.

This is a huge educational undertaking. Tsofa is responsible for the A Rocha Kenya Schools and Community Environmental Education Programme involving 54 primary and secondary schools around the boundaries of the Arabuko - Sokoke Forest, the largest area of natural coastal forest in East Africa. He has coordinated guided field trips, puppet theatres, slide and video shows, art and writing competitions, games, debates, conservation festivals, tree planting, litter clean ups, newsletters and trips to National Parks.

Considering how difficult it seems to be for our relatively wealthy society to understand the need to reduce our carbon emissions today, for the sake of the planet's future, how much harder must it be to teach people living in poverty the need to preserve their very source of income for the sake of sustainability? Tsofa does it with continual humour and dedication!

In just one morning Brian witnessed a typical school visit in which Tsofa taught a class of 30 students how to set up a tree nursery for 3000 seedlings! Using local natural resources the students were sent out with machetes to cut branches binding them together with vine to make the nursery. To stop the natural loss through insect predators the nursery was built 3ft above

ground, suspended across a canopy of woven branches. With additional shade and a daily routine of watering these seedlings will have germinated within 3 weeks and be ready to be transplanted in 6 weeks, a process that could take up to one year here! At this point it becomes full class involvement. Tsofa encourages students to take up to 50 young saplings home and to grow them on in their own shambas. The trees that cannot be accommodated are sold back to the forest department, the trees that the students nurture will have reached maturity within 6 years providing for domestic use and creating a source of income.

As the community directly benefits from this educational programme their receptivity to the environmental teaching is high! The programme is currently being expanded to also include adult education focusing on ways of using local materials, resources and alternative technologies to improve local people's quality of life in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. The community are very aware of the fragility of the forest eco system and the importance of maintaining it. They know the importance of the trees to help preserve the weather patterns and the very soil they are so dependant upon to grow their maize.

As our Island schools become registered as Eco schools, and teaching about climate change at last takes its place in the national curriculum, I find it interesting to speculate that environmental education and awareness is less developed in the so called "developed" world. That in our world of high technology we seem to have lost

our understanding of mans interrelationship with and dependency upon a healthy and well balanced planet.

If you would like any further information on the work of A Rocha see: www.arocha.org or for information on the ASSETS programme see. www.assets-kenya.org. The One World Centre is a registered charity on the IoM that seeks to raise awareness of global poverty, inequality and injustice and to encourage a response; If you would like any information about the work of the One World Centre, or would like to support their work, or to join as volunteer or member please contact Cheryl on: cheryl@owciom.org