
Gambia: Bee-keeping as a tool for forest protection and restoration

In the early 1900s Gambia was covered by dense and almost impenetrable forests. Today there are only some few remnants of primary forest left, with 78% of the remaining forest area classified as “degraded tree and shrub savannah vegetation.” The main cause of this forest degradation process can be traced back to the introduction of groundnut (peanut), which became the main export-oriented cash crop, mostly aimed at supplying the French market with industrial and cooking oil.

In The Gambia, the easiest and cheapest way for preparing the land for cultivation is the use of fire, and at end of the dry season people are actively setting fire to small and large areas of land. In many cases, those fires spread to the nearby tree and shrub vegetation, thus further contributing to forest degradation. Fire prevention and control thus appear to be essential for the protection of the remaining forest areas.

In a recent visit to the country, the WRM interviewed Amadou Ceesay (CEO) and Ousman Joof (Production manager) from the National Beekeepers Association of The Gambia (NBAG), who explained the importance of their activity –coupled with community forest management- in the conservation and restoration of forests, particularly regarding fire prevention.

They explained that community forest management is a long term project and that people need to identify income generating activities within those forests. According to Ceesay, “one of the best identified activities is beekeeping. The moment they have their equipment, in only 2-3 months they can begin to receive earnings, and beekeeping provides more than the annual farming income.”

The result is that people are then interested in protecting the forest, because they need enough trees and flowers for their bees, so they sustain existing ones and plant more. With hives, community forests are well protected from forest fires, not only because beekeepers wish to maintain their source of pollen, but also because they need to protect the hives themselves -located inside the forest- from fires. Ousman Joof says: “We serve as forest guardians: no cutting, no burning, more planting. We need year-round flowers, so we plant different species.”

The activity is promoted in partnership between the NBAG, the Forestry Department and the community forest committees. While the former takes care of training and marketing of the honey, the Forestry Department assists in the provision of equipment and transportation.

It is also important to note that beekeeping and honey consumption are not alien to Gambian culture. On the contrary, there is a long tradition in the use of wild honey and in most communities there is traditional beekeeping knowledge. The bees themselves are native to Africa, thus being very resistant to disease. According to the NBAG, “the idea of incorporating beekeeping into community forests came from the farmers themselves, and most of the honey produced is sold in Gambia, where it is also used in medication”, emphasizing that “every household has honey.” People are now thinking of planting trees to realize other incomes: wax, fruit, jams (with honey and mango), firewood.

In words of Amadou Ceesay, beekeeping “is the fastest and cheapest way of protecting forests,

because local communities benefit from it.”