
Senegal: Women's project restores nature and benefits the community

Two different natural ecosystems go to make up the Popenguine-Guéréo natural reserve, located 45 km to the south of Dakar, capital of Senegal: a continental part with rugged hills covered by a primary forest and a maritime part, mainly consisting of a rocky habitat where fish come to spawn.

The zone was classified in 1986 as a natural reserve with a view to reversing degradation from deforestation, depletion of meadows and successive droughts that had led to a considerable loss of biodiversity.

In 1987 and as a community response, 116 women voluntarily and spontaneously set up the Popenguine Women's Gathering for the Protection of Nature (RFPPN, its French acronym) as a way of contributing to the conservation and restoration of the zone's biodiversity. These women have risked their reputation and even their marriages, because they have used their time and energy in establishing a natural reserve for the community when, in the eyes of their neighbours, they should have stayed at home and devoted themselves to the domestic tasks of Senegalese wives and mothers. But the dynamic women of the village of Popenguine and its surroundings have finally convinced those who were against them. Slowly, they have shown that they can regenerate and conserve their environment, encourage eco-tourism, ensure forest restoration and survival of the flora and fauna, while benefitting the community as a whole.

Year after year, they have introduced thousands of trees from the indigenous flora. Slowly the fauna was reconstructed and thus 195 species of birds, gerogryphic antelopes, duikers or small grey antelopes, striped jackals, mongooses, algalia cats, and monkeys of the callithrix family (titis or tamarins) have reappeared.

With time, strictly environmental objectives have evolved and now the socio-economic demands of the women involved (inter alia, generation of income, solving the demand for cereals and fuel) have also been integrated. A programme for sustainable development has thus been created, ignoring models imposed from the outside and on the contrary, basing itself on the conservation of the local environment from a grass-roots, empiric approach.

Since 1995, the group has extended its action and joined efforts to restore a vital space of some 100km², known as the Ker Cupaam Community Space, in homage to the feminine spirit protecting the site. This space includes the whole Popenguine-Guéréo Reserve and the territories of eight villages surrounding the reserve. The villages are represented by the Women's Economic Interest Groups (GIE), integrating the 1555 member strong COPRONAT cooperative for the protection of nature.

The present RFPPN programme is linked around:

a) Management of forest restoration: establishment in each village of nurseries for timber tree indigenous species as a source of fuel, and fruit trees and ornamental plants for sale; management of the village forest, creation of a network for the distribution of fuel to avoid logging timber tree species.

b) Health management: organisation of the collection and classification of domestic waste, treatment and transformation into compost, construction of latrines.

c) Food management: establishment of cereal banks and family vegetable plots

d) Training in community management of protected zones: training on waste treatment, horticulture and management of natural spaces, initiation in computer science, the catering trade, construction of a training centre, computer and audiovisual equipment with a view to training young people.

e) Tourist management: extension and equipming of the tourist camping zone.

To reverse erosion, stone barriers and contention dams were built to lessen the speed of rainwater. Another objective is the rehabilitation of the mangroves on Lake Somone, at the southern limit of the territory.

The women of Popenguine proudly show off their work: the shiny mangroves and the full lagoon in spite of the scant rainfall. A decade ago, regeneration of Lake Somone and the Popenguine region was a dream. Woulimata Thiaw, president of the women's cooperative is proud of the results of their work. She smilingly repeats that success has had its price: hard work and that sustainable development means "to be conscious all the time of the effects of our actions on the future and on the future of our children and grandchildren. This is sustainability: the decisions we take. We have to be sure that there is continuity."

Article based on information from: "Ker Cupaam: ejemplo para el desarrollo sostenible", sent by Liliana Marcos Barba, Canal Solidario, e-mail: lilianita_81@hotmail.com ; Cultivant la Diversité - Afrique de l'Ouest, La gestion de l'espace communautaire Ker Cupaam, <http://www.grain.org/gd/fr/case-studies/cases/wa-abstract-senegal-fr.cfm> ; Case study, La Réserve Naturelle de Popenguine (Sénégal) : une expérience de développement durable basée sur la conservation de la biodiversité, Paul Ndiaye, <http://www.cdr.dk/sscafrica/ndi2-f-s.htm>