

WORLD BEAT

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Good Ideas and Work: Report from S. Africa

by James Wynn and Paul Cohen

Greetings from South Africa. I received the "Ecofiction" issue of *Talking Leaves*, and it's made the rounds here. I always enjoy reading quotes from Lone Wolf Circles, and I think that Ernest Callenbach's work needs to be examined and reexamined if our society is ever going to deal with the real issues of restructuring our economies to support the ecology. Sorry I've not written sooner, but was waiting to have more specific information on permaculture in S. Africa.

A renowned permaculture center in Harare, Zimbabwe, called Fambidzani, is the most established and demonstrative of good ideas and work. In addition to well established plant systems, they are developing cottage industries centered around a brick-making machine that they have purchased, and they also have a fabric business. Botswana has had a group of people doing extension work and teaching courses in permaculture design for several years. Namibia has an interesting project going that is not affiliated directly with permaculture but they are training people to build beautiful brick vaulted houses.

Lesotho has a very promising project to implement permaculture in about forty elementary schools and they are currently planning to hire someone full time to design and supervise the development of permaculture landscaping at each of the schools. The school district has agreed to provide for housing and transportation, and they are seeking funding specifically for salary and other expenses. Tlholego has agreed to help them write a grant proposal. At the school we visited, the children grow much of their own food and also raise animals to bring down the cost of education for their community. The deforestation and erosion in Lesotho is the worst that I have ever seen (even worse than Douglas County, Oregon). Introduced species such as eucalyptus and poplar have only begun to stabilize the soil in some of the most severely eroded areas. I was there on a national tree planting holiday, and hundreds of people

around the countryside were out planting trees that had been grown out by the government and sold at cost.

We are now starting on a one-page brochure that describes the work we are doing at Tlholego. The project has been proceeding for about three years, but this year the work is happening much faster, as adequate funding, an international design team on location, and an expanded work force are transforming the grounds into a well integrated, cutting-edge demonstration site. We have some tilapia fish growing in a large, above-ground pond. We are collecting water plants that we intend to use in constructed wetlands for waste-water treatment.

Tlholego is a Tswana word that means "natural origins". Now is a historic time for South Africa. Most people realize that many things will change in the near future (editor's note: James's letter preceded the recent elections), so they are very open to ideas that will give them options that can effectively improve the standard of living for the many people now living in squatter camps and unsafe or unhealthy living conditions. The ANC has written out a plan for reconstruction and development which will affect the lives of millions of people in the near future. In fact they propose to build one million homes in the next five years. There is now a tremendous opportunity here to integrate ecological village design on a large scale. People are demanding a better way of life and the new government will have to address this if they are to maintain the support of the people. Permaculture can improve more lives, with less money and fewer expensive resources than other forms of proposed development available. The Tlholego Learning Center is gearing up to do just that.

The permaculture demonstration site here is about 300 acres, with an educational facility, a small village of about fifty people, and an autonomous public school on approximately six acres that has about 300 local children in attendance. Living Systems Design Group, an international permaculture design consulting business, has been contracted by Tlholego to oversee the project for 1994. I work as an associate of LSDG. The Tlholego Learning Center is a project of RUCORE, the Rural and Urban

Development Cooperation of Southern Africa. LSDG is working in cooperation with the California Institute of Earth Architecture, and we have rights to develop and apply their building technologies here. These technologies rely on local materials and skills to build structures which are durable, inexpensive, easy to build and beautiful. We are currently building domed and vaulted houses that use no timber or expensive finishes. Joe Kennedy, an architect from Cal Earth, is here at Tlholego to supervise the construction technologies.

In the past two-and-a-half months we have completed a new classroom building, two shade houses for the garden and nursery, two ferrocement cisterns for harvesting rainwater from rooftops, and we have started on a new kitchen building which will be capped with a thirty-foot strawbale dome, and two new staff houses, one domed and one vaulted. We have also dug a new fishpond, put up extensive arbor shade trellises, and completed some interesting retrofits to an existing classroom building.

Thanks to plans sent to us from the Aprovecho Institute (8057+ Hazelton Rd., Cottage Grove, OR 97424), we have cast our first rocket stove, which has cooked many good meals so far. Last month we planted about fifty eucalyptus trees near the local school with the help of about 100 children. English language classes several times a week for villagers and workers are taught by the woman who is in charge of the gardens here. A choir has been going for a month or so now with about ten village children who meet on weeknights to practice and record. And there is of course soccer practice every day after work at four o'clock. There are also solar hot showers, and a good CD Rom and video system. So there is a lot going on here and much to learn.

After a two-week permaculture design course here next October, we plan to commence a residential internship program for students who are seeking advanced permaculture training. Now we are getting the ground systems and facilities up to speed to comfortably house several international students for an extended period. Tlholego will continue to offer apprenticeships to locals seeking skills in welding, construction, and

nursery management. At this time we are open to a few more people with experience to work in exchange for room and board for one or two month periods, or longer. Please let us know if anyone out there is interested.

In addition to all the building going on, we are also expanding our garden and nursery. We are finishing a new chicken coop this week, and putting up more fencing around the gardens. Lots of winter crops have been sown. The seed store here is being expanded and we are exploring a seed growout program in cooperation with Seeds of Change. Both Seeds of Change and Plants of the Southwest have sent us dozens of varieties of open pollinated vegetables to grow here and to help our seed and nursery business get started. We have ordered approximately twenty pounds of tree seed, fifty varieties so far, to plant in the spring.

Wild cousins of olive, jujube, sumac, hackberry, and figs grow wild here, so in addition to collecting native species for land reclamation, we are locating cultivars of these trees for grafting and cross pollination. I've done an inventory of the species that have flowered so far this season, and we are getting a feel of how plant populations are distributed on both disturbed and restored areas. So far I've caught a few small cobras and a couple other venomous snakes and moved them away from our Zone 1. There are kudu and porcupine on the land here, and troops of monkeys just across the border of the property in a large reserve that borders the adjacent farmland. Lots of owls, hawks, and a few eagles.

Now for comments by our project director, the founder of RUCORE, Paul Cohen.

—James Wynn

Thanks to James I have received the past four issues of *Talking Leaves*, and I am very pleased to be familiar with your publication.

South Africa offers tremendous opportunities right now to demonstrate to its people and the international community that we have by no means exhausted effective solutions to our problems, but are really only beginning to solve them.

The dynamic socio-political and economic climate, together with the rich cultural, biological and material diversity here, provide for those of us who are working to see systems solutions successfully developing on the ground—a timely window of opportunity.

South Africa is unique in the world. There is an established tradition of rural lifestyle which, although threatened, has its common sense close to the land and an intuitive understanding of what it really is that sustains us. The large urban and First World infrastructure provides easy access to technology and materials that allow us

to design more efficiently and implement more complex solutions. The general confusion here now, mixed up together with people's needs for housing, food, and work, when approached from a permaculture or systems perspective, provide landscapes of common ground for us all to get the good work done.

Economic success is a primary element within our overall development strategy. There are unique opportunities in our region to model what has developed in Mondragon—to initiate the development of worker owned, worker managed cooperative enterprises based on renewable biological resources. Here at Tlhologo we are proceeding in exactly this way and based on our successes so far we can see that the rate at which these systems can be developed is directly related to our collective expertise on the ground. Although we are well covered in terms of the diversity of skills needed, there could be more of us to move this process as fast as it wants to move right now.

—Paul Cohen

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The Plant Kindom Is Whispering Ancient Messages

by J. Sparrow, Amazon Ecuador



A plant kindom indeed it is, here in the Amazon rainforest at the base of the mighty Andes. Tremendous mountains, volcanoes clothed nearly to your rim in an empire of plants. A vegetable nation intertwined by vines and palms and towering trees on whose branches are sustained myriad forms of life, thrusting forth myriad shapes, colors and forms, all of which are whispering archaic messages. All your lovely and pristine valleys, each with varied microclimates and changing environment, supporting the existence of your characteristic flora and fauna. Plant nation, adapting to the climatic condi-

tions you were born amongst, your parameters to the world, to which you belong and which you yourself have created. You are an integral part of this world, fulfilling an important and irreplaceable niche; you are sustaining us all.

"Plant nation, vegetable kindom, I salute and respect the empire of sustenance that you are. I salute and respect your divine purpose of sustaining all life on earth. I am your ally; I humble myself to you with respect and dedication. You have my respect. Oh great teacher, teach me. Oh greatest of masters, from my heart to yours I send an unconditional prayer of love. I shall always love you as you have, from time immemorial, loved me. I shall always be with you, as you have, from time immemorial, loved me. I shall always be with you as you have, since dawn began, been with us, dancing together in divine unity."

How wonderful it is to be a part of this infinite web of life! All around and within us, the relationships—all the trusty marriages—bond, never to divorce. All the interactions bound together and intertwined towards growing this forest. Oh primal source. Oh positive force. The myriad bees pollinating seasons of fragrant flowers thrusting forth into existence possibilities untold, and the fairest of butterflies fluttering on the fairest of winds. What secrets do you hold? Am I still part of this mighty web; if so, how do I fit in? Does planting the seeds of the greatest of fruit trees make me worthy of your greater plan, your greater purpose? I strive to sometimes understand.

In this day and age, due primarily to civilization's ongoing consummate slaughtering of mother nature, we are effectively detaching ourselves as a race from mother nature herself, failing to recognize that our relationship with plants on the whole may be more significant than we deem it be. Since the dawn of time, people and plants have been bonded in reciprocal unity. Let us be empowered and reweave ourselves back into the mosaic through renurturing our direct relationship with the plant kindom.

My intention in writing this paper is to bring to light a few ways I feel may be effective in doing this. Ethnobotany is one of the many valid modern-day tools we have, but the mere study of the relationship between people and plants in any context will not effectively allow us this opportunity for relationship. My intention is not to discredit the science of ethnobotany, but rather to bring to light the importance of a "new" reciprocal ethnobotany that aims for the inspiration necessary to apply the study in our every-