

PHYTOTRADE NEWS UPDATE NUMBER 13

APRIL 2005

In this issue we look at the environmental sustainability of natural products commercialisation, hear about microbiological contamination and learn more about nutcracking. We also welcome new members, and hear back from Arthur about his visit to BioFach.

QUALITY CONTROL TRAINING COURSE

On 26th and 27th May 2005, PhytoTrade will be holding a Quality Control training course in Harare. More information about the course including the draft curriculum and application forms will be circulated to members shortly.

WIN THE PHYTOTRADE AFRICA CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION!

Fancy your chances as a writer? PhytoTrade members are invited to submit stories about their experiences with natural products, with a cash prize for the winning entry, announced at the AGM in June. Articles should be 2000 words in length and should explore your, or your producers, experience of working with natural products. We're particularly interested in personal insights into how your organisation or enterprise has tackled Fair Trade issues, sustainable harvesting techniques, how you've overcome production problems or how producers have benefited from the sale of natural products. The more information you can include about people, places and events, the better.

Please apply to Lucy, Information Services Manager (lucy@phytotradeafrica.com) for an application form and enter your submission to this Phytotrade competition no later than Friday 20th May 2005. Only two entries per corporate member, and one per individual member.

IS NATURAL PRODUCTS COMMERCIALISATION ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE?

"It's a great idea, but is it environmentally sustainable?" This is one of the first questions we are regularly asked when we start talking about natural products commercialisation. What's the real issue here? We talked to Gus Le Breton, PhytoTrade Chief Executive to see if we could get a straight answer. "Well, basically people are concerned that if and when one of our products, say baobab oil, starts to go into full scale commercial production, harvesting levels will outstrip regeneration, and we'll start to see a decline in the number of baobab trees in the region" says Gus.



Gus Le Breton, PhytoTrade Africa Chief Executive

FAIR TRADE AND ORGANIC CERTIFICATION TRAINING COURSE

PhytoTrade Africa will be holding a Fair Trade and Organic Certification training course on 13th and 14th July 2005, in Harare. We'll be sending you more information about the course including the draft curriculum and application forms.

So are we being over-cautious in terms of biodiversity conservation, or is this a genuine concern, based on hard facts and scientific evidence?

“Of course it is a genuine concern. If the natural resource base from which thousands of people were generating their income were to disappear as a result, that would be a big problem for everybody. Ask the former cod fishermen in the North Atlantic, they’ll tell you all about it!”

“At PhytoTrade we (along with many others) are continually monitoring the environmental impact of natural product commercialisation in the region. It takes a long time to assess ecosystem change, but the findings so far all “Well, it’s simple really. Adding value to indigenous plant resources, which is effectively what commercialisation does, provides a strong incentive to rural producers to conserve those plant resources. And it actually does happen. Recently we had a case where a Government forestry officer in Northern Namibia wrote to his head office complaining of a sudden and inexplicable demand for ximenia seeds from local people. It turned out they’d heard there was a market for ximenia through PhytoTrade Africa, and they wanted ximenia seed so they could go out and plant it. He was a bit put out because he didn’t have enough seed to meet the demand!”

“But seriously, our whole approach is based on the premise that if you give a resource value, especially in an area where people have precious little else in terms of economic opportunities, they’ll look after it. They’re not going to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. And there’s years of hard-core data from numerous social and environmental studies to support that idea.”

Is it really that simple?

“No, there’s more to it than that. One of our immutable ground rules is that we only focus on species that are abundant and not under any immediate conservation risk. Moreover, we only work with the parts of those plants that can be harvested in an inherently sustainable manner. That means seeds and fruit, rather than bark and roots.”

“At the same time, we ensure our members are all on the same page in terms of a shared commitment to sustainable harvesting techniques by getting each member to sign up to the

PhytoTrade Africa Environmental Charter. This binds them to adhere to certain principles of environmental sustainability, and gives us the right to expel any members who violate these principles.”

“Thirdly” Gus goes on, “we target overseas export markets where concrete evidence of sustainability is required, for example, through independent certification. That’s why we are so interested in the organic market: both the criteria and the monitoring for sustainable harvesting are undertaken by accredited independent bodies such as the Soil Association or EcoCert. This means our members have a strong, market-driven incentive to ensure their operations remains sustainable.”

“Finally, we’re involved with heavy hitters in the conservation world. We’re partnered with, amongst others, IUCN, People and Plants International, ICRAF and CIFOR, all of whom share our approach towards the sustainable use of plant resources. In fact I’m a forest ecologist myself by background, and I can assure you I wouldn’t be involved if I didn’t believe what we’re doing is good for trees!”

“I’m not claiming our approach will solve all the problems associated with biodiversity loss in Southern Africa” concludes Gus, “but the experience of PhytoTrade, and evidence from elsewhere, suggests it could make a substantial difference... we believe that the financial gains to be made from natural product commercialisation make a very convincing case for the sustainable management of plant species in the region”.

We’d like your feedback. If you would like to contribute to this debate, contact Lucy Welford, the PhytoTrade Information Services Manager on lucy@phytotradeafrica.com



RADIO BIOFACH – A VISIT TO NUREMBURG 2005

By Arthur Stevens, Business Services Manager

Germany, in the depths of winter, can never be an African resident's favourite destination! Yet this was my fifth visit over the years to Nuremburg in February, host to the annual Biofach Organic Trade fair. A major pause for reflection as I clambered over snow and ice into a taxi in the cold dark evening on the way to my modest (but very pricey) lodgings.

My first visit had seen just three of the massive exhibition halls, known in Germany as Messe, in use. Then a relatively small exhibition, Biofach 2005 now covered nine halls of the Nuremburg Messe. Back in 1998 the three halls used carried quite a mix of exhibitors, although the international ones were generally grouped loosely together. By 2005 one of the nine halls is devoted exclusively to organic wine – from all over the world. The other halls cover Organic foodstuffs for import export outside of Germany; Organic foodstuffs for the German market; Agricultural supplies; Natural cosmetics, drugstore items, textiles and accessories and so on. There is even a solo Brazilian section that takes up almost one entire hall.

Despite the expansion and complexity (and the distractions of the wine tasting!) German efficiency meant it was easy to find your way around and soon many familiar faces were in view. Not least was a significant Zambian organic producers presence at the CBI stand (CBI is the Centre for Promotion of Imports from developing countries) and a major supporter of organic and natural products exports especially from Southern Africa.

In the Natural Cosmetics arena, it was impossible not to notice that the exhibitors in this sector have grown enormously in number and range of products and there is significant and growing interest in the supply of organic and natural products – and where possible, both – for the formulation of cosmetics.

I spent some considerable time in the organic foods halls – both the international market exhibitors and those aimed more squarely at the German market, the biggest organic market in Europe. And here I was especially keen to stimulate interest in organic baobab pulp, and which will also form the basis of our marketing approach for the Vitafoods Trade Fair in Geneva in May. While the Novel Foods legislation for the EU remains a concern for many potential users, and PhytoTrade continues to work its way through this maze on behalf of baobab pulp, there was nevertheless some strong interest shown. A couple of especially useful meetings took place with a Swiss foodstuffs importer while a Spanish specialist in soya products was interested in the potential for mixing in products such as soya milk. It is hoped that these and other initiatives being taken by PhytoTrade will lead to some positive trade deals.

Biofach of course is not just about product presentation and puffery. Various side events take place also including a number of important seminars covering a range of issues. I was fortunate to attend a seminar sponsored by Dutch aid organization HIVOS. This seminar brought together

leading lights in the certification movement and the specific topics covered including the harmonisation of standards for certification, not only between the individual organic certifying agencies, but also covering the Fair Trade labelling movement. While the “One Stop Shop” is not a short term possibility, there is a strong movement towards this ideal, which should have the longer term benefit of reducing costs and complexity for organic and fair trade producers.

And for the first time since I had been attending the show, the Fair Trade movement had a significant exhibition presence, with the Fair Trade Labelling Organisation (FLO) in particular having a stand, and one that was especially well attended, such that meetings with key FLO personnel were almost impossible to arrange (although I did succeed!).

And for the future? Biofach is now a significant event on the world trade fair circuit and with the increasing interest in organically and/or fair trade certified natural products, it is to be hoped that perhaps PhytoTrade may have a more interactive presence in support of our membership at future shows rather than the less visible attendance that was just me this year. I better not lose my woolly hat and gloves....

CONTAMINATION ISSUES...

Microbiological contaminants in virgin oils are a major cause for concern as these have to be removed before being used by our partners in cosmetic formulations. The contaminants include yeasts, mould, as well as harmful bacteria such as e. coli and salmonella. Unfortunately removing these contaminants can also cause the constituent desirable qualities of the oils to change, rendering them less useful and less valuable for cosmetic purposes as well as altering their virgin status. However there are ways our members can try and minimise the potential for contamination.

These are mainly through taking great care in the collection, storing and processing of the seed material. Each time the seed is handled – when picked from the ground right through to packing in bags, handling for kernel extraction and so on – is an opportunity for contamination to occur. People's hands are great channels for contamination – even regular washing will not eliminate the problem completely. But the more that steps are taken to ensure that those handling the seed and processing material have clean hands and are working in a clean environment – off the floor, bags of seed stored in clean, dry places, away from water, animals, children – the greater the chances of reducing microbiological contamination to acceptable levels.

PhytoTrade has prepared a paper: **Minimising the Risk of Microbiological Contamination in Lipid Production** outlining the steps members should take in reducing contamination risks.

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK!

A very real problem faced by our membership is the extraction of the kernels from the nuts of the various trees so they can then press out the oil. This is not only the difficulty of removing the kernel, but also being able to remove it in a cost effective manner while also minimising potential for microbial contamination.

More often than not the nuts our members are trying to crack have never been so processed on any large scale for potential industrial use. A typical and current example is the parinari nut, being researched by one of our members in Zambia. This nut has a very hard outer casing, then a thin layer of a hairy film that covers the two very soft kernels. Smashing the nut into little pieces serves little purpose – the kernel fragments and is mixed with the woody outer casing. Trying to press this mixture of nut and kernel leads to the oil being absorbed entirely by the woody casing and no oil yield as a result.

On the other hand, extraction by hand is a very labour intensive and time consuming process. Each nut is split individually by hand, using a metal blade and a hammer. Then the kernel is extracted with a small pick – there are two kernels and often the nut splitting cuts the kernels in two pieces resulting in four hand operations to remove the kernels completely. And finally, the kernel weighs only 3% of the total nut weight, so yields are very low as well as the process being very slow. And obviously, apart from the manual tedium of the extraction process, the greater the handling of the nut the greater is the potential for the nuts and the resulting oils to become microbially contaminated.

PhytoTrade is taking a very proactive stance to assist its members in resolving these problems. An important area is the provision of Research and Development Grants to individual members to enable research into the best methodology for nut extraction, bearing in mind costs and quality requirements. A second major area of assistance is through the running of courses for members aimed at providing them with the technical knowledge they need in processing of nuts. This is backed up by dissemination of relevant technical information and where desirable direct one on one site level technical assistance by PhytoTrade technical staff.



PROTA

The newlook PROTA (Plant Resources of Tropical Africa) has just been restyled to enable faster and easier access by visitors. PROTA is an international, not-for-profit foundation that is working to synthesize the dispersed information on the approximately 7,000 useful plants of Tropical Africa to provide wide access to the information on internet databases, books, cd-roms and special products. The objectives are to bring the published information, now accessible to the resourceful happy few, into the public domain. This will contribute to greater awareness and sustained use of the ‘world heritage of African useful plants’, with due respect for traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights. <http://www.prota.org/uk/about+prota/>

IFAT

IFAT has appointed a new director, Stefan Durwael, who formally took up his post on 1 February 2005. From the same date, the IFAT Secretariat relocated to Culemborg in the Netherlands.

NEW MEMBERS

We would like to take the opportunity to extend a very warm welcome to six new corporate and individual members of PhytoTrade Africa, approved at our Management Board Meeting in March 2005.

- African Organic Farming Industries, Zambia Don McIntosh, gwenam@zamnet.zm or aofi@zamnet.zm
- Bophelong Medical Clinic, Botswana Christopher Nakabale, nakabale@botsnet.bw
- Farmer’s Association of Chief/Headman Investment Groups (FACHIG), Zimbabwe Princess Gabayi or Ronald Nyandoro fachig@africaonline.co.zw
- Zvishavane Water Project, Zimbabwe, Irene Dube or F Whindizi, zwp@telco.co.zw or zvishwp@mweb.co.zw
- Desmond Paul, Zimbabwe (individual member) 302064@ecoweb.co.zw
- Isaac Rampedi, South Africa (individual member) rampeit@unisa.ac.za

We would also like to welcome six groups from Zvishavane, Zimbabwe who have subscribed to our new Natural Products Information Service.

PhytoTrade Africa:
 PO Box BE 385, Belvedere, Harare, Zimbabwe
 Tel:790364; 708882; 704178; 790381 Fax: (263) 4 723037
 Email: info@phytotradeafrica.com
www.phytotradeafrica.com