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First-time visitors to Southern Africa almost always remark on the same three striking characteristics of the region. It is poor, and it is dry, but it has an amazing natural resource endowment.

If you think about it for a moment, you quickly realise what an anomaly this is. The global natural resource endowment is diminishing on a daily basis. If we are so, comparatively, advantaged in this area, why are we still poor (and getting poorer)?

The answer to this is simple: we have not been able to turn the potential economic value of our natural resources into an actual (and sustainable) income stream for our people.

It doesn't have to be this way, though. To the members of the Southern African Natural Products Trade Association (SANProTA), there is a clear path ahead. It may not be an easy ride, but none of the members doubt that the end-result will be worth the effort.

SANProTA's overall goal is to bring many of the thousands of rural people in Southern Africa (who live in biologically rich, but economically poor, areas) into the global economy as producers of high quality natural products. More specifically, it is the Association's aim to create a viable and enduring natural products industry, for which low income rural people are the primary producers.

It hasn't happened yet, but the Association is only a year old, and still has a long way to go before it matures. But all the indications are positive. At the recent Natural Products Europe Expo, in Amsterdam, SANProTA was inundated with requests for new natural products from Africa. "The market potential is enormous", says Cyril Lombard, SANProTA's European marketing agent. "Our challenge is

to find the right kind of buyers: buyers who will partner us in researching and developing new products from our natural heritage, buyers who will invest in a lasting relationship with African producers, and buyers who will ensure that, collectively, we all get the best possible deals for our members".

SANProTA's members are all either currently active in, or hoping to become active in, the natural products industry. Their backgrounds are as diverse as the countries they come from. Some are Namibian producers, some are Botswana traders. Some are Malawian community-based organisations, some are Zambian foresters. Some are Zimbabwean bio-chemists, and some are international NGOs. But they all share the same vision. "This is a potentially viable industry, from which thousands of poor rural people can benefit. If we work together, we can make it happen."

So what is this 'natural products industry' that they talk of? "Well, it's the industry that essentially converts a raw natural resource into a processed and marketable natural product", says Gus Le Breton, the Association's Chief Executive Officer. "Our members, for example, are currently engaged in the production of oil from the seeds of a variety of indigenous trees and shrubs. These oils are sold as ingredients in the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries."

Is it profitable? "Yes indeed, it can be very profitable", responds Le Breton. "But it is not an easy industry to break into. The quality standards for cosmetics and pharmaceuticals are extremely exacting, and it takes a considerable amount of research before we can develop a product that meets these standards, and that meets the market's requirements."

And are sure you can meet these standards?
“We know we can, because we already are. If you go to the UK, for example, you can find cosmetics made with marula oil, lotions made with Kalahari melon seed oil, and skin creams based on the African sausage tree. SANProTA has members working on each of these natural ingredients.”

For a business to be sustainable, the supply of raw materials has also to be sustainable. One of the primary concerns of SANProTA is therefore to ensure that all the products it promotes are derived from sustainably managed and harvested natural resources. “We’re not only trying to diversify livelihood opportunities for rural people, but we’re also trying to ensure that they have a strong financial incentive to invest in sustainable resource management activities”, says Le Breton. “And besides, it’s only common sense. It wouldn’t be a very good business if it used up all the raw materials on which that business is based.”

In terms of translating Southern Africa’s ecological wealth into economic opportunities for its people, SANProTA is still at the earliest stage. There’s no doubt that they’re on to something, though. Globally, the natural products industry is huge. To date, this region has played little part in it, but if they can turn that around, SANProTA members may one day start to feel the benefits. “It may not make us all rich overnight”, says Cephas Zinhumwe, one of the Association’s members, “but it could make an awful lot of us a lot less poor. And that, surely, has to be a good thing!”.