

# Managing forest resources wisely in Zambia... extracting washing soap and ropes from trees

Surprising though it might seem, the tale of deforestation and the environmental threat that it poses does have a positive side to it. Our forefathers had the skills of using the forest as an important source of livelihood without necessarily causing long-term damage to it. For example, detergents and building materials were extracted from the forest without harming it and these skills that have been handed down from generation to generation are still being practised today.

“Because there are so many detergents and soaps on the market nowadays most people don’t use the Ndale (*Swartzia madagascariensis*, a small semi-deciduous tree, with a light rounded crown, which can reach a height of 10 m on rich soils, also known as Snake bean) tree anymore” said Thomas Chibulu, a teacher at Danger Hill Community School in Mulenga Kasomo village of Chief Chikwanda’s area in Mpika rural district of Zambia. While demonstrating the simple production of washing soap from a tree Chibulu said that it is mostly in the very remote areas that the detergent from this tree is used where the Bembas (a local tribal grouping in northern Zambia) have washed their imibinde (loincloths) long before the colonialists came to Zambia.

“If you are washing white clothes, you are better off using some pieces of the bark. Although it takes longer to produce bubbles (foam), it has a stronger effect than the soap that is made from the tree’s fruits.” says Chibulu.

The tree can provide the detergent from its bark and fruit without being cut down. Crushing thin strips or slices of the bark or pods of fruit produces the detergent. This is then vigorously rinsed in water, and left to settle for about 5 to 10 minutes. The pieces of crushed

bark or fruit are then removed from the water solution leaving rich white foam. Clothing or fabrics can then be immersed in the water for washing.



*Thomas Chibulu demonstrates production of washing soap from Ndale*

And Victor Kawanga, the National Branch Coordinator for the Commonwealth Forestry Association says that the ndale tree has a grey black bark with a lattice-work of deep furrows and ridges from which a crimson-black liquid exudes when the tree is damaged. The bark serves to distinguish *swartzia* from the otherwise similar *Dalbergia nitidula*.

Another handy product that comes out of the forest without causing long-term damage is fibre rope, which in Bemba, the language most widely spoken in Northern Province, is called ulushishi. Ulushishi is mainly used for building, although it has other purposes such as making beds or weaving mats. The fibre rope can be extracted from various species of trees in thin strips. If done expertly the tree may be fully healed within a year. But CFA’s Victor Kawanga says that lack of proper technical know-how on the mechanics of extracting the rope fibre can leave the trees vulnerable.

“Trees are living organisms. A wound that is left on a tree at the mercy of nature to heal could be harmful, these wounds or openings become the entry point for diseases,” he says “Eventually the wound doesn’t heal appropriately with the end result of the vigour of the tree being reduced, fruitification being reduced and eventually death of the tree.”

Nevertheless, it remains clear that if the forest resources are used wisely, they may continue to benefit future generations.



*Fibre rope from trees has to be extracted with care*

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