

NEW FUND DOCUMENTS USEFUL PLANTS

Spreading plant knowledge in Africa

‘Most African countries do not know their own wealth when it comes to plants,’ says Jan Siemonsma. He set up the Plant Resources of the World Fund, which distributes books and CD-ROMs about edible, medicinal and otherwise useful plants.

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Women in Benin learned to extract natural colorants from sorghum. In Nigeria a forgotten leafy vegetable, the spider plant, made a comeback. And researchers from universities in countries including Kenya, Ghana and Uganda documented the effect of traditional medicinal plants. All these projects made use of information from Plant Resources of Tropical Africa (PROTA), a foundation which documented useful plant species between 2000 and 2013.

‘Many plants can be used as food, as medicine, or as a source of wood or fibre. But most African countries do not know their own wealth when it comes to plants,’ explains Jan Siemonsma, who was project leader of PROTA for many years. Siemonsma is now on the board of the new Plant Resources of the World Fund (PROW Fund) which manages the foundation’s legacy in collaboration with Wageningen University Fund. ‘There are eight to nine thousand plants in tropical Africa of which we know that they are used. We have studied about four thousand of them,’ says Siemonsma. ‘By putting the useful plants in the spotlight, we contribute to the preservation of knowledge about the plants, and of the plants themselves.’ The plants can potentially provide the local population with additional income as well as increase their food supply.’

The descriptions of the plants can be found in books, on CD-ROMs and in the PROTA4U database. For every plant, a description is given of its characteristics,

growth, cultivation, chemical composition and uses. The description is accompanied by a botanical drawing and a small map of the plant’s distribution across Africa. The database, which was created with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is consulted more than half a million times a year. ‘The database is mainly consulted by researchers and universities and institutes all over the world for their teaching and research,’ says Siemonsma.

BOOKS ARE POPULAR

In many African countries, where the internet is not always available, the books and CD-ROMs are popular too. ‘With the help of the CTA in Wageningen, which distributes agricultural information in developing countries, 22,000 books and 9000 CD-ROMs have already been sold in Africa,’ Siemonsma says. The books are available in both French and English.

Books and CD-ROMs have come out on cereals & pulses, vegetables, tropical hardwood, vegetable oils,

‘A lot of people in Africa could benefit from this knowledge’



Medicinal herbs at a local market.

fibre crops and dye plants. The first two of five books on medicinal plants have been published too. In African countries the books about vegetables and medicines are the most popular. 'Millions of Africans are dependent on traditional medicinal plants. There is a great need for reliable information about how they work,' explains Siemonsma.

The documentation and the editing of it is labour-intensive. 'The job is to collect, verify and summarize existing knowledge which often comes from far away, for instance from the libraries of African universities,' says Siemonsma. So PROTA worked with local authors and had several offices and an extensive network in Africa.

In 2013, the project fizzled out when the Dutch government cut back on development cooperation. Publications on fruit, ornamental plants, forages, root crops and auxiliary crops such as ground cover plants were still in the pipeline. The search for another source of systematic financing did not bear fruit, however.

REPRINTING

Siemonsma even took early retirement to continue with this work without pay. The rights for the books and the database fell to Wageningen University. The university wants the database to go to Naturalis. 'We saw that the university had no interest in keeping the book series and the CD-ROMs on the market. We felt that was a shame,

as there is still plenty of demand for them. Even in 2014, we sent 1400 books and 800 CD-ROMs to Africa.' So in June 2014, Siemonsma and two ex-colleagues set up the PROW fund, to be managed by the Wageningen University Fund.

'Every year the book sales make about four to five thousand euros. Together with money from donors this enables us to keep on reprinting and distributing the books. If more money comes in, we would first like to finish the reviews of medicinal plants.' With that aim in mind, the PROW Fund is still working on fund-raising. 'Of course we would love to complete the whole series. A lot of people in Africa could benefit from this knowledge.' ■

www.wageningenur.nl/prowfund

SUPPORTING THE PROW FUND

The Wageningen University Fund (WUF) manages several named funds. The Plant Resources of the World Fund (PROW) makes knowledge about useful plants available to developing countries. You can support the PROW Fund with a one-off donation, a regular contribution or a legacy.
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