

Book Review

“LIVING WITH THE TREES OF LIFE – TOWARDS THE TRANSFORMATION OF TROPICAL AGRICULTURE”

by Roger Leakey (2012).

Cinderella trees: a fairy tale solution to sustainability in Africa?

Roger Leakey is a shining example of someone who has taken an original route to tackle big problems. He has come up with an entirely plausible solution to one of the great challenges facing humanity – how to farm sustainably in the tropics without destroying the environment and, while doing so, help lift poor farmers onto the bottom rung of the cash economy. The severity of this particular challenge is illustrated by the fact that 70% of these farmers - who make up nearly half the world’s population - are malnourished and very poor.

Roger’s method of tackling hunger and poverty in tropical rural communities is based upon a remarkable career spent turning culturally-important wild fruit and nut trees into a new generation of crops. His career started with a passionate wish to improve the lives of Africans. Now more than 50 years later, through initiatives that run counter to conventional wisdom, that wish has borne fruit – literally. Many fruits unfamiliar to most people are becoming new tree crops.

Central to his philosophy is the message that governments and development agencies need to take a fresh look at where agriculture is going. He argues that by applying horticulture to an array of little-known edible plants we can create new highly nutritious food crops and also capture the benefits of the bugs and beasts that live around them, which keeps the cycles of nature working properly and positively for mankind in general – especially in connection with processes affecting soil health and carbon sequestration.

As the current Vice Chairman of the International Tree Foundation and former Director of Research of the World Agroforestry Centre, Roger has come up with a clear action plan that sees rural communities in tropical countries benefitting from what he calls “Cinderella” trees. These are species which have until very recently been ignored by formal science, in the same way that, as Roger puts it, “the beauty and talents of the hard-working Cinderella were ignored by the fun-loving ugly sisters”.

Roger’s extensive travels to remote forests and rural markets all around the world have contributed to his argument that Agroforestry could hold the key to resolving many of Africa’s problems. It started with a ‘eureka’ moment as he explored Kumba Market in the South-west Province of Cameroon. In amongst the wonderful sights, smells and colours of the market, he found himself, “looking at stalls laid out with a wide range of unusual looking fruits, nuts, dried tree bark and other products” that he could not identify. He suddenly realised that he was looking at something that fitted naturally with the societal and environmental circumstances of the local people but which had enormous potential

elsewhere. These food products were coming from indigenous trees that required relatively low maintenance, were providing nutritious food to rural communities while simultaneously providing a vital ecological service. And yet, these 'Cinderella' trees were being ignored in discussions about food poverty in tropical countries, to the indigenous populations' clear disadvantage. There and then he resolved to become their 'fairy godfather'. In doing so, he has spent the last 20 years conducting research which is now itself bearing fruits and becoming recognized both formally in scientific circles, but more importantly by tens of thousands of poor farmers in hundreds of communities, who now see realistic opportunities for a better life.

Having myself a strong interest in this field, my acquaintance with Roger's work suggests to me that his research is unravelling secrets of new products for national and international food, cosmetic and pharmaceutical markets previously only known to local inhabitants. Roger is adamant, however, that the benefits from these developments must remain with the local people. Consequently, the approach being developed is one of participation by rural communities so that they can improve their lives in many different ways.

He points out the extraordinary fact that over 20,000 plants have edible parts and yet we have domesticated a little over 100 food plants from them. By turning this around he foresees better ways of producing food in areas of tropical forest and semi-arid savannahs; ways which are more sustainable, yet more intensive; which promote wildlife, and the tradition of culture of tropical peoples. His ideal is a highly-adaptable 3-step model for agricultural practices – practices which already have the young people of a few communities saying that they now want to continue living in their home villages, rather than trying to find employment in local towns and cities.

For Roger, an approach to farming that embraces multifunctional agriculture is the key to small rural communities feeding themselves. By utilising trees and the traditional practices indigenous to rural tropical communities, evidence is emerging that that these communities are indeed able to achieve this, and that in the process they are helping to preserve their environment – and even our global environment - for future generations.

There is little doubt that the challenge of feeding an ever-increasing population on a finite planet will be a defining part of the 21st century. This challenge will be felt most painfully in Africa, where high poverty levels and a changing climate inflict famine upon millions.

At a meeting of the UN Environment Programme Governing Council, Roger was asked by the late Professor Wangari Maathai, winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, if Africa would be able to feed itself in the future. He confidently responded, "Certainly, yes, it can." Let us all hope he is proved right.

Harry Vickers.