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Buzz Marketing the Bottle Gourd

 John Mulrow  Uncategorized  2010-06-17

In the 1990s, two anthropologists explored a surprising trend in Guinea: the forests seemed to be expanding, not shrinking, as human populations grew. The presence of forest “islands” in the midst of vast savanna had led experts and policymakers to conclude that the growth of local populations was responsible for deforestation. However, after investigating land records, interviewing tribal leaders, and doing aerial surveys, the researchers confirmed that, far from triggering deforestation, local residents were actively converting savanna land into forest, planting new trees and cultivating them for their useful products, and in turn enhancing ecosystem service provision.

In many cultures today, especially those where humans are seen primarily as apart from nature, and primarily as consumers, there is a strong belief that the natural world must be preserved, in isolation, so that people will not destroy remaining natural settings. Yet there is nothing inherently destructive about the human species. Humans can be an integrated, positive part of natural systems, helping to restore rather than undermine ecological functioning. As the example of Guinea illustrates, rather than clearing forest and destroying biodiversity, local communities were actually “filling in” the savanna with forest, thereby increasing biodiversity. Many cultures have learned to live in balance with the ecosystems on which they depend by creating the right mix of norms, customs, rituals, and other traditions.

In an ideal world of ecosystems in balance, humans would develop a broad diversity of cultures, each one adapted to the ecology in which it is placed. Today, instead of trending toward more diversity, humans are experiencing a rapid convergence to a single cultural pattern—that of consumerism—and the conservation practices previously preserved in unique languages and customs are being lost. This struggle, and the battle to reverse “the convergence toward dominant cultural models,” is captured in a recently published book titled *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook*.

The authors, Luisa Maffi and Ellen Woodley, analyze [45 different projects](#) from around the world—each one aimed at either preserving or reviving local cultural practices. Some focus on language conservation while others train youth in traditional craft-making or medicine. The authors reject the notion that indigenous people are explicit “conservationists,” arguing that the maintenance of forestland or plant diversity does not require “formalized conservation guidelines.” Instead, “conservation-like behavior may arise implicitly from...a fluid theory-like belief system that takes shape through cultural upbringing.” In other words, long-lasting cultures often practice conservation without even thinking about it.

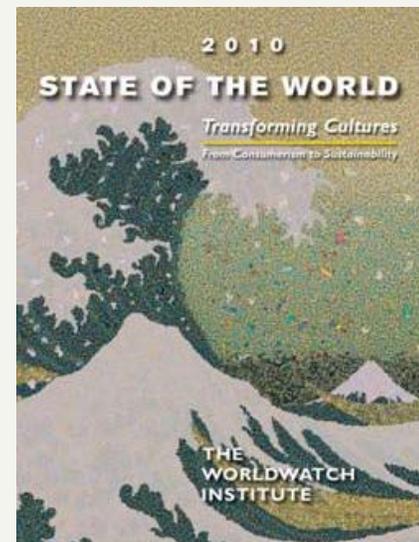
Consider the Kamba people of Kenya. For some 10,000 years, this group has literally cultivated a culture centered around the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), a large fruit in the same family as squash and pumpkins. The Kamba have over 61 documented uses for the bottle gourd, including as calabash containers, wash basins, masks, musical instruments, and food. In selecting for specific bottle gourd traits, the Kamba have naturally bred over 50 varieties of the fruit. Each variety has its own name, but the main word for bottle gourd in Kamba is *kitete*. Recently, the importance of *kitete* diversity in Kamba culture has been greatly diminished by the arrival of plastic containers that substitute for nearly every use *kitete* has traditionally fulfilled. The resulting loss of *kitete*-centric language and ritual erodes the overall Kamba culture and threatens the survival of deeply rooted conservation practices.



Bottle Gourd bowls, photo courtesy of New Agriculturist

In 2001, several organizations, including a local

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A group of teens show off their kitete (bottle gourd) jewelry and art, photo courtesy of Yasuyuki Morimoto/Bioversity International

women’s group and the National Museum of Kenya, launched an initiative called [Community-Based Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge, Awareness and Conservation of Cultural and Genetic Diversity of Bottle Gourd](#). As the title implies, they addressed kitete cultural conservation from almost every angle imaginable: documenting varieties, cultivating and exchanging seeds, recording stories and instructions for how to use kitete, and finally establishing a local bottle gourd museum. The efforts proved to be a grand experiment in cultural buzz marketing. Kitete art, songs, jewelry and cutlery came back into style and the kitete even began to show up on t-shirts! All of a sudden, kitete was “cool” again. By focusing on reinforcing the cultural norms around the kitete,

rather than hands-off conservation, the project has been a self-sustaining success in the Kamba community.

Overall, Maffi and Woodley, and the leaders of each project described in their new book, do a great job of communicating best practices of biocultural diversity conservation. Elders, language, and [ritual](#) emerge as major factors in the success of projects. These are three things that best preserve deep ecological understanding that cannot be communicated in one lifetime, or in a generalized textbook. True conservation cannot be calculated, planned, and executed—it must be lived.

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[John Mulrow](#) says:

June 22, 2010 at 9:52 pm

Just noticed that bottle gourd buzz marketing is even happening at the World Cup! Check out South Africa’s calabash-shaped football stadium:

<http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/destination/stadiums/stadium=5007759/index.html>



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