

Looking to the sun to fuel West Africa's food needs

By Tony Ends
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Pedaling along roads, streets and byways before meal time in Guinea, I smell a sweet fragrance of hardwood burning into charcoal. It wafts up from cook fires in every household I pass.

Whether on bike or in one of our UN World Food Programme land cruisers, we often have to dodge firewood in transit. Women, men and children seem everywhere engaged in carting and selling wood for fuel.

It's often atop their heads or piled upon their backs. If the wood stacks are not on their person, they're pushed and pulled in even bigger piles in carts and makeshift wagons.

One woman's image in the regional capital of Kissidougou lingers in memory for days. She'd paused, as is custom and requisite, to exchange greetings with another Kissi woman installed at a place of sale on the road in a quarter I travel daily.

Turning sideways to chat, she swung the load of wood on her head out into my path. Successive swarms of motorcycle taxis were buzzing around us. Lumbering trucks and heavily burdened vehicles of all makes and ages were weaving about like provoked cattle.

I ducked and swerved, as I frequently must do, on my Peace Corps-issued bicycle. I held my breath in hopes everyone coming at me from behind was swerving with me, too.

I can smile about it now. Yet that unsettlingly fragrant smell of centuries-old wood going up in smoke just won't leave my senses. I grieve for those trees.

Clear-cut forests pose a loss I've found troubling across half a century's awareness of the importance, the gift, the worth of trees. Exchanges I've had with woodworkers half and a third my age here in Guinea persuade me that I'm not alone in my concerns.

Anyone who has hand-planed West African walnut and mahogany into ornate beds, doorframes, cabinets and tables surely must understand hardwoods' value. Isolated now in moist evergreen forests, they once densely covered swaths of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia.

I've been seeking out furniture makers over several weeks here to get estimates on fabricating solar food drying cabinets. I want to demonstrate this means of preserving food to cooperative market gardens where the WFP also helps serve community primary schools a hot lunch program.

Total area of global tree cover our planet lost last year equals the area of a country the size of New Zealand (approximately 73.4 million acres). That is a staggering 51 percent increase over Earth's tree losses in 2015.

Compare the area of tree loss to something closer to home, now that so much of the Upper Midwest's tree cover has been bulldozed, burned and buried out of memory. Each spring across the United States, farmers plant as much as 100 million acres to field corn. Most of the corn harvest is either made into ethanol for subsidized fuel production or fed to animals in subsidized huge-scale livestock production.

In just one year, tree loss around the world equaled three-fourths of the land American farmers cleared for



TONY ENDS PHOTOS *The Independent-Register*

A Guinean primary school teacher, with two grade levels she teaches simultaneously, pauses for a picture in the same village.

cash crop planting – over our nation's 244-year history.

Global Forest Watch cited a University of Maryland study that surveyed the global tree losses in 2016. Forest fires, the study said, are a primary cause of the one-year spike. Dramatic changes in climate, many scientists believe, are igniting the wildfires. Deforestation is due, too, to agriculture, logging, and mining, which are stripping the globe of tree cover more and more, year-to-year, according to Global Forest Watch, in reporting the UM study.

Africa is suffering deforestation at twice the world rate, according to the United Nations Environment Programme. Some sources claim deforestation has already wiped out roughly 90 percent of West Africa's original forests.

I viewed some of the effects of accelerating deforestation in Central Africa, in drives across mile after mile of bare ground in the Congo during my 6 months' service there 2 years ago. According to the FAO, Africa lost the highest percentage of tropical forests of any continent during the 1980s. Some put the forest loss in the Congo at more than 40 percent. It did not appear from my travels and work to be coming back.

During about the same time since America broke with its colonial past, Africa has been coping with the same troubling impact of colonial ancestry we often share. Forests along the Senegal River, for instance, disappeared to make way for French cotton and peanut plantations.

On a 2015 Farmer to Farmer assignment with my wife Dela, I taught solar food drying in northern Senegal's blazing hot Mattam region. We worked hard to support cooperative gardens and farmers struggling with the scorching impact of 50 years of declining moisture in the now virtually treeless area.

Teaching Senegalese and Guineans

to channel the sun's heat into solar food driers will extend the shelf life of fruits and vegetables from days to as much as a year. It will also curb some percentage of wood presently being harvested from disappearing tree cover used in cook fires that feed two-thirds to three-fourths of West and Central Africa's people.

In some areas of West Africa, 90 percent of the population depends on wood-fired heating and cooking, the FAO reports.

UN WFP staff readily embraced my proposal as a Peace Corps Response volunteer here in Guinea to bring solar food drying into market gardens. Staff with a non-profit partner and the seven market gardens are trying to increase local crop contributions to school feeding.

Parents and relatives of the children in these schools just as enthusiastically greeted my efforts to engage groups of primary students being fed in market vegetable production training and food conserving. Seven groups of 10 students and a teacher each are being organized to join adults in all that I hope to teach on raising vegetables organically and saving them from spoilage by solar dehydrating.

In classrooms, schoolyards and gardens, lie shared hope for Guinea, for the world, in a brighter and more sustainable future that includes trees.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS *The Independent-Register*

Taking what's hers

Haley Knauff is among the leading scorers for the Rock County Fury, a girls co-op hockey team that has been on a tear, tallying a record of 13-2-2.



Haley Knauff of Albany wins a faceoff.



A pair of women pause from a morning's labor preparing lunch for more than 100 primary school children in a village half-an-hour's drive from the UN World Food Programme compound at Kissidougou's airport in eastern Guinea.