

Janet Matota

Rural revolutionary

By Linda Baker

Loud applause ends Janet Matota’s presentation on the role of women in conservation in Caprivi. About fifty people have braved a chilly Windhoek evening to listen to the challenges facing rural women in this region, from elephants destroying precious maize fields to the impact of living with HIV and Aids in the community. Addressing a session of the regular Park Talk Forum hosted by the Strengthening the Protected Areas Network, Janet has captivated the audience for forty minutes, without the use of the customary PowerPoint presentation.

From homemaker to leader in conservation

A rural homemaker sixteen years ago, she has become a role model for thousands of women in north-eastern Namibia. She has championed the cause of natural resource management by sharing the story of Caprivi women at international forums, and is working with colleagues to improve the living standard and choices for women and their children. As co-head of the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) office in Katima Mulilo, Janet coordinates women’s resource management, office administration and institutional support. She controls the organisation’s considerable budget, ensuring that auditors and donors are satisfied.

Her story starts back in 1994, when she heard through the local *induna* (headman) that a non-governmental organisation was seeking to hire a woman as a Community Resource Monitor.

IRDNC was introducing Community-based Natural Resource Management activities in Caprivi Region, where years of war, colonialism and other factors had alienated people from natural resources and led to a drastic reduction in wildlife numbers. While it was mainly men who attended meetings to discuss the use and ownership of natural resources, it was noted that women were the main users of these resources, particularly veld products, and needed to be involved in discussions and management.

Twelve women applied for the post, but Janet’s application proved successful. In the early days, she worked with women in villages, compiling lists of natural resources that were used in everyday life for food, crafts, medicine, building and other purposes. She then looked at the availability of these resources, how far women had to travel to collect them and which part of a tree or plant was harvested, such as the bark, root or leaves. She also obtained her driver’s licence – an event that attracted much attention, as few women in the

region had achieved this at the time. “Nearby villagers would come to watch and clap as I practised,” she laughs.

Establishing Mashi Crafts

Working with conservationists and various organisations, Janet Matota began to educate women in using resources sustainably. Due to her success, more resource monitors were employed. Notable progress was made in the correct harvesting of palm leaves and dyes for basketry. Where previously, women had struggled to earn an income through brewing traditional beer to put food on the table, the establishment of Mashi Crafts enabled them to sell baskets and other crafts for profit while using natural resources sustainably.

“At present, 267 women supply crafts to the market along with 36 men. Up to 2000 people currently benefit from Mashi Crafts, with producers using income to buy cattle, care for orphans, pay school and clinic fees and feed their families,” she proudly reports. Mashi Crafts is one of Namibia’s most successful community enterprises, with many of the A-grade products sold at the Namibia Crafts Centre in Windhoek. Janet has always encouraged women to take an active role in conservancy structures. With the establishment of communal area conservancies in Caprivi Region and growing interest in Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), more and more resource managers have been employed in conservancies.

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Women to the fore

It is this involvement of women in conservancies in the north-east that Janet Matota feels is her major achievement. Twenty years ago, men dominated meetings and decision-making. Today women are well-represented in communal conservancies in the area, with the endorsement of the traditional *khutas* (courts) and chiefs. In the eleven established and six emerging conservancies in Caprivi Region, nearly all conservancy treasurers are now women. Women constitute thirty-seven percent of committees, while two conservancy managers and three conservancy game guards are women.



Tony Figueira

In addition, resource monitors have taken on a broader role in their communities, disseminating information on HIV and Aids, working with support groups through village structures and helping people to access treatment. "We found that women had less time to be involved because of HIV and Aids. There was less time to make crafts. They were caring for the sick and the orphans or attending burials, so production was down." Figures released at the time (2006) showed that forty-three percent of pregnant women tested in Caprivi Region were HIV positive. "People did not have information about anti-retroviral drugs, and they were shy to get tested or to disclose their status once tested," says Janet.

Promoting Aids awareness

Working in partnership with the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations, Janet helped to set up an HIV and Aids organising committee to sensitise fellow staff. They then worked at conservancy level and through village structures to disseminate information in siLozi and other local languages - linking

with other organisations and using video presentations, promotions as well as quizzes with prizes.

"Twenty members of support groups in conservancies have now disclosed their HIV-positive status. We are gradually fighting the stigma attached to HIV and Aids and this is winning the battle. The latest surveys reveal that infection rates have dropped to under thirty-two percent among pregnant women tested in 2008 in our region."

Awarded for her work

Janet Matota has also been instrumental in organising Caprivi's first women's conference held in 2005, and, with the help of other IRDNC staff, she has trained more than 200 women in public speaking. The confidence built in women is tangible, so that women in neighbouring Zambian institutions have requested her to assist them with similar skills training. But, says Janet, there are still many

challenges ahead. The many elephants migrating through the area, particularly along the Kwando River, often destroy fields of crops as they travel. This creates food insecurity and increased poverty. New markets for crafts are needed, as well as more assistance in helping people to access treatment for HIV and Aids as well as general healthcare.

Yet, looking back, it is clear that a rural revolution has taken place in the sixteen years that Janet Matota has worked for IRDNC. Women have become partners in natural resource management and have increasingly found their voices. Small wonder she was the first joint recipient of the Namibia Nature Foundation's Conservationist of the Year Award in 2000! Asked what has brought about such a remarkable change in the region, Janet responds: "Women now have role models. They look at us and say - if they can do it, why can't we?" ♀