

Living in the desert, Surviving off the land...



photo: Mari Dahl Adolfsson

Sarah Bock (pictured above) won the Namibia Nature Foundation Environmental Award for 2001. She was recognised for her role in organising rural communities in the arid south to improve natural resource management and farming practices. Mari Dahl Adolfsson and the interpreter Appolonia Naris met her ...

There is something special about Sarah Bock. I repeatedly ask her how she came to do the work that she does. But Sarah does not really want to talk about herself. She wants to talk about her projects. And of course, the projects are part of her, so it is understandable.

Sarah achieves the remarkable: she manages to create project after project with the objective of enabling women in the arid south to be able to live off the land. She does this with almost no donor money.

"I started because I saw that there was a strong need for the people on the farm. There was – and still is – no work in the area. I walked around the farm and saw a lot of possibilities. It made me realise that if you listen to the land and take care of it, you will be able to survive off it," she tells us.

As a young bride, Sarah joined her husband on the farm Nikonoord, close to Gibeon, in the early 80s. At the time, there was only a small house and a windmill on the farm. They were poor and had a hard time making ends meet.

"When we got married we had fifteen sheep and seven goats. I took care of the animals, but I soon realised that if we were going to get more out of life I had to earn some money. The other families were in the same situation."

From small beginnings

Sarah began by starting a vegetable garden and selling some of the vegetables. With her earnings, she bought a few chickens and began selling the eggs as well. "I earned so much that I could open an account at the bank!" she laughs. "Then I thought that maybe all the women could do something together to make more money. I initiated a

street market and then we arranged a dance where the women could sell things."

The additional income led to the idea of starting Nikonoord Campsite. "Money comes from the tourists who stay overnight, and the women also make cakes and other delicious things to sell."

Doing it for yourself

There are now six women working together on the farm and putting money in a bank account. They all want to start their own business, and when they get a good idea, they can borrow start-up funds from their own bank account. When their business starts to bring in an income, they can pay the loan back to the group and another woman can borrow money to start her business.

Sarah explains the reasoning behind this way of operating: "It means that the money comes from within the projects. The only donor money we ever got was N\$ 3 000 to buy chickens. I think that if you want a project to be sustainable, you have to do things by yourself. If you get money to do things, your project will fall flat."

She hands over some papers so I can read more about the projects. I read about rabbit farming, a fruit orchard, homestead gardening, small stock auctions, mudbrick housing, and grazing control projects. In other projects, the women repair fences and roads and clear the dams of invading bushes.

Sarah thinks that there is so much richness in nature. She tells us that there are a lot of plants on the farm that can be used for medication. The farm is close to the Fish River Canyon and nobody has thought about how to utilise the fish in the river – or the turtles in the field.

Sarah's prize money from the Namibia Nature Foundation was N\$10 000. She has put the money in a trust fund, so it can be used for ongoing projects. And for the projects to come.

"Life is much better on the farm now. We feel confident that we really can survive from nature. We live in a desert, but nature holds so much richness that we can make use of – if we really want to." ♀