

## OTUN COMMUNITY HERBAL HERITAGE CENTRE: THE STORY SO FAR

### Background:

The Community Herbal Heritage Programme was conceived as an indigenous strategy towards the implementation of the **International Convention on Biological Diversity** which was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. The Convention on Biological Diversity is contained in **Chapter 15** of the main document from the UNCED popularly known as **Agenda 21**. The Convention is an international legally binding treaty which has three main goals, namely:

- (a) Conservation of biological diversity;
- (b) Sustainable use of its components; and
- (c) Fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources.

2. One of the key recommendations under paragraph 5 of Chapter 15 of the Agenda 21 was that: ***Governments at the appropriate levels, consistent with national policies and practices, with the cooperation of the relevant United Nations bodies and, as appropriate, intergovernmental organizations and with the support of indigenous people and their communities, non-governmental organizations and other groups, including the business and scientific communities, and consistent with the requirements of international law,*** should, as appropriate:

- ❖ Develop new or strengthen existing strategies, plans or programmes of action for the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of biological resources, taking account of education and training needs (15.5a); and
- ❖ Subject to national legislation, **take action to respect, record, protect and promote the wider application of the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles for the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of biological resources**, with a view to the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising, and **promote mechanisms to involve those communities**, including women and youths, in the conservation and management of ecosystems (15.5e);

3. In pursuance of the global objective, the **Community Herbal Heritage Programme** was conceptualized under the auspices of the defunct Natural Resources Conservation Council (NARESCON) in 1992. **The programme was initiated through the establishment of a Community Herbal Heritage Centre at Otun–Ekiti as far back as July 1993** when the project site was formally located in Otun by the joint team of experts from NARESCON and the Community Leaders. This represents one of the unique efforts of the Council to encourage community participation in the conservation of our natural resources, including plant genetic

resources. The centre was meant to provide the community with an aggregation of indigenous culturally adapted plant species which are to be carefully managed for the continuous provision of medicinal raw materials and local horticultural crops which were to be protected for the enjoyment of present and future generations. This is a conscious effort towards the conservation of the floral endowment in a given community by the community members themselves.

4. The initial concept was experimented in collaboration with a local community Club known as **“The Great League of Pioneers, Otun-Ekiti** which mounted an exhibition on **“Our Herbal Heritage”** during the 5<sup>th</sup> Community Day celebration on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1992. The exhibition in 1992 created the initial awareness in the community and paved way for the symposium and exhibition organized by a sister local community organization (known as the **Otun Community Development Associates - OCDA**) during the 6<sup>th</sup> Community Day celebration in October 1993, with some financial and technical support from NARESCON. A team of NARESCON staff visited Otun in July 1993, to select a suitable 10-hectare land for the pilot project. The land was demarcated and *Gmelina arborea* stumps were planted along the boundaries as live fencing. Also, during this visit, Conservation Clubs were inaugurated in two Secondary Schools within the Community, Moba Grammar School and the Community Secondary School, Otun Ekiti..

5. The symposium in October 1993 made use of resource persons from the community and was conducted in the local language with the main theme as: **“Benefits of Our Plant Resources’** and the following sub-themes:

- (a) Economic benefits of our plant resources;
- (b) Cultural importance of our plant resources;
- (c) Medicinal uses of our plant resources;
- (d) Other benefits derivable from our plant resources;
- (e) Factors capable of destroying our plant resources;
- (f) Some of our endangered plant resources;
- (g) How to conserve our plant resources; and
- (h) Why we need a Community Herbal Heritage Centre in Otun.

6. Announcement posters and flyers (in English and Yoruba languages) were produced and distributed extensively as a means of publicity while souvenirs of handkerchief, key holders, stickers, etc, were also distributed to all participants and the general public. The memories of the symposium linger on in the community till date.

7. One of the conclusions of the symposium was to set up a local Management Committee whose membership was drawn from the various interest groups in the community. The list of the Management Committee members was later sent to the NARESCON.

8. Following the merger of NARESCON with the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) early 1994, activities on the project were slowed down for logistic reasons. However, the following activities were undertaken in 1994:

- (a) Consolidation of Environmental Conservation Club activities in the nearby Schools; and
- (b) Community meetings on the Herbal Heritage Project.

9. In 1995, the followings were achieved:

- (a) Re-constitution of the 12-member Community Management Committee; and
- (b) A preliminary survey of the 10-hectare land.

10. In 1996, Pa Awotola Osunwonroogunse, one of the Herbalists assisting in the project attended a national workshop on medicinal plants organized by the Abuja Horticultural Society and held at the Abuja Sheraton Hotel.

12. In August 1998, a combined team of experts from FEPA, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and the National Institute for Pharmaceutical Research & Development (NIPRD) undertook a 5-day ecological and social survey on the project at Otun. The cost of data collection and report production was met by FEPA.

13. The creation of the Federal Ministry of Environment in June 1999 and its expansion to include other Agencies/Departments and units from other Ministries finally led to the merger of the Conservation Department in FEPA with the Federal Department of Forestry. This reorganization had further affected the progressive development of the project.

14. In March 2003, the Ekiti State Ministry of Environment proposed that the project be included in the World Bank-supported GEF Grant. In April 2003, the Federal Ministry of Environment was informed that the Ekiti State Commissioner for Environment and Health paid a visit to Otun and held useful discussions on the project with the **Oore of Otun, His Royal Majesty, Oba James Oladele Adedapo Popoola**, and some community leaders. Incidentally, the King was the President of the Great League of Pioneers when the Club mounted the exhibition on the Herbal Heritage Centre in 1992, before he was enthroned in year 2000.

15. Finally, the National Council on Environment at its meeting in Ilorin, Kwara State on 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> December 2003 received a memorandum on the Community Herbal Heritage Programme. In its communiqué, the meeting stated thus: ***“Recognizing the role of medicinal plants in the Nation’s Primary Health Care Delivery System, and the need to conserve our herbal heritage, Council commended the Otun - Ekiti Community, in Ekiti State, on the establishment of the Community Herbal Heritage Centre and urged other States to adopt and promote this initiative”.***

16. Following the experience of the Otun Ekiti pilot project **(which is first of its kind in Africa)**, the Ministry has established additional Community Herbal Heritage Centres in 14 other States of the Federation, namely: Akwa Ibom, Borno, Cross River, Gombe, Niger, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Kogi, Imo, Ogun, Ondo, Taraba and Zamfara. However, unlike the Otun Ekiti Project, the Herbal Heritage Centres in these States were established through contract awards following the prevailing Government policy. This policy has created some gaps. Thus while the

Otun project had been carefully guarded from intrusion by community members, we cannot be sure of such protection of other centres in the various States.

17. It is worthy of note that the United Nations declared year 2010 the **International Year of Biodiversity** while the theme of the World Environment Day for 2010 was: **'Many Species. One Planet. One Future'**. It was an opportunity to stress the importance of biodiversity for human well-being, reflect on our achievements to safeguard it and encourage a redoubling of our efforts to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss.

18. In 2015, Miss Korede OgoOluwa Omole, an undergraduate student from the Department of Forest Resources Management, University of Ibadan, undertook an assessment of flora diversity at the Community Herbal Heritage Centre as her final year project. The student was at the Centre for over a week with her four other colleagues working through the thick vegetation with a lot of excitement. Recent site inspection confirmed that town development has reached the brink of the project site as houses are already springing up on all sides,

19. Also in December 2015, it was reported that **Ms Deni Bown**, Head of Forestry Unit at the **International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA)** Ibadan visited the project and also interacted with members of the Conservation Club in Moba Grammar School and donated some books to their Library while acclaiming that the Community Herbal Heritage Centre was a significant example of community participation in biodiversity conservation.

20. In May 2017, the Chief Executive of ENARMAC Nigeria Limited led the team of experts from Federal Ministry of Environment to undertake some project activities which included:

- (a) Interactive session with Conservation Club at the Community School (Moba Grammar School, Otun Ekiti);
- (b) Interactive discussion with Community leaders on the project objective and expected role of the Community;
- (c) Botanical rambling with Community members to identify medicinal plants that are in the Herbal Heritage Centre;
- (d) Natural resources assessment to facilitate the development of management plan for the project; and
- (e) Perimeter fencing of the project site with barbwire.

21. The interactive session with community members at the project site on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2017 was held with a lot of fun and pageantry as it was blessed with the presence of **His Royal Majesty, Oba James Oladele Popoola, the Oore of Moba land** and the entire members

of his Council of Chiefs. Also present at the event were the President of Egbe Omo Otun, Chief Abilomu, the President and members of the Great League of Pioneers, many other community members, primary school pupils, members of Conservation Club in Moba Grammar School and their and Teachers.

The perimeter fencing of the project site was completed within two weeks after that historic event and this is expected to help protect the conservation area from encroachment as town development activities have reached its surroundings.

21. In realization of funding constraints from Government, ENARMAC Nigeria Limited has, in 2017 undertaken feasibility studies on some project activities for further development of the Herbal Heritage Centre with a view to making the project centre self-sustaining in the long run. The project activities include:

- (a) Establishment of a bottle water factory;
- (b) Fisheries production;
- (c) Establishment of a plant nursery; and
- (d) Infrastructural development (including the erection of project office, access roads, and internal footpaths/nature trails).

22. From the feasibility studies, it has been observed that the project centre has the potential of providing job opportunities for over seventy people while also contributing to socio-economic development of the Community. In addition, the project is fast gaining national and international attention as many researchers have started coming to visit the site for one research or the other. The next challenge now is how to mobilize fund for the implementation of the identified project activities. It is our hope that the project site can become a valuable research centre in future.

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**The King with the Technical Team from FMENV**



**Community Elders during the botanical rambling**



**The King with the Students**



**Housing units springing up around the Project (extreme right)**



**A perennial spring requiring attention**



**The Team of Experts on Resource Inventory**



A freshly cut access path through the forest Some of the standing trees on the right