A SUSTAINABLE CRAFTS INDUSTRY

BY KARIN LE ROUX

1. A zebra carving from the Okavango Region.
2. Himba women from the Kunene Region produce jewellery from wild seeds, such as these carved makalani nuts.
3. Pottery.
4. Throughout Namibia crafts are offered for sale at roadside stalls such as this one near Okahandja. The growing tourism industry has led to the greater production and marketing of crafts.
5. Beadwork of the San people.
6. Embroidered textiles from the Gibeon in the South.
7. Wooden utensil from the Kunene.
8. Basketry from the Okavango.
THE booming tourist industry in Namibia has contributed to a greater production and marketing of crafts than ever before. Local baskets, wood carvings, dolls and jewellery are on sale in the larger centres and can even be found along the busy, though remoter tourist routes in some regions.

Namibia’s handicraft sector consists of contemporary craft produced mostly in the urban areas and the more traditional crafts produced in the rural areas. The contemporary crafts include quality leather and fur garments and an equally sophisticated jewellery industry, using precious and semi-precious stones found in Namibia. There is also a long-established industry of fine carpets and tapestries using wool from the karakul farming industry. More recently, embroidered textiles brought considerable fame to Namibia. Contemporary craft has had little impact on the environment as many of the materials are processed from the agricultural sector. The skills base is often limited to a small number of highly trained people.

Like most craftspeople from developing countries, rural Namibians almost exclusively use their environment in the production of tools, containers, baskets, pottery, body and home adornments and musical instruments. Most lack the money to purchase other materials and therefore will continue looking to their immediate environment for their crafts materials in the future.

Namibia’s environmentally friendly constitution supports exploitation of the country’s natural resources, but stipulates that this should be done on a sustainable basis. Little data exists on the present use of natural resources in the crafts industry. There is no reliable information on the impact of the crafts industry on the environment. There is also limited planning of interventions at local and national level.

As a first step towards addressing this problem, a baseline study into the crafts of Namibia was undertaken in 1994. The study concentrated on the natural resource-based crafts industry within the communal areas and was requested by the Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE) programme, coordinated by the Rössing Foundation. The report briefly describes Namibian crafts derived from natural resources. It also assesses the potential for the crafts industry to generate income, while evaluating resources and their status.

CRAFTS USING NATURAL RESOURCES:
BASKETRY
A variety of baskets are used by agro-pastoral cultures for storing and winnowing pearl millet. Basketry is common in the Caprivi, Okavango, Oshana, Omusati, Oshikoto and Ohangwena Regions of northern Namibia. The semi-nomadic pastoral people in the Kunene Region use them for storage of milk and the preparation of butter fat. Baskets are also increasingly popular with tourists. However, the over-exploitation of basket weaving and dyeing materials elsewhere in Africa has led Namibian environmentalists to question the sustainability of present resources. Leaves of the makalani palm tree (Hyphaene pettersiana) are used for basket making.

The palm situation in Namibia varies in different locations. Researchers attribute the decrease in some areas to increased browsing of young palms by animals, the felling of mature trees for fencing materials or the cutting of palm hearts. Acknowledging that the makalani palm is fairly resilient and able to withstand heavy leaf cutting, researchers nevertheless caution that any promotion of basket making in Namibia must be accompanied by long term monitoring of the basket making industry.

The increased awareness of environmental issues has resulted in some non-governmental and community-based organisations as well as government fieldworkers making proactive plans to trial the cultivation of the makalani palm.

Several plant sources are used for dyeing palm leaves. The bird plum tree (Berchemia discolor) is the most important dye and is used in most of the basket making regions. Its bark is boiled with palm leaves to produce a brown colour. Researchers caution that the bird plum in the long term is particularly vulnerable to over-exploitation due to the commercialisation of basketry. They suggest that alternative dye sources be used before the situation reaches crisis levels.

WOOD CARVING
Carvers of the Okavango Region are the most prolific producers of wooden tourist art. Between 300 and 1 000 carvers are estimated to work there. Roadside markets and curio and craft shops throughout Namibia sell these wares, made from the favoured teakwood (Pterocarpus angolensis). Opinions differ as to the impact of the wood carving industry on this resource with some arguing that damage from landclearing for agriculture and firewood collection have a far greater impact.

Wooden bowls and decorative head rests made from the Commiphora species have become increasingly popular in the more arid Kunene Region but craft makers complain that the resource is difficult to obtain. In Caprivi wood is generally available although there is mention that foreigners are exploiting the resource.

The main problem with the use of wood in the craft industry is the confusing legislation which presently governs its use, management, and replenishment. Ministry of Environment and Tourism officials and producers differ on how trees can be accessed. Government is
presently revising current legislation. In the meantime the resource can be used more efficiently and alternative plant and animal resources investigated.

**POTTERY, LEATHERWORK, BEADWORK AND OTHER CRAFTS**

Pottery is produced in Caprivi, Okavango, Omusati, Ohangwena, Oshana and Oshikoto Regions, where it is made for domestic use but the demand by tourists is on the increase. Clay is apparently adequate although women often have to travel long distances to gather it.

Skin and leather products include traditional items such as beaded gathering-bags and aprons, karosses, mats, belts, shoes and knife sheaths. Women in the Kunene Region are now also making Himba dolls for the tourist market. Other craft products from natural resources include jewellery from a variety of wild seeds, ostrich shells and carved nuts from the makalani palm.

Many crafts makers gain access to their leather and skin from local stock or wild animals. Some complain that they cannot produce their traditional products because they cannot get game-skins. The declaration of conservancies might alleviate this problem by allowing controlled hunting in the conservancy areas.

**COORDINATED APPROACH IN THE FUTURE**

The marketing and promotion of Namibia’s craft industry are important components of the tourist industry because they enable tourists to experience something of the uniqueness of Namibia’s cultural life, while generating income for crafts makers. If the industry is to expand, the production and marketing of crafts needs to be carefully planned and monitored. Government needs to update and improve the dissemination of information on regulations and legislation on wildlife and plant utilisation. Non-governmental organisations, crafts groups and crafts makers should familiarise themselves with environmental issues, resource management and cultivation programmes to ensure that resources are used sustainably.

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