

A detailed report on progress



Thanks to your recycling efforts, Alupro has now planted more than 250,000 trees since 2004. This represents a 57% increase in recycling, from just under 36,000 tonnes a year in 2004 to nearly 55,000 tonnes in the year to end-June 2009.

It's always great to grow trees, but we have made it an integral part of our support for tree-growing projects, both in the UK and Africa, to see for ourselves how the money is being spent. We want to understand the problems and the successes, and to assess objectively the impact we are making on your behalf.

Because this scheme really is your scheme. It's your commitment to recycling aluminium drinks cans and foil which determines how many trees we can grow: and the promise is that we grow at least one tree for every tonne recycled.



Why fruit trees ?

Value: they're unlikely to be felled for firewood, so should survive to make their full lifetime contribution to carbon sequestration and climate change

Nutrition: fruit provides high quality food in an area of subsistence farming

Trade: a proportion of the fruit trees will be grown in community orchards, to provide crops for trade and for storage and drying.

This approach tackles the three cornerstones of sustainability: economic, social and environmental improvement.

Alupro is now in its third year of growing fruit trees from Ripple Africa's base on the shores of Lake Malawi, and Alupro's Cherry Hamson has visited the project twice.

On my first visit in 2007, I had seen the new greenhouse and home nursery, visited several tree nurseries out in the field, and helped plan the logistics of introducing improved fruit species to the region, taking into account the difficulties of keeping budstock fresh over long import distances, the isolation of most of the rural villages, and training people in the grafting and budding techniques which enable the new 'juicy fruit' trees to be propagated.

The lemon rootstock for the improved species was already growing well, as were other local fruit trees such as guava and paw paw. Most importantly, I met a large number of the people involved with the project - those employed at the home nursery and in field training, led by environment manager Force Ngwira, as well as many of the people in the garden club nurseries who were learning the skills and patience needed to grow trees successfully.

It was a fascinating time, and Ripple volunteers from Australia, South Africa, Switzerland and the UK, who were mainly working on health and education projects in the area, ensured that lamplit dinners at Mwaya were noisy and fun. So, all very promising ...



Second visit in 2008

We decided to take some guests on the second trip a year later in November 2008: two local authority representatives and two teachers.

James Dunlop of Camden Council and Sue Daynes of North Lincolnshire Council were chosen because of the enormous amount of help they had provided in running local Recycle for Africa campaigns in their areas. And Aimee Barton of Bootle Primary School in Liverpool, and Dawn Morgan of Daniel James Comprehensive in Swansea, were invited because of the excellent videos their schools had made about helping the environment in the UK. We wanted to increase understanding in the UK of the work which was going on, and also planned to show the two videos to children at schools in Malawi.



Some of the challenges we are tackling ...

Deforestation is a major problem in the area, largely underestimated by local people because they have always chopped down trees to build fires for cooking, and to fire kilns of hand-made clay bricks for building. Just as they have always burnt undergrowth and dry crop material, and always simply moved on to new land when crops start to fail because soil structure and quality has deteriorated through over-use.

What's made matters worse in recent years is the pressure of an expanding population, with fewer adults to do the work because of HIV/Aids, and masses of children. Around 90% of people in rural Malawi are subsistence food growers, living on cassava porridge and a few vegetables, with virtually no jobs or employment, and very little money.



The landscape

When you arrive in Lilongwe and drive north, you pass through a landscape of scrub and small-scale crop growing which our driver Amos confirmed had been primary forest within the last 20 years. Our project region - an area the size of Kent around Nkhata Bay - still has large areas of dense woodland, but it is decreasing at a rapid rate, and the prevalence of bush fires while we were out there was alarming.

But our partners Ripple Africa believe that the battle must be won, and are working hard to halt the deforestation. We saw some of the 135 community tree nurseries which have been established to replenish stocks of trees for firewood (a nursery 'garden' infrastructure which has enabled our fruit tree seedlings to be readily added to around 100 of them), one of the 15 women's groups making clay cooking stoves which reduce a family's need for firewood by two-thirds, and two new initiatives to help kickstart the modest economic activity which will demonstrate that new land management practices bring rewards: an innovative vegetable garden, which uses composted material to improve crop quality, and employs companion planting to tackle some of the more prevalent pests and diseases; and the early stages of a fish farming project.



Fruit tree progress

Morale was high in the community nurseries, with most of the first year's local trees already sold or given away in the locality and the second year seedlings now in their place in the nurseries. There were some problems with the grafting programme, with failure rate higher than we had anticipated, but we were able to see thriving plants being grown on in the nurseries, as well as a good number of recently planted community orchards.

The grafting process delays growth in the first year, and a three year pay-back period is a long time to wait for reward when you're only used to quick-growing crops such as cassava and maize. When I first went out last November, I saw the first growth of lemon rootstock - an impressive 50cm in just three months from sowing. This year I saw the first orchard plantings of budded oranges and tangerines - still 50cm having been checked twice over the year, first during the budding process and then again, once successfully budded, when planted out.

This is fantastic progress, and when the rains started soon after our return, a period of rapid growth began. But it will be two years before the emerging fruits are cropped, so we are investigating ways of helping which do not break the principles of 'no hand-outs'.



Schools visits

UK schools' videos about helping the environment were received attentively, and the reduce, reuse, recycle message was well understood in large, mixed age Malawian classes.

Some problem solving

A departure from the original plan has been to establish 'mother' nurseries across the district for improved orange and tangerine trees - so that budding material can be used fresh from the mother tree - as well as improved mangoes, which provide grafting material from living trees. This is likely to prove far more successful and long term than doing all the grafting and budding at Ripple's base in Mwaya as we originally planned.

This change of plan was in response to the unacceptably high rates of failure in the early imports from southern Malawi of improved plant material. So four extra staff, led by grafting expert Fumbani, were employed to spend more time with the groups, offering plenty of follow-up support. The first 10 'mother' nurseries have already been established, with another 10 planned over the next few months, and it is expected that the trees will be big enough to use from 2011.

Mwaya will now become the trial nursery for studying best varieties, as well as ways of tackling pests and diseases. A small banana plantation has also recently been established there to grow sucker plants which can produce early crops for the garden groups.



So, lots of good decision-making by Geoff Furber and his environmental projects manager Force Ngwira - and great credit to the new manager at Mwaya, Catherine. It is worth noting that Ripple has a firm policy of only employing Malawian staff, though it also has a thriving volunteer programme.

So how many fruit trees have been grown ? Our commitment for the first year (July 2007 to end June 2008) was 46,707 trees - that is 46,707 tonnes of aluminium cans and foil recycled during the year, according to Government figures. And for the second year 54,656 trees (the number of tonnes recycled in the year ended June 2009). Clearly estimates have to be made about how many seedlings to grow to allow for failure rates - particularly during grafting and planting out. Seeds do not always germinate; people do not always do what they say they will.

So Ripple have done an excellent job in organising the planning (and stretching the funding) to grow more than 150,000 seedlings over the two-year period, with around 15 - 20% surviving grafted or budded trees, and perhaps 25% rootstock being brought on.

Plans for this year

The plan now is to keep consolidating the achievements, building the confidence and skills of all the people involved, finding solutions to the challenges which arise, and getting closer to the cropping years.

What we ask you to do is to keep recycling your aluminium cans and foil - and to do what you can to make sure everyone you know is doing the same ! Our visit proved that this is a really exciting project - and the more everyone recycles, the more success we can have.

