

ABN

The African Biodiversity Network is a regional network of individuals and organisations seeking African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent.

# NEWS

JULY - SEPTEMBER 2017

## Matters of Principle

Guiding our way through challenging times

### ALSO

#### REGIONAL CENTRES:

The way forward for ABN?

#### MYSTICAS:

A new start to the day


#### SAYING NO TO PLASTIC

Can EJ find answers to the challenges of our plastic addiction?

#### ECOLOJAH:

a school with an eco-heart





"The Peasant Food Web  
nurtures 9-100 times  
the biodiversity used  
by the Industrial Food  
Chain, across plants,  
livestock, fish and forests.

Peasants have the knowledge, innovative energy and  
networks needed to respond to climate change: they  
have the operational scope and scale: and they are  
closest to the hungry and malnourished."

- ETC Group's new publication '*Who will feed us?*'



# ABN NEWS CONTENTS



16

## QUARTERLY EDITION

### Snippets

Note from ABN Secretariat

New website from Gaia

Agrifood Atlas

Resolution 372 at ACHPR

Questioning our principles

Report back on the 2017 Biennial

Partners Meeting

Reflections from partners

04

06

08



Regional Nodes: 11  
is the time right?

Mystica practice 12

Saying no to plastic 14

ECOLOJAH: CEVASTE's 17  
eco-school in Benin



14

Funded by:



**Brot**  
für die Welt



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# Note from the ABN Secretariat



**W**ith July's Biennial Partner meeting in Nanyuki, Kenya successfully wrapped up until we meet again in 2019, this issue of the ABN Newsletter highlights the processes that participants followed to analyse and reflect upon the actions of the network over the last two years. The principles that were crafted back at the Biennial Partner meeting in 2015 have been a valuable tool for assessing the progress of the network, but as you will see, they also worked on a personal level for participants (see page 8). After all, the success of the network not only relies on engagement with it at an organisational level but lies at the feet of each individual that makes up the African Biodiversity Network (ABN). It is critical to understand the importance of the methodologies that the ABN encourages its partners to integrate into their daily operations and these principles guide that journey.

This year, the practice of Mystica heralded the start of each day of meetings. On page 12, you'll find the benefits of this practice as reflected upon by someone who was there.

The subject of regional nodes for the ABN continues to be considered a priority and was discussed in depth at the meeting. With the network growing, partners are somewhat conveniently clustered into West, East and South, which could lead to decentralisation of elements of the ABN work. Explore this on page 11.

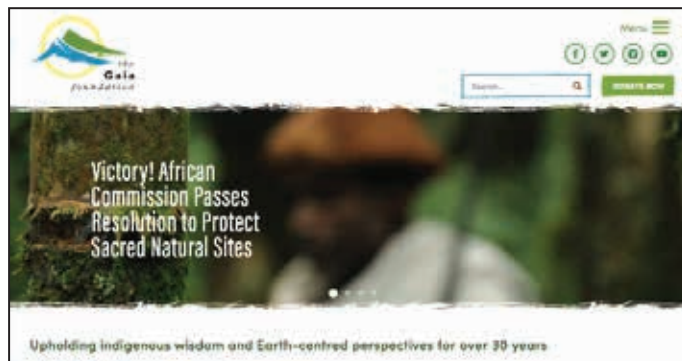
On page 14, we share good news from Kenya, where a ban on non-biodegradable plastic bags was put into place at the end of August. We explore the potential of Nature and traditional knowledge in providing some solutions to the ban. We'll be watching closely to see how this new ban fares as previous attempts have sadly failed. We remain hopeful that the impact will be wide reaching, and of course, we support such initiatives wherever we are in Africa.. And be sure not to miss Mere Jah's news from ECOLOJAH, CEVASTE's school in Benin, see page 16.

Warm wishes on behalf of the ABN Team,  
Simon Mitambo, CEO,  
African Biodiversity Network

## Snippets

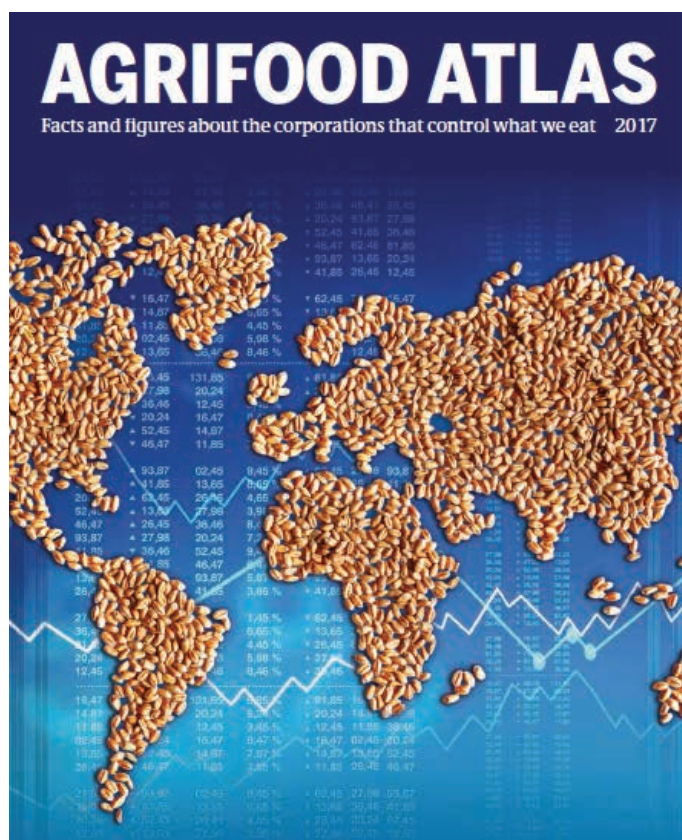
### LAUNCH OF NEW WEBSITE

ABN's international partner, The Gaia Foundation has launched its new website. For news, updates reports and films that are relevant to ABN's work, visit [www.gaiafoundation.org](http://www.gaiafoundation.org).



### ATLAS MAPPING THE FOOD SYSTEM

The Henrich Boll Foundation, Friends of the Earth and the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation have collaborated on a new resource that should be on the reading lists of anyone interested in the state of the world's food supply: those controlling it standing in stark relief to those who produce it. Find it here: [www.boell.de/en/agrifood-atlas](http://www.boell.de/en/agrifood-atlas)



**IN THE NEXT ISSUE:** The next ABN NEWS will focus on pastoralists: specifically on challenges faced by pastoralists around the globe; case studies of East Africa Community; women and pastoralists; policies and legislation. Please get in touch if you would like to contribute.





### PUBLICATION FROM HOMEF

If you haven't seen it already, look out for Eco-Instigator, published quarterly by Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF). It's filled with articles, poetry and interesting book reviews. Well worth reading regularly to keep you updated.

### FROM RESOLUTION TO REALITY

During the 61st Ordinary Session of the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), ABN and Gaia hosted a side event to celebrate the passing of Resolution 372. The panel included Commissioner Jamesina King (Chair of the WGIP), Dr Melakou Tegegn (Advisor to the WGIP) and Dr Sulemana Abudulai (ABN and Gaia). Together, they unpacked the links between sacred natural sites (SNS) and the right of African peoples to economic, social and cultural development. With

King moderating the event, Dr Abudulai discussed the importance of Africa's SNS for biocultural diversity, planetary health and climate change, and increasing threats faced by African indigenous communities, while Dr Tegegn addressed the crucial role and importance of indigenous knowledge systems, and their relevance to social development.



### SEED & FOOD FAIRS

Gatherings of small-scale farmers, and others practising agro-ecology, to share and exchange seed, are a symbol of hope in the face of industrial agriculture. ABN partners are increasingly holding such events as a way of exchanging not just seed but knowledge too. In Harare, Zimbabwe, September's Good Food Festival brought such an event to the city for the fourth year, allowing city consumers to meet the producers of their food.

### UGANDA AT A GLANCE

**Official name:** Republic of Uganda

**Area:** 241,038 km<sup>2</sup> | 93,065 sq mi

**Capital:** Kampala

**President:** Yoweri Kaguta Museveni

**Form of state:** A federal state, comprising a national government and nine provincial governments

**Population (2016 estimate):** 41.49 million

**Currency:** Ugandan Shilling (UGX)

**Internet domain:** (.ug)

**Official languages:** English & Swahili. Also Luganda - a central language is spoken widely, and Runyoro, Runyankole, Rukiga and Luo.

**Parks:** Uganda has 60 protected areas including ten national parks.

**ABN Partners in Uganda:** National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE), Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), SEATINI and Food Rights Alliance (FRA)



### FEEDBACK

Do you have any questions you'd like to ask or comments you'd like to make? We would love to hear from you. Email us at [abnsecretariat@africanbiodiversity.org](mailto:abnsecretariat@africanbiodiversity.org) or write to us at African Biodiversity Network P.O. Box 6271-01000 Thika, Kenya. You can also interact with us on our Facebook page at African Biodiversity Network or follow us on twitter @africanbiodiv

ABN News is published by the African Biodiversity Network. We acknowledge our Partners for contributing articles and stories towards the success of ABN News as a strong advocacy mouthpiece.

# QUESTIONING OUR PRINCIPLES

*Developing a set of principles according to which an organisation runs is a fairly new approach. The 10 ABN Principles were crafted at the Biennial Partner's meeting in 2015. Two years on, they were put to the test, with each day of the 2017 Biennial meeting exploring how they have worked. Facilitator JOHN WILSON shares the process and asks how successful they have been over their two years of existence.*

I remember our session at the ABN partners' meeting in 2015 very well when we developed ABN's ten principles. I've rarely experienced a plenary session as engaging as that. Everyone was involved in some way. As is the nature of plenary sessions, some talk more than others, but all who were not talking were listening intently.

We were trying to articulate statements to capture the essence of what ABN is all about. At that stage ABN had been in existence for 13 years. During that time much had been learnt. The aim was to draw on this experience to produce a set of principles of effectiveness. What had/has ABN learnt during that time that really works for ABN?

You can imagine that there was lots of discussion around such a question. This was about going to the heart of ABN, its core.

"It starts with each of us", suggested someone, "ABN work relates to where each of us as individuals are in our thinking and doing. When we understand and keep deepening our understanding about what we are doing, we are much more effective in our work." And so began the effort to form a principle that captured this critical aspect of ABN's work. This is what emerged:

**It starts with each of us:** *Strengthening individuals to share and deepen their personal conviction, determination,*



*EarthLore's Method Gundidza holds forth around the fire.*

*understanding of, and commitment to ABN's philosophy and practice as a basis of all ABN's work.*

Though the set of principles is not ordered, this one is nevertheless purposefully first in the list.

By the end of a morning we had rough drafts for 10 principles. We slept on these. The next morning a small group revisited the drafts and made changes here and there. The whole group then re-looked at this next draft set. More changes, more sleeping on them. Finally, by the last day we had a set of principles that everyone was at least reasonably happy with.

Then came the 2017 biennial partners meeting. We decided that discussion at this meeting should centre on the set of principles. On the second day participants worked in groups to share examples of how they are putting principles one and two into practice. And what difficulties or barriers they were facing. In plenary we shared examples of stories and the barriers too. Then we discussed ideas for the way forward for each of these principles.

The next day different groups worked in a similar way but each with a different principle. The circle method of reporting back where everyone has a chance to report was then used. Throughout, discussion was intense and engaged. This is not surprising as people were discussing ABN in terms of what ABN is all about.

At the end of the meeting we held a reflection on how using principles as the basis for discussion had worked. One person suggested that it 'requires partners to reflect on their purpose of existence'. Another said that it enabled partners to recognise the value of their work. Someone else felt that it stimulated creativity.

"It allowed us to understand the philosophy behind each principle and thus to understand ABN much better", was another contribution to this discussion. "It suits the complex situations in which ABN works," and "it brings meaning to ABN's work".



*Here partners share reflections after Mystica (see page 12) before the start of the day's proceedings.*

Some of the concerns that people had were:

- These principles are not being universally applied by partners who are using other approaches
- The principles are too broad to concretise evaluation and so there is need for other evaluation methods too.
- Balancing use of principles and conventional evaluation could be tricky.
- Principles look at qualitative outputs and not quantitative.

This was the first time that I had facilitated a multi-day meeting that focused on principles as the basis for discussion. For me it emphasised the value of this approach. Participants left the meeting with a much better understanding of ABN. They also had a better grasp of where ABN needs to improve in relation to the core of what it's about. The principles reflect how ABN can be more effective. They are there to guide the process of continually improving this effectiveness. My hope is that each partner representative who was at the meeting will now have the confidence to take these principle discussions into their own organisations. If this happens then ABN will truly be deepened within each partner. ■

## Where to now?

*Many ideas and recommendations on the way forward came up in the discussions on the principles. The full report captures these and will feed into ABN's strategic direction 2019-2021, to be developed next year. Here is a sample of some of the points that came up.*

- The issue of sharing stories and documentation came up in just about every principle discussion. This remains one of ABN's struggles.
- A number of times there was suggestion for the development of joint fundraising proposals by ABN partners, perhaps on a regional basis.
- The question of setting up country/sub-regional nodes was emphasized under at least three principles (see p11 for further discussion on this).
- The plan to set up a network of Elders was suggested on two occasions.
- There were also suggestions to do more Earth Jurisprudence (EJ) training, to develop ethical documentation principles and to link with global forums that are likely to support ABN's approach and thus amplify it.
- Cutting across the discussions was the suggestion that each partner needs to deepen their understanding and application of ABN's principles.



# Reflections on principle

*Participants of the 2017 Biennial ABN meeting were encouraged by the use of the principles as a method of facilitation. Here three participating ABN partners and the Secretariat's finance manager reflect on their use and how they will have an impact on the work that they do day to day in their own organisations. That there are strong benefits had resounding consensus.*

**Karangathi Njoroge** is Executive Director of Maendeleo Endelevu Action Program (MEAP) in Kenya.

He says, "My reflection on the use of principles is that they encourage an individual or organisation to critically review the initiatives they undertake in relation to set principles. This process allows deeper understanding of the context and results of the engagement. Principles are based on core values that individuals and organisations subscribe to and therefore encourage inner consciousness and meaning of any engagement that one is involved in. Use of principles encourages engagement of mind, heart and spirit as opposed to the conventional approach where rationale takes precedence.

ABN works in complex situations that involve communities and nature within varied contexts and therefore use of principles helps assess the effectiveness of partners' activities. This is so because use of

principles stimulate and allow creativity as well as flexibility for different contexts.

Using principles require deeper understanding of each principles and application of the same in different contexts, necessitating continued sharing among parties involved so as to harmonise their perspectives and related practices.

Principles are used as an approach to assess effectiveness and have not been largely taken by donors or development partners to evaluate interventions that they support. Instead they use the conventional evaluation approach that is based on set parameters that are quantitative.

On the other hand use of principles largely depends on qualitative parameters or complex situations that may not be quantified. In such circumstances there is need to sensitise and encourage donors to embrace the use of principles when assessing complex situations. ■



Use of principles encourages engagement of mind, heart and spirit as opposed to the conventional approach where rationale takes precedence. "



**Jane Kinya** is Finance and Administration Manager ABN Secretariat, based in Kenya.

She says, "The use of ABN principles made the meeting the best ever since it offered a good convergence point for both new, not so new partners and 'old' partners, and also the staff in the ABN's Secretariat. It made everyone seriously reflect and challenge one's self on work, especially where we claim to do the goal towards the realisation of the SDGs. Underlying the principles is the ABN philosophy and core values which defines why we exist.

The use of the principles allowed all to participate, it didn't matter whether you are a practitioner, or a Programme Officer, a board or a finance person, what was underlying everything is the VALUE we

put in all that we are doing.

The use of principles opened up the discussions deeper than ever before.

It was also a very good assessment tool. We saw what is lacking at all levels on the ABN methodologies.

I am not sure, at a personal level, whether any of us had ever looked at the principles that we created in 2015. On my part, I would just replicate them in documents. But after this meeting, everything makes sense. Now I don't just replicate them in documents, they mean so much to me. And in everything I do, I am always challenged by Principle One: *It starts with me!* ■



**Tabaro Dennis Natukunda** is Senior Programme Officer at the National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) in Uganda.

He says, "I see a growing process of communities struggling to adhere to ABN Principles, with the support of Partners. The consciousness that conventional methods and approaches applied to address the growing crisis on food, land and ecosystems are no longer effective, makes the ABN Philosophy and approach ever more relevant.

For those who want to have a change in Africa, a restoration of African glory, to see the recovery of our traditional food that is known to be nutritious, medicinal, ceremonial and delicious; for those who want to save the remaining ecosystems that have hitherto been the life support of African peoples' livelihoods, for those who want to save our fertile soils from killer pesticides, greedy land grabbers, greedy corporations... the list is long... embrace ABN philosophy and principles.

I love being associated with ABN, I love its philosophy and principles when I read the writings of Thomas Berry, the American Cultural historian. I call everyone to read him... start with *The Great Work* and *Evening Thoughts*.

I learnt and also emphasise that ABN; - is not an ordinary Network of NGOs trying to promote merely the welfare of communities, - is not a network where conventional workshops are held to endorse governments' positions on 'sustainable mining', provision of hybrid seeds and GMOS, to 'communities whose soils are



no longer fertile', 'communities whose traditional seeds are not pest and drought resistant'.

ABN is a unique network that wants to decolonise African communities; promote African rich bio culture and biodiversity, traditional knowledge and governance systems, based on African values, beliefs and cultures.

It is a network to define a paradigm shift from anthropocentric to Earth centered laws. It is a network that realises the human disconnection from Nature caused by the industrial based thinking.

ABN is determined to address the current crises in food, land and ecosystems created by colonial thinking, industrialisation and human centered

If you are shy and you shun African knowledge, beliefs, values and traditional practices, then ABN is not for you.



laws, among others.

For ABN principles to be realised, we need to rethink our mindset as especially informed by the current education systems, the religious sects that demonise African cultures, beliefs and knowledge systems.

ABN principles and philosophy are informed by the age-old African knowledge systems and beliefs, which are entrenched in Earth laws, laws that have governed human practice since creation.

If you are shy and you shun African knowledge, beliefs, values and traditional practices, then, I think ABN is not fit for you! ■

**Mohammed Kamel Damma** is monitoring, evaluation & learning officer at the Regional Advisory Information and Network Systems (RAINS) in Ghana.

He says, "The aftermath of the AGM has kept me busy; trying to understand how different I have been, participating in such a brainstorming intelligent discourse with very strong personalities of African philosophy.

Definitely, I am invigorated and intrigued even more that I did not miss the opportunity to be in the midst of ABNers. And even so that I am not "caught between two stools". As I do not

find it difficult to choose between two alternatives.

The ABN philosophical thinking for me might just be the most effective concept to development particularly in the African setting. But we (ABNers) must forge ahead with respect or recognition of current development approaches/ trends; drawing lessons from that to inform our own processes.

I pledge from this moment to uphold, respect in high esteem the principles of ABN distinguishing the role of communities in achieving the principles." ■



## Our Mission

To ignite and nurture a growing African network of individuals and organisations working passionately from global to local level, with capacity to resist harmful developments, to influence and implement policies and practices that promote recognition and respect for people and nature.

## Vision

Vibrant and resilient African communities rooted in their own biological, cultural and spiritual diversity, governing their own lives and livelihoods, in harmony with healthy ecosystems.

## Our Core Principles

1

### It starts with each of us

Strengthening individuals to share and deepen their personal conviction, determination, understanding of, and commitment to ABN's philosophy and practice as a basis of all ABN's work.

2

### Those on the edge

Emphasising recognition of those who are marginalised by today's modern world and bringing to light their knowledge and beauty as well as helping them to know their rights.

3

### Our work with communities

Recognising the devastating impact of colonisation and industrialisation, we accompany communities we work with in a patient, non prescriptive and potentiating way that draws particularly on the knowledge of elders towards deep level transformation.

4

### Learning towards practice

Developing an expanding range of methodologies and practice that are based on experiential learning and African traditional knowledge system and which validate traditional knowledge and build confidence.

5

### Ethical documentation

Documenting rigorously, carefully, selectively and creatively the experiences of our work, whilst always seeking permission from those we work with, following community protocols and sharing information back to the sources.

6

### Building alliances towards a stronger global movement

Reaching out to work collaboratively with those who we recognise as allies in the bigger struggle and movement towards healthy communities and ecosystems across Africa.

7

### Bringing in new partners

Continually seeking out and actively supporting new partners, communities and individuals to bring into the ABN fold.

8

### Networking amongst partners

Partners and the secretariat taking up the responsibility to share often and openly their experiences, knowledge and skills with each other, towards a strong sense of collective ownership for the network.

9

### ABN gatherings

All ABN events, at whatever level, should strive to reflect ABN's deeply felt respect towards and celebration of Nature and diverse African cultures.

10

### Our Institution

Having an effective and well-run organisation that is transparent and accountable while reflecting the Pan-African value of Ubuntu.





# Regional ABN nodes: is the time right?

*With 36 partners spread across 12 countries across Africa, should the ABN decentralise to better serve members in different regions? JOHN WILSON ponders this question.*

**T**here has been much discussion in ABN over the years about decentralising. So far not a lot has happened to that effect.

Perhaps the time was not yet ripe for this. I think there has been a growing determination to go down this route. As partners in country have been gaining confidence so they've begun to feel ready to play their part in this process. They are now pushing for it.

Why are country or sub-regional nodes for ABN so important? Running an operation like ABN solely from a continental basis is expensive and probably not financially sustainable. Don't get me wrong, I think the continental dimension, the African perspective, is very important, but it's at

country level, and even more locally, that ABN will grow and keep itself going. This must be its foundation, the basis of its African web.

In that vein I also see a tremendous opportunity for ABN as it embarks on setting up these country or sub-regional nodes. There could be the opportunity for ABN to set these nodes up in such a way that they are not dependent on donor funding for their ongoing existence. In fact I would go on to say that this should be a guiding principle for the setting up of the nodes.

How exactly this happens could be left to each country. I would go further and suggest that the way to carry out this task would be to develop a set of principles, perhaps four or five

principles, to guide all countries in their process of establishing their ABN country node. This would also give them a tool for assessing how it's going. What would also be important would be to ensure lots of sharing and learning as the process is unfolding. Mistakes will happen, fruit for learning.

Imagine 25 years down the line, thriving ABN chapters in many countries across the continent, creatively reaching out into their own reviving cultural diversities. Africa is leading the way globally in reconnecting people to Nature.

Out of this is coming the wisdom to live at peace with our Earth, and with each other. ABN is indeed a 100-year programme! ■



## Unlocking the potential of Mystica practice

*The 2017 Biennial Partners' meeting introduced a new practice for participants. At the start of every day, time was dedicated to doing Mysticas, a ritual that very quickly became an essential part of the Meeting's processes. JOHN WILSON shares his experience.*

I was in the 'air' group. Others joined water, earth and fire. In my group we dispersed into the edges of the forest for ten minutes on our own, to think about the 'air'. The air I smelt was rich with the forest. I thought about how the air smells when it rains for the first time in months. I learnt the English word for this not so long ago, petrichor. There's nothing quite like the smell of petrichor, an earthy and wet smell, a celebratory smell for life in a dry area.

I thought about how air is the only one of the four elements we can't see. And how more than any of the others it connects all life on Earth, or so it seems to me. I wondered about what makes air blue in the sky, and where does the sky begin? I suddenly caught a whiff of smoke floating past, a fire somewhere. For those 10 minutes I steeped myself in a way that I had never done before. Why not, I wondered?

After the 10 minutes I joined my 'air' fellows and we shared the different reflective journeys we'd had. Then we joined up with the other three groups and each group shared. It was early in the morning and we were all fresh and listening intently. I sensed that the circle we sat in was deep in absorption.

At the end I wrote this reflection: "Yes, it's good to plant a tree but a tree planted with deep and growing understanding of Nature is worth much more than a tree that is just planted. We've lost our understanding of these four elements and what they mean and how interconnected they are. We've lost our reverence for them. This is the root cause of our current problems. Yes, we need to be practical, but we need to be deeper than practical too."

This Mystica exercise took up most of the 1½ hour session before breakfast. What was the output? What did we achieve? Hard to specify but it was a very rich session for me, as were all the mystica sessions we held during the ABN partners' meeting. Mystica has become part of the tradition of ABN meetings.

Some might be concerned with the time they 'take up', when there's so much to do. I was one of those concerned people in the early ABN meetings. I've now come to recognise their value.

What is a mystica you might ask? You won't find a dictionary definition. The way I understand a mystica, it's an exercise that aims to deepen our understanding of issues and interconnections that are important

to us. Being connected to Nature is important to anyone who is part of ABN and so mysticas within ABN explore our relationship and understanding of Nature and help to deepen these.

Why have I grown to like mysticas? I think a good mystica sets up the day very well in a workshop. I can't pinpoint exactly why or how but somehow they usually create an excellent launching pad into the day. They root people in what really matters, they connect people more to each other, they are cultural, they bring contemplation and questions to the fore, they stimulate insights, they celebrate humour, they push our boundaries, and they deepen our connection to Nature.

I can imagine the practice of mystica extending into organisations, to help people within the organisation to deepen the connection to their work, and to each other. Mysticas are one of those activities that are important but not urgent that will all too often be pushed aside by the urgent. They are one of those activities that could perhaps provide the rigour and connection within organisations and initiatives that takes their work and its meaning to another level. ■



The Frogs are now...

It's dark now, the equator's symmetrical day  
Opening the way  
For them to begin their song.  
It doesn't take long  
For the first to begin that beautiful, that mesmerising, that  
Lilting, croaking chorus.

The hot, dry day becomes the cool, near night  
Where darkness replaces light.  
Where frogs, and owls and crickets  
Take the place of birds in the thickets,  
Where the stars take you off,  
Into a universe of thought  
That stretches your mind beyond yourself  
That puts you in your place  
That reminds you of the universe itself.

There is no time in that world out there  
Time is now, and then, a billion light years away.  
Time is now with the croaking, the chirping, the lilting  
That brings you back to now.

Now flies back and forth  
Between the frogs and the stars,  
For the frogs are singing to the stars  
And the stars are twinkling to the frogs  
In a unison that stretches your mind beyond yourself  
That puts you in your place  
That reminds you of the universe itself.

John Wilson

# Saying NO to plastic

*The Kenya's new ban on manufacture, use, importation and sale of plastic bags, in August this year, has been described as the world's toughest. Hopefully the tide will turn as this is not the first time a similar attempt has been made. SIMON MITAMBO takes a look at how Earth Jurisprudence approach can provide the much-needed, simple and Earth-centred solution to the plastic carrier bags menace.*



In August this year, Kenya passed a ban on the manufacture, use, importation and sale of plastic bags. The ban has been described as the world's toughest, with a penalty of 4 years in jail or a Ksh4,000,000 fine. It is the third attempt to implement such a ban in the past 10 years, though previous bans have failed. Other African countries, such as Rwanda (2008), Eritrea (2005) and Mauritania (2013) have instituted similar national bans on non-biodegradable plastic bags, with varying degrees of success.

Kenyan Environment Minister Judy Wakhungu told the BBC that, "Plastic bags now constitute the biggest challenge to solid waste management in Kenya. This has become our environmental nightmare that we must defeat by all means." Her sentiments come at a time when an estimated 24 million plastic bags are used every month across the globe. Plastic pollution poses a near permanent contamination of the natural environment worldwide. Plastic bags litter most roadsides in Kenya, clog sewers and streams, destroying marine life. Beaches are also seriously polluted. Often we experience floods in our towns and cities due to obstruction of our sewers by plastic bags. Animals also graze on the rubbish; the United Nations Environment Programme quotes a shocking number of polythene bags being pulled out of livestock in Nairobi's abattoirs - as many as 20 bags per cow - raising fears of plastic contamination in beef.

If the fear of eating plastic concerns us, we should also be worried about drinking it. According to a study by the University of Minnesota and the State

University of New York, people may be ingesting between 3,000 and 4,000 micro particles of plastic from tap water every year. Of the 159 tap water samples collected, 83% were found to contain plastic particles. The highest density of plastic per volume of tap water was found in North America. This is a shocking revelation from the first study to be carried out on the micro-plastic in drinking water. Past research has focused on plastic pollution in lakes, rivers, oceans and even the air we breathe.

Plastic manufacturers allege that as many as 80,000 jobs will be lost as a result of this ban in Kenya. However, the Kenyan government could take the initiative to establish a kitty to support alternative livelihoods that are ecologically sound to mitigate the job losses and use fines collected to boost the kitty. There can be no jobs on a dead planet.

One challenge has been in developing alternative materials for plastic bags. Here it is emerging that traditional knowledge has the potential to offer solutions to the challenges of the ban. A good example we have witnessed is from Hilda Gacheri Bundi, a Form 3 student from Materi Girls' Centre in Tharaka Nithi County. Hilda has been bold enough to borrow a leaf from her ancestral wisdom to make a banana bag to carry her books and other personal effects to school on the opening day. She learnt how to do this from her late grandfather, using banana leaves to fashion a bag. She has attracted attention from across the Kenyan divide and is now poised to be an Environmental Ambassador.

Yet there are few young people who

are keen to learn from the elders today. Hilda's experience teaches us the extent to which we have become so deeply disconnected from the natural world and to our cultural rooting. She relates how supermarket attendants refused to touch her banana bag, forcing her to pack all her shopping on her own. The women at the local market thought she was a witch. They ordered her to throw away the bag. Her fellow colleagues and boys scolded at her and thought she was behaving in a funny way.

It is disturbing how we have become slaves of the Western industrialised thinking, to a certain extent the genesis of the current global crisis. We have been schooled to believe that solutions to our challenges can only be found in Western technology and not in our own ancient wisdom. We need a paradigm shift in our mindset to develop confidence in ourselves to reconnect with our natural world and our cultural rooting. In his book *The Great Work* (1999), Thomas Berry implores the need to restore the people's deep sense of connectedness to Nature and all the life-forms as a way of sustaining and taking greater care for the planet Earth in which we live. ■

*What other solutions will we find if we focus on these problems using our Earth Jurisprudence (EJ) lens? Let's share our thoughts about this challenge. [smitambo@yahoo.com](mailto:smitambo@yahoo.com).*

**Facing page:** Egrets gather on Pomona Landfill in Harare, Zimbabwe, a sad reminder of how wildlife interacts with our rubbish.

Credit: Laurie Macpherson





# ECOLOJAH:

## A primary school with an eco-heart

*Deep in Benin, ABN's partner CEVASTE has been operating an eco-school, providing an educational experience that encompasses many ABN values. MERE JAH shares some of the stories from their pupils, past and present.*

**C**EVASTE/ECOLOJAH makes it a priority to reverse the trend of losing endogenous knowledge and self-confidence in the African knowledge system experienced by the local rural population by using the first principle of ABN: *It starts with each of us*; in connection with the 4th one: *Learning towards practice*. Our practice of these principles helps us to bring back the knowledge and love of self and to rediscover nature among the community.

Consequently, in 2015 ABN sponsored a 15-year impact survey during which several former pupils spoke and illustrated how much they had been transformed by their education at CEVASTE/ECOLOJAH. The survey was implemented to ascertain the effectiveness of their education and its application to their current lives. The 50 people who answered the survey were selected from pupils registered during the 2002 to 2010 academic years.

The survey unveiled a renewed consciousness of nature, an affectionate

attachment to Africa as a whole, a fair knowledge of major events of Africa's history; and furthermore, a strong will to take action and to represent or generate expected change.

Our story begins in 2001 when an NGO brought us some orphans from the interior of Benin, in Ouessé in the Department of Collines. They arrived anxious and introverted, with many illusions about their new life, expecting to find a Eurocentrist model hidden under the slogan of modernity.

What a great surprise it was for them to see dishes: glasses, plates, spoons, teapots, made from calabashes, coconut shells and bamboo; as well as to find themselves living in the heart of nature which they thought they had distanced themselves from by coming to study at a school near Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin.

Their astonishment continued when they learnt that "agro-ecology", natural agriculture, was one of the school's subjects; and that the houses and the classrooms were all built from earth with

straw rooves. Yet it was said that the founders had lived in Paris and on the offshore islands of the Americas.

There was also a class on pan-African history where they learned that the African was the first teacher of Mathematics. For them it was unbelievable that Africa is the cradle of humanity, of civilisation, of communication with the divine source, the Almighty Creator through the knowledge of Nature and her natural mystic.

Judith Da Costa, 19, a former pupil who spent six years at ECOLOJAH: "I thought that Africa was cursed. Then I was taught during the pan-African history class that Africa is the cradle of humanity and civilisation, and that it is greed that brought Europeans to our homeland to steal our knowledge and resources. I love myself now as an African."

Former female pupil, Odile Faton, 15, now attending secondary school, said, "After being educated at ECOLOJAH, we wanted modern villages with running



*Pupils in the garden during an agroecology lesson.*



*Learning how to braid strings of raffia made from local materials.*



*Lessons in growing and composting in the gardens at ECOLOJAH.*



water, electricity, internet connection, but no skyscrapers.”

Dazzled, they also learnt that their peasant parents were precious to all people because it was they who provided food, everyone needing to eat each day.

Dieudonné Agbodo, 22, who attended ECOLOJAH from 2000 to 2006 said, “Before, I was ashamed of being a farmer’s son. At ECOLOJAH we were shown that the farmer was the most indispensable man on earth because we all need to eat, and we could thank [the school] for that. I looked at life in a different way and felt equal to those of the city.”

Everything seemed unprecedented and at the same time familiar to them as if what they had been forcing themselves to forget suddenly became a priority again. As the founders keep on saying, our history and our culture are an inestimable treasure.

Sandra Omoloto, who spent six years with ECOLOJAH and is now 24, said: “At first we felt like we were living the world upside down, but we knew that the founders had known Europe, had chosen to relocate to Africa and to live in the forest. It has forced us to question ourselves and to change our way of thinking and to look at ourselves ...”

Amour Savi Wanikou, 18 years old says,

“Before I used to see Nature as what I called bush, with a certain contempt ... but at ECOLOJAH I understood that trees, water, nature... are the riches that God has given us, and that if we take care of them they will always be with us.”

Another former pupil, 18-year-old Landry Kpataclan, now a secondary school pupil, stated, “I now believe I will be more useful in the rural sector to work and let everyone know why we should protect natural resources. I would like to stay and later be a teacher ....”

Eighteen-year-old Star Agbodo Kossi, who also spent six years at ECOLOJAH and is also now a secondary school pupil, demonstrated a spirit of responsibility for the future of Africa, illustrating one of the school’s guidelines that we are actors and builders of our lives and no longer victims. Echoing the first principle of ABN, he stated: “It starts with us. I understand the importance of being African, and I am ready to sacrifice myself for Africa.”

These stories also demonstrate that ABN’s Principle 4, *Learning towards Practise* or experiential learning, is the key to action.

This is a story that I am happy to share with you. ■

*Mere Jah is the director of CEVASTE and member of the ABN Board of Trustees.*



*Above: Mere Jah the director of CEVASTE; pupils spend much time in the garden learning about agroecology.*

*Below: ABN partner Mr Lio Oussou guides participants in a session of meditation with nature.*







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