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Tea of life

Australia's tea tree brings cheer to farmers in Kenya, who plant them to supply the cosmetic industry. >2

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Planting hope

The production of tea tree oil is changing the lives of farmers in central Kenya.



Story and photos by CHIN MUI YOON
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IMPOVERISHED farmer Julius Munyiri had struggled for years to provide for his six children on his 1.2ha plot of land located at the foothills of Mount Kenya in east Africa. Droughts, marauding wildlife and market fluctuations are constant threats to the survival of smallholders.

Munyiri grows vegetables for the European export market but brokers constantly dictate low prices.

"My hands are tied every time, as once the produce is ripe, I have to sell them at any price. That's just the way it has always been," says Munyiri.

Once, opportunistic brokers came along and commissioned him to grow castor plants and later amaranth. Both times, the buyers failed to honour their orders. Munyiri nearly went bankrupt.

Then came the reversal of fortunes, although he was understandably hesitant when Earthoil Kenya



Symbol of hope: Koofa chairman Gibson Wahome and The Body Shop's Community Fair Trade director Mark Davis are pleased to see the new cash crop, *Melaleuca alternifolia* (above), take off successfully in Kenya.

approached him in 2007 to supplement his food crops with organic tea tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*), a new crop.

"Earthoil has a distillation factory nearby, and they visited me several times so I felt more assured," says Munyiri.

Earthoil is a global commercial processing and export company supplying the global market with oil extracts from macadamia, moringa, papaya seeds and passion fruit by thousands of small-scale farmers

in East Africa. It introduced tea tree to the farmers living around the small town of Naro Moro through the Kenya Organic Oil Farmers Association (Koofa) in 2007.

A key customer is The Body Shop, which has worked closely with Koofa and Earthoil in enlisting the farmers as its community trade suppliers.

Organic tea tree oil from Koofa is just the latest raw ingredient sourced under The Body Shop's Community Fair Trade (CFT) pro-



Munyiri was eagerly awaiting his next harvest during our visit to his farm last month organised by The Body Shop.

The money, Munyiri said, would buy five cows that can produce biogas to generate electricity for his farm.

Earnings from his previous harvests saw to his children's school fees, clothes and books, and contributed to his second son's medical studies in Russia, where he is on a scholarship.

Munyiri added joyfully that he'd also splurged on a new shirt for himself at the local market.

He is very positive about the tea tree. "The market is assured," he says, beaming.

A new demand

As our plane flew north from Nairobi, the landscape morphed from urban chaos to a patchwork of fields and farms at the foothills of

gramme. This year marks the 25th anniversary of Body Shop founder Dame Anita Roddick's first trade with Teddy Exports of India (see story on page 4).

Tea tree requires less investment and labour, yet provides steady cash in an area where farmers earn a per capita income of less than US\$1 (RM3) a day. Munyiri's first harvest was just 660kg, as the trees were single stems, earning him Kenyan Shillings (KSh) 9,000 (RM335). After harvesting, he left 15cm to 20cm stumps in the ground to sprout more branches.

Drought destroyed much of Munyiri's second harvest, and he collected just KSh5,000 (RM186). His third harvest, however, rewarded him with KSh18,000 (RM670).



Monday to Sunday

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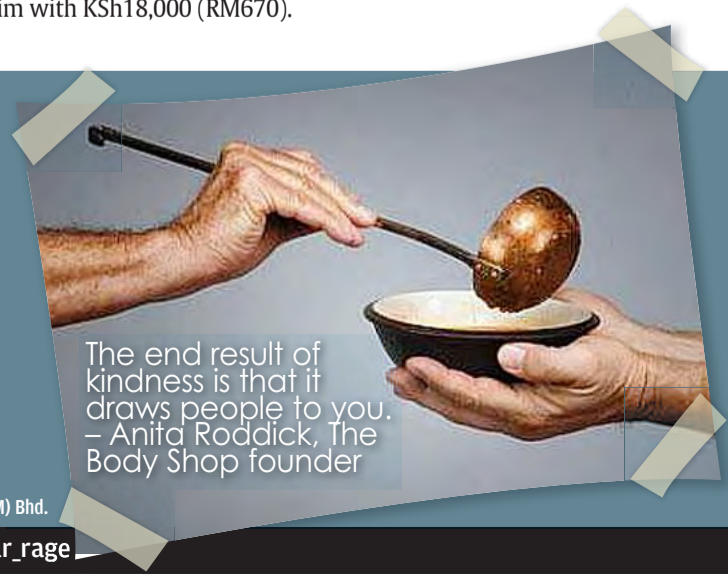
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The end result of kindness is that it draws people to you.
— Anita Roddick, The Body Shop founder

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majestic Mount Kenya. The fertile volcanic soils and abundant rainfall make the Central Highlands the country's most populated and cultivated region.

It's home to agricultural communities such as the Kikuyu, Meru, Embu and Akamba – subsistence farmers who grow vegetables, fruits, flowers and grains in *shambas*, or smallholdings. In 2007, Earthoil selected the Mount Kenya region as its production site as other *Melaleuca* species already grew wild in the area.

The plant flourishes in subtropical climates in moist soil, but it also holds up during droughts, fires and flooding.

Tea trees also provide fuel wood that help mitigate deforestation. The trees have a lifespan of 25 years and can be harvested within 12 months of planting, with new crops every eight to 10 months.

Mark Davis, The Body Shop's CFT director, is especially delighted with the project.

"Since 1994, we have been buying tea tree from Australia's indigenous communities," he explains.

"With increasing government support, the community decided they wanted to get involved in other activities instead of providing essential oils for the beauty industry.

"We looked at it as a fresh opportunity to continue working with marginalised farmers and communities under our CFT principles. We'd been working with Earthoil in Australia, and its African operations director Wayne Barratt told us they were exploring possibilities in Kenya."

Koofa was established after numerous discussions with local farmers. Today there are 484 members under a 15-member board. Any farmer can join as long as he or she is willing to grow organic tea tree and pay the KSh500 (RM17) lifetime membership fee.

"For years, we'd relied on growing vegetables for the European export market," explains Koofa chairman Gibson Wahome.

"We've also attempted to plant borage (an oilseed herb) but lost much of it to bugs. Vegetables required many chemicals and are subject to market demands, so we



Hard work pays off: (Far left) One of Koofa's youngest and among its few female farmers is Grace Kinyua. Her perseverance in growing organic tea tree has rewarded her with a good harvest that goes towards keeping four children in school.

Left: Mary Mumbi and Hannah Maeharia work on Grace Kinyua's farm.

Below: For the first time in her life, tea tree farmer Jecinta Watetu was able to treat herself to a new dress, shoes and earrings from her earnings. She hopes to build a timber house soon.



have irregular income.

"However, we are very positive about tea tree. It's a good crop especially as we grow it 100% organic. It's not easily perishable and there is an assured market.

"Koofa serves as a unified front so we can offer a larger amount of pure organic tea tree and command a better price. We worked closely with NGOs, The Body Shop and Earthoil to map out fair prices," Wahome explained.

Farmers are paid using Mbesa, a form of mobile payment providing instant cash even to the most remotely sited farmer, using just their mobile phones and without charging a commission or interest.

An integral part of The Body Shop's CFT programme is its promise to benefit local communities directly. Thus, the company contributes to an additional common fund started by the farmers to improve the local community with a percentage of their earnings channelled into it.

The initial amount collected of KSh750,000 (RM28,000) is funding five deserving and academically

inclined orphans to continue their education.

Harvests of hope

Koofa's tea trees are planted and harvested entirely by hand. The crops are rain-fed and some are irrigated by glacial waters under a project that channels melting snow from Mount Kenya.

"Koofa's tea tree oils are of very high quality, as they are 100% organic so they are more beneficial to the skin," explains Davis.

The 2011 harvest of crops resulted in 3.1 tonnes of pure tea tree oil (a mere 1kg is extracted from 100kg of leaves). A single tree can yield about 3kg of leaves. The farmers are on their way to reaching a targeted two million trees, as many are expanding their existing plots.

This year, The Body Shop ordered six tonnes of oil, double last year's amount, and the farmers could barely keep up. Koofa hopes to increase membership to 750, and one of the ways is through feedback from successful farmers.

One of Koofa's youngest, and among its few female farmers,

Grace Kinyua, 32, decided to grow tea tree out of sheer desperation to provide for her four children aged 16, 14, seven and two. She and her husband James, a retired soldier and itinerant labourer, could hardly afford the daily meals of potatoes and oatmeal.

In 2008, Kinyua visited Koofa members' farms and attended Earthoil's organic farming workshops. Convinced that tea tree was a viable crop, she took a loan and purchased 10,000 seedlings.

"My in-laws left us 10 acres (4ha) of land, and I converted three acres (1ha) to grow tea tree. I drew water from a stream 3km away and transported it on the backs of donkeys," she says.

However, drought destroyed almost half a hectare, and Kinyua barely managed to salvage the remaining crop.

"But I couldn't give up. We'd have nothing at all if my crops didn't grow," she says. "I want my children to finish their schooling and go to university so they can get jobs. I have struggled all my life. I don't want my children to be like me."

Kinyua's initial harvest fetched her KSh21,000 (RM782). It went towards repaying loans, and to pay for food and uniforms for the children, and a much-needed water tank. Money from her next harvest will go towards rehabilitating the land decimated by the drought.

Another female farmer, Jecinta Watetu, 52, proudly greeted us in her white embroidered dress with matching earrings and shiny black leather shoes.

These were the first new pieces of clothing she'd ever bought herself with earnings from tea tree. She shyly added that she'd also indulged in some skin lotion for her work-worn hands.

The sixth child of 10, Watetu did not get an education. Her whole life has been spent in the fields, and she sold cow's milk for KSh1,000 to KSh2,000 (RM37 to RM74) monthly. Most of the money went towards medication for her ailing mother, who died in April.

"I heard about the new crop and I decided to try it out," Watetu says.

"It took me three years to rehabilitate the land for organic planting by growing maize and legumes that would help regenerate the soil with nitrogen. I lost many crops to drought, but tea tree is hardier."

Watetu's first harvest of 2,500kg fetched KSh25,000 (RM933) and her second harvest is expected to be twice as much. Many women have sought her help in starting their own tea tree farms. Watetu has since formed a women's cooperative with 30 members. They earn additional income by renting out tents and chairs for village celebrations.

From Watetu's little mud hut, she can look across to her beloved mother's grave, which she covers with fresh roses daily.

"My life has always revolved around work," Watetu says.

"I am not waiting to get married. I'm determined to be independent and not rely on a husband. I can hire extra hands when it's harvesting time. My goal is to build a proper timber house for myself to replace my mud hut."

Her eyes wandered off for a moment.

"I just wish my mother could have seen this. It would have made her happy knowing I have a better future ahead."



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Stories by CHIN MUI YOON
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IT ALL began when Amanda Murphy, who founded Teddy Exports in India, turned up at The Body Shop office in Britain and refused to leave until Dame Anita Roddick took a look at the little rolling wooden massagers she was selling under her fledgling company.

Murphy's persistence was duly rewarded when Roddick placed an order of 10,000 rollers for The Body Shop.

That was 25 years ago. Today, The Body Shop remains Teddy Exports' largest customer, importing over 2.3 million accessories annually.

Teddy Exports began in 1990 as a five-employee company operating out of a mud hut in Tirumangalam, a small village in south India, producing goods made from locally sourced *Acacia nilotica* wood. It has since grown into a major exporter, employing over 500 people. The community has also benefited with over 700 children having been put through school through a communal fund.

"The Body Shop was their first customer," recalls Mark Davis, The Body Shop's Community Fair Trade (CFT) director.

"The power of change is in the hands of consumers who believe in the ethics practised by The Body Shop. Some 80% of our products contain CFT-sourced products. We are not a charity. We trade (with), not aid, communities. We use our commercial buying power to bring change like what we see through Teddy Exports."

This year is special for The Body Shop as it marks the 25th anniversary of its CFT programme, which began when Roddick kept discovering raw ingredients for cosmetics produced by indigenous communities during her travels.

"In those days, there wasn't a single cooperative representing these communities," says Davis. "Anita strongly believed that we could deliver a form of social change through our commercial purchasing power. This principle has remained as one of our core values."

A similar successful collaboration was formed with the Tungteiya Women's Shea Butter Association in Ghana. Roddick met local women in Tamale who'd been collecting nuts from the shea tree which are made into a moisturiser to protect their skin from the harsh Saharan winds. Roddick saw the efficacy of the ingredient and placed an order from women from 10 villages who formed an association to churn out the product for her.

Today, The Body Shop buys 410 tonnes of shea butter from that same cooperative, making it the single largest customer. The now-thriving cooperative has 500 members supplying the butter globally.

The women's standing in their communities has increased, as have their living standards. Their income funded wells and water pipes, and provide access to medical care, housing and education for the whole community. The association has created a community project fund used to build 10 nursery schools, three medical centres, latrines and washing facilities for local villages.

Most of all, the income is sustainable, as shea trees are readily available in Tamale, live for up to 300 years and are adapted to the dry climate.

The Body Shop currently trades with 26 cooperatives around the world for ingredients and products. These range from baskets in Bangladesh and hand-made paper in Nepal, to cactus mitts from Mexico, and organic babassu oil from Brazil. Highly moisturising hemp seed oil and chamomile water is purchased from small British farms.

The Body Shop buys more than



Better butter:
Nuts from the shea tree that produce a moisturiser that is now a globally popular beauty aid.

Fair trade

1,000 tonnes of CFT ingredients. The staggering amount includes enough cocoa butter for 15 million chocolate bars and honey for 60 million pieces of toast.

And yes, folks continue to turn up at The Body Shop's office in Littlehampton with jars and bottles of raw ingredients or plant extracts that they hope would someday be turned into a much-in-demand product.

"We are constantly on the lookout for innovative new ingredients that we formulate into brilliant products; it requires years of research and development," says Davis.

Roddick's legacy (she died in 2007 from a brain hemorrhage, aged 64) of trading fairly continues today with The Body Shop's latest collaboration with the Kenya Organic Oil Farmers Association (Koofa). Aside from tea tree oil, Davis adds that the company is exploring the possibility of producing other oils that complement tea tree between harvests.

"We are proud to have been the pioneers in the beauty industry when it comes to trading fairly with suppliers in Latin America. We have put in

place an effective chain and a community fund that ensures middlemen are removed and profits channelled back to the farmers.

"Our suppliers have many other customers today. We've had many requests for referrals for raw ingredients and we are only too happy to recommend our suppliers.

"Specialty organic ingredients like Koofa's tea tree oil will always be in demand. We work with Earthoil as they have a proven track record and they train field officers and provide agronomists to deal with all aspects of farming the crops. This way, local employment is ensured and beneficial skills are taught.

"I was on a field visit in Ghana when I was startled to see that the appointed secretary of the Tungteiya Women's Shea Butter Association was Aseshitu. She used to help her mother churn out shea butter. Despite growing up in extreme poverty, she benefited from one of the schools built from the community fund. Today she is a successful, independent young businesswoman.

"To me, that's what our CFT is all about," Davis says.



The late The Body Shop founder, Dame Anita Roddick, having shea butter applied to her face by a Ghanaian stallholder. As cosmetics containing shea butter pop up on more Western supermarket shelves, little do buyers realise that sales of this age-old beauty-boosting nut are helping legions of African women feed and school their children.



The leaves of the *Melaleuca alternifolia* contain oil that is much sought-after by the beauty industry.

Goodness in a leaf

EARLY in the morning, Charity Wanjama and Catheline Kina are busily stripping tea tree leaves from freshly-plucked branches which yield the prized essential oil.

Once distilled, the oil will make its way to a variety of formulations or sold as pure essential oil, which would eventually end up in pharmacies, beauty retail stores and households around the world.

A hardy member of the myrtle family, *Melaleuca alternifolia* can grow up to 7m tall. The delicate, narrow leaves are rich in aromatic oils. Left undisturbed, the stalks bear fluffy white flowers on their tips in spring time.

The Australian aborigines have long known of tea tree's potent and highly effective uses. Traditionally, they crushed the leaves to treat skin infections. Today, tea tree oil is renowned for its antibacterial, antifungal and antiseptic properties. It's also prized for treating acne and respiratory problems.

While the tree is native to Australia, the Kenya Organic Oils Farmers Association (Koofa) has successfully cultivated a premium grade of organic tea tree that offers a lifeline to impoverished communities.

The farms are scattered around the small town of Naro Moro at the foothills of Mount Kenya, accessible after hours via a bumpy dirt track.

At James Munyiri's farm, slender tea trees thick with leaves await harvesting. This new crop won't yield as many leaves as the older ones which have been cut back close to the ground. Eventually they will regrow more stems. Baby seedlings are neatly spaced between 1.5ft and 2.5ft (0.5m-0.8m) to allow space for growth.

Organic composting, which includes farm waste and natural manure, are used in place of fertilisers. Mulch is employed to trap water in the soil.

"Nothing of the tea tree is wasted," says Munyiri. "We



Hours of distillation yield the prized and aromatic tea tree oil.

use the main branches for firewood or to support our beans. Smaller stems are processed along with the leaves. After distillation, the leftover plant fibres are used on the crops as mulch."

At Earthoil's distillation plant near the Nanyuki airstrip, trucks haul in piles of freshly harvested tea tree leaves in numbered jute sacks that can be traced back to the farm.

Macadamia nuts are used to run a boiler for the delicate three-hour-long distillation process to extract the volatile oil from the plants. The first hour will yield most of the oil, followed by higher quality oil.

Work goes on around the clock at this production plant to ensure that the precious plants are processed immediately upon harvesting to maintain optimum quality.

The result is the valuable, colourless oil that slowly drips out from what is essentially a giant kettle.

Tea tree oil has over 60 components and is among the most important natural antiseptics to earn a place in every First Aid kit. It is useful for treating wounds, cuts, stings, burns and skin infections.

The essential oil is also excellent in treating smelly feet, head lice, acne and cold sores. However, while the oil is skin-friendly, it is toxic when consumed.

The Body Shop counts its tea tree oil range as a perennial bestseller beloved by customers through the years. It is especially in demand as a treatment for acne-prone skin and a quick antiseptic for cuts and wounds.