

TRYing for a Better Future

Women oyster sellers in The Gambia come together to improve the quality of their lives, and as they do, their produce—oysters—receives an upmarket boost

By **Adrian Croke**
(adrian.croke@gmail.com), Peace Corps
Volunteer, The Gambia

A 35-year old widowed mother of five. During a four-month season, she wakes up at dawn everyday and heads to the river. Her children stay at home by themselves. How nice it would be if they could go to school, but there just isn't enough money. She works briskly throughout the low tide, hacking oysters off the mangrove roots with an axe. Sometimes her hands and feet come in the way of the axe, but then she hasn't met her death yet in the water, has she? That's something to be thankful for. So many of her friends lost their lives this way. She can't swim; she has no boat, no life jacket, no gloves and no boots. The old sweater sleeves wrapped around her feet might get her through the day. Though the sun is high up in the sky, only now is the tide beginning to return. It's time to take her water logged feet out of the mud and head home. Next, to steam the catch and walk to the highway with a bucket of cooked oysters balanced on her head. Will she be able to sell enough today to feed her family tomorrow? On the highway, vehicles roar past. Occasionally, a motorist stops to buy a cup of oysters. The year is 2007. The country: Africa's smallest—The Gambia.

In the year 2007, driving along the Serrekunda highway on her way to Banjul, the capital city of The Gambia, a woman named

Fatou Janha Mboob spotted an oyster seller by the roadside and drew her car to a halt. As she placed her order, Fatou began to chat with the oyster seller: "So how much do you make in a day?" "Not much. Nothing really," the woman replied. And so a conversation started. The other women selling oysters began to draw near. Soon, they were all sharing their stories and through these Fatou came to learn about the reality of oyster selling and the lives of the women dependent on it.

Most of the women were widows, Fatou learned—the sole breadwinners in their families. Oyster harvesting offered only a few months of work. Many of the women could not swim and owned no protective gear. Many had terrible wounds from accidental cuts. Due to the remote nature of many harvest sites, death by drowning was not entirely uncommon; neither were rape and theft.

Oyster beds in The Gambia are located in the root systems of mangroves, an essential and highly threatened habitat. Mangroves are among the most productive and biologically complex ecosystems on earth but they are also in grave danger from development, deforestation, salt production, pollution and overexploitation. Irresponsible harvesting of oysters, due to ignorance or desperation, poses great risks to the health and survival of the mangroves. Careless hacking or the use of large machetes may damage the roots of a mangrove plant, leading to its death. The more mangroves destroyed, the smaller the oyster harvest and greater the level of insecurity in the lives of those dependent on oyster harvesting.

Fatou was deeply moved by the stories she heard. Born in The Gambia and trained as a social worker and agricultural extensionist, Fatou had lived abroad for a while. On returning to her homeland, she started a fashion designing business. The roadside encounter with women selling oysters by the cup and struggling to make ends meet was, however, a turning point. It was the beginning of a process that would culminate in the formation of the TRY Oyster Women's Association, an organization started by 40 women in one village. Today, TRY has expanded to include 500 women from across 15 villages. Supported by the USAID-funded Ba Nafaa project and the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center, TRY is now a force to contend with in the world of women's development and sustainable resource management.

ERIN WILKINSON



TRY Oyster Women's Association aims to improve the livelihoods of its members, and their conditions of work

The association aims to improve the livelihoods of its members and their families, the oyster product, the conditions of work, and the sustainability of the industry. Currently, the association is involved in a number of projects to meet these goals. First, there are 250 women enrolled in a microfinance scheme that started in January of 2011 and will continue over the next year. Each contributed GMD300 (approximately US\$11) and received a loan of GMD1,000 (US\$37) to start a small business enterprise. The loan period was six months. Before the loan was given, the women received training on small enterprise development and business and marketing skills. The project has had considerable success, as at least 25 women have saved over GMD5,000 (US\$185) and some as much as GMD14,000 (US\$518). This is particularly remarkable considering many of the women never previously dreamt of having their own savings and assets. TRY hopes that in five years, thanks to the microfinance programme, each woman will be able to build a decent house for herself and her family and successfully break the cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

TRY's first goal—improving the livelihoods of its members—is inseparable from the responsible management and protection of mangroves. Mangrove reforestation programmes and educational training help to underscore the importance of the mangrove ecosystem. Gambians depend on the mangrove habitat not only for consumable resources like fish, oysters and cockles, but also for the success of the tourism industry, which benefits greatly from the natural beauty of the country's coastal landscape. Improving women's work conditions thus leads to the protection of the environment and supports

the country's main source of income, the hospitality industry.

During the week, TRY's Resource and Processing Centre hosts a skills-building class for 35 young girls, daughters of oyster harvesters, who, unable to pay their fees, have dropped out of school. These girls receive training in sewing, cooking and computer literacy. The aim is to provide training in tailoring, catering and computer skills so that they have a set of marketable abilities with which to start a business. In addition to these activities, the Centre is engaged in the continuous improvement of the oyster product. In partnership with the Ba Nafaa project, TRY is involved in water quality studies of the wetlands in which oysters are harvested so as to eventually harvest and export raw oysters to international markets.

Do women sell oysters by the roadside then anymore? They do, of course, but they now have cleaner spaces for selling, better tools for harvesting, and also a space in the public market reserved for them. Earlier, the women had no place to meet except by the side of the highway. Today, there is a Resource Centre where they can gather, receive training and process their oysters. The Centre offers a good price for the oysters, which are washed, cleaned, hygienically packaged, labelled and refrigerated for sale. Once, oysters were available only at roadside stands. Today, they are an improved, clean and safe product in high demand. Once water quality studies are completed, TRY aims to export raw oysters. This opportunity for international export would not only put The Gambia on the world economic map, but would also make TRY a model for financially beneficial, sustainable resource management. **M**

Improving the livelihoods of women oyster sellers is inseparable from the responsible management and protection of the mangroves.