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Newspaper Article

Title: Report on Marula Workshop

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NELSPRUIT - Villagers across southern Africa are being encouraged to make money out of the age-old custom of marula harvesting. University researchers and representatives from the United Kingdom's department of international development (DFID) are also urging governments to invest in the marula fruit industry. "There's absolutely no government investment in the marula industry, and governments don't consider the fruit as having potential for local and international markets," says Myles Meander of South Africa's Institute of Natural Resources. Majestic marula trees grow naturally in the arid northern parts of South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In summer, their golfball-sized fruit ripen to a pale yellow and drop to the ground. Baboons and even elephant are known to become intoxicated if they eat the fermented fruit, which villagers turn into a popular beer. DFID's studies on marula usage in rural communities of South Africa and Namibia have shown that marula beer and wine brings some financial relief to poor families, who can earn an average monthly income of R250. Women sell marula beer for R2,40c a litre in South Africa and \$N2 in Namibia. The marula kernel can also be turned into oil or snacks and some communities, especially in Namibia, use most parts of the marula tree to make various medicines. However, a survey of about 200 households that use marula in South Africa and Namibia, found that more than 87% of the households did not trade in the fruit products. Marula is mainly used for beer and jam in South African households, while Namibians use it for juice and porridge. A small group of enterprising women in both countries are struggling to break into international markets by selling oil, juice and soap. Andy Botelle from the Marula Resource Inventory in Namibia said rural communities had a spiritual link to marula trees. "There are songs, rituals and festivals associated with marula and all these have been gradually revived after independence in 1990," said Botelle. "Marula beer and wine isn't regarded as alcohol at all. Instead, during marula season you will find even government ministers take it easy - everybody drinks and enjoys it," he added. Dr Caroline Sullivan of the UK-based Centre for Ecology and Hydrology accuses governments of seriously neglecting the potential of indigenous tree products to generate revenue. She said there were no national records of revenue generated from indigenous tree products such as drinks, oils and medicine. Sullivan said governments were only interested in profits made from timber and ignored other tree products such as medicines, which could make millions of rands. "Some communities in the world depend exclusively on the non-timber products of trees, but forestry concessions and commercialisation reduce people's access to these resources," she said. Sullivan said rural communities were losing out because they lacked political authority. She said communities were not making money because markets were too far away or not well developed, and that they didn't know the actual value of their products. "They're unaware, for instance, that marula has five times more vitamins than citrus," said Sullivan. Leader of Eudafano Women's Group in Namibia, Priskila Nashandi, said that about 3 000 women in her association were struggling to find markets. "There's more than enough marula in our country but companies only ask for a limited supply," Nashandi said. But, she says, the Namibian agriculture ministry is providing financial back-up to her group. - African Eye News Service