

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

An African reforestation project that strengthened economic and community development

The first clue that something special awaited us was the presence of a young man with a video camera in the front of the 10-person dugout canoe that came to take us across the Senegal River for our visit to Salayaal de Loboudou, Mauritania. When Ousmane Aly Pame, President of the Global Eco-Village Network, Africa and Professor at Cheikh Anta Diop University; Assane Diop, a development specialist from Guédé Chantier; and I (Harwood) stepped out of the canoe, we were greeted by a large delegation of people including our host, Ali Ly, Chief of Salayaal village. Others in the welcoming delegation included Member of Parliament (MP), Moctar Aliou Sow; Mayor Mohamed Ould Bilal; Deputy Mayor, Savi Ould Amar; the Griot; and representatives of several development and environmental agencies in southern Mauritania.

As we turned around to look at the river, a different dugout canoe with 9 paddlers came racing into view and put on a spectacular show of canoemanship as they made several tight circles in front of us, suddenly stopped the canoe and paddled the canoe in reverse in tight circles. At one point, the front and rear paddlers stood up facing each other, tossed their paddles to each other, sat down, and continued paddling.

We were then taken to the vehicles for the ride to Salayaal. As the vehicles left the riverside, we were escorted by 5 horsemen, several with billowing robes, as we made the 2 km ride to our host community. Once we arrived at the gate, the women were on one side of the village gate and the men were on the other to personally greet us and welcome us to the community. After an opening ceremony where we listened to music and several leaders, including me spoke, we retreated to a room in the village offices where we enjoyed a traditional meal of rice, vegetables, and goat meat. After the meal, the group discussed the vision and activities in Salayaal.

Salayaal is a community of 320 which is linked with Ali Guelel, a community of 180, in a project of developing, maintaining, and benefitting from a protected forest. A little over a decade ago, the people of Salayaal sought to develop a community forest to protect them from the hot, dry, west wind. To achieve this goal, several members of the community would have to give up their homes and some of their farmland.

After many discussions and community meetings they agreed to fence in 18 hectares for the forest. The fence was necessary to protect the area from goats and other animals that would eat the small trees as fast as they appeared. Most of the new trees in the forest were seedlings that spontaneously began to grow larger in the absence of the grazing pressure of herbivorous

animals. The strategy of the project was to learn from nature, follow nature, and work with nature.

After several years the trees were large enough that the community could open the forest up to the goats. As the forest has continued to grow, the number of goats has increased, the milk they produce has increased, birds that had not been seen for decades have returned, and bees have reappeared. Beehives have been established and are managed and protected by a group interested in apiculture.

The fishermen of the community have seen a significant increase in the number and size of the fish that are on the forest side of the Senegal River. They have seen an increase in the number of birds that fish and view their reappearance as a sign of the health of their fishery. With the abundance of fish, the fishermen formed a fishing committee and decided on a minimum size for their nets so they would only catch large fish, allowing the small fish continue to grow.

In addition to the birds and the bees, the community has seen the return of monkeys, rabbits, a few hippopotami, and peccary (small wild pigs). At present, the community is lobbying the national legislature to keep bird hunters out of the area.

When the community-owned-and-managed forest preserve was first established, one member of the community grumbled, "You have destroyed your fields to grow this forest!" Today, this man says, "We should do this along the whole river." Today there are voices in the community asking for a forest on the other side of the village to protect them from the hot, sandy, east winds. The process Chief Ly and other leaders are using is to inform the members of the community about the project and turn them into allies. Then comes the hard part of agreeing on who will have to give up some of their land for the benefit of the whole community. Once an agreement has been reached, they need to find a way to create the necessary fence to keep the goats and camels out. The rest they will leave to nature.

The two communities farm about 800 hectares. They grow vegetables in the cool season. After the annual river flood recedes, they plant crops on the river bank. The system they use is "walere" (it helps) which includes the use of dung, leaves from the nearby forest, and the annual flood. During the dry season they grow okra. In Salayaal and Ali Guelel there is always something growing no matter how hot.

Harwood met Ali Ly last December (2014) at the Global Eco-Village Summit in Dakar where he told Ali that he would visit Salayaal on one of his trips to

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Senegal. When Harwood stepped out of the canoe, Ali hugged him and said, "You kept your promise!" During the Summit, Ali visited several Eco-Villages in Senegal and realized that Salayaal was already an Eco-Village without knowing it. During this visit, Ali expressed the desire for Salayaal to formally become a part of the Global Eco-Village Network and to create a national Eco-Village Network in Mauritania like the one just across the river in Senegal.

With the success of the forestry project, the community is looking for additional ways they can continue to improve the lives of the people and their

environment. In one of the meetings during the visit, MP Sow expressed the desire for a larger, coordinating and activity-sharing project he described as "two nations, one project, one river, one environment."

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