

# Sowing seeds

# for a positive future

**On a trip to West Africa Jackie Butler meets a passionate conservationist and discovers the bond between schoolchildren in The Gambia and Cornwall's Eden Project**



**T**HERE'S a little corner of the Eden Project's rainforest biome that is forever Gambia. It's a simple dirt plot shaded beneath palms and banana trees, where cooking pots are lined up ready to rustle up a tasty domada stew, and clean washing is draped to dry on the wobbly wooden fence.

It's a scene which echoes thousands of extended family compounds in rural areas of the tiny West African country, and its authenticity is down to a rather special man named Malang DK Jambang.

In his colourful flowing robes, he's a striking, yet humble character, a great ambassador for his roots who holds an unshakeable passion and a steely determination to preserve tradition, alleviate poverty and encourage sustainable living in his local community.

His fortnight-long trip to Cornwall from Serrekunda, near the coast in The Gambia, 18 months ago cemented a unique bond between Cornwall's giant greenhouses and a celebrated eco-tourism site and 1,000-acre reserve known as the Makasutu Culture Forest, and the surrounding 85 sq km Ballabu Conservation Area, encompassing 14 villages, west of the capital Banjul.

Malang's fact-finding and knowledge-sharing visit has not only given Eden visitors a flavour of his homeland, it forged an on-going friendship between the Gambian wildlife expert and the Project's horticulture director, Don Murray – and other key Eden staff members – and it resulted in the five schools in the Ballabu joining Eden's global Gardens for Life project.

An initiative which links 20,000 pupils in the UK – including many in the Westcountry – Africa, India and the USA, it encourages them to create gardens, grow food and tell each other about their experiences via new technology and good old-fashioned "snail mail".

For Western children and teachers, Gardens for Life represents a terrific learning opportunity; in The Gambia its significance is more a case of future survival. A former British colony, it's now a developing African country with growing aspirations – clearly illustrated by the ubiquitous presence of mobile phones but the evident dearth of cash and work, outside of the tourism industry.

Malang works long hours, with no regular pay and limited practical resources, as chief executive of the Makasutu Wildlife Trust charity which was set up – initially with some grant aid – to protect the wildlife and wild habitats of The Gambia through biodiversity and conservation and the wholehearted involvement of the local community and its elders.

Malang, 45, is a walking encyclopaedia about the wildlife in his homeland – in fact he's written as yet unpublished books on the country's incredible wealth of birds and butterflies, and trains the Gambian guides

who accompany tourists on walking excursions through the forest and by canoe upriver.

A father of five children aged from nine to 17, and a traditional healer, he is deeply concerned for their future and worries that if communities lose their ability to sustain themselves by rejecting customs and survival strategies, there will be no going back.

The Gambia is a magical, colourful country awash with goodwill, but nothing gets done in a hurry here.

However, with Malang's advice and encouragement, fledgling school plots are now beginning to emerge. On a recent holiday trip with the Gambia Experience I was privileged to join him on an inspiring – and bumpy – journey through the bush to two of the schools involved.

"When I was at school our lunch was made with the food we grew ourselves, but that custom has mostly disappeared now," Malang said. "Children often walk long distances to get to school. They bring money to buy food at school, but if their families have no money they won't eat all day."

As we stepped out of the car at Santayalla Nursery School at Kubuneh village in the heat of the morning sun, I was mobbed by a sea of little children in smart brown uniforms, all wanting to shake my hand and ask my name.

The headmaster called them to sit on little plastic chairs in a massive circle, in the dappled shade of the biggest mahogany tree I've ever seen, for a singsong recital of British nursery rhymes Baa Baa Black Sheep and I See the Moon in our honour.

Malang's short speech about incorporating local community knowledge to promote food security went a little over the heads of the three- to nine-year-olds, but when asked which food they would like to grow they were unanimous in their excited reply: "Bananas!"

In a new 30m by 10m garden plot, marked out by basic metal fencing and wooden posts – bought with donations from the Friends of Eden back in Cornwall – a row of baby banana trees rose proudly from the dry and dusty ground, the first evidence of their endeavours, which are hampered from the start by the lack of basic facilities.

In the UK we can turn on a tap to get as much water as our plants need to thrive. At Santayalla it must be drawn in buckets from a nearby well, which is far too deep and dangerous for the children to get near. On their long shopping list of essentials are a pump, tap and hosepipe. There are no gardening tools either; these and more plants and seeds to grow garden egg (aubergine), potato, okra, onion and hot peppers will be acquired when funds allow.

Over at Makumbaya village Lower Basic School, a couple of miles away down many more potholed tracks, the enthusiastic seven- to 13-year-olds of the environmental club and their garden master, Bakary Jambang, were a little further advanced in their endeavours.



Boys and girls at Santayalla Nursery School show off one of their banana plants; right, children from Makumbaya School use their new hose to fill watering buckets



PICTURES: JACKIE BUTLER



The children and teachers of Santayalla School gather for assembly under a giant mahogany tree; below, Makumbaya pupils get ready for garden planting

Here they make their own compost using earth, sand, leaves and animal manure – an age-old process Malang has helped to capture as a Powerpoint presentation to share with Gardens for Life schools in the UK via Eden living networks manager Rob Lowe.

Their small banana plantation was well established and there were beds taking shape for more crops. They were immensely proud of their new hosepipe, but it wasn't long enough to stretch from the standpipe to the vegetable beds, and they had no watering cans.

It's early days for Gardens for Life in The Gambia and it's going to need a reliable influx of money to ensure that Malang can keep it running and start to really make a difference. There are already some fundraising initiatives in place through the Eden Project to provide support.

Acclaimed photojournalist Jason Florio and his partner Helen Jones recently returned from a sponsored trek on foot from Makasutu through the Gambian to highlight and benefit the project, and Don Murray is planning to visit with a group from Friends of Eden this autumn.

**● You can help by making a donation or you can get more involved through the Friends of Eden. Cheques made payable to the Eden Trust can be sent to Nicola Hawkins, Gardens for Life Gambia Appeal, Eden Project, Bodelva, Cornwall PL24 2SG with the following reference on the back of the cheque: GFLGAMBIA. Or you can donate online at [www.edenproject.com/our-work/people/gardens-for-life/gardens-for-life-in-the-gambia](http://www.edenproject.com/our-work/people/gardens-for-life/gardens-for-life-in-the-gambia). And don't forget to visit The Gambia corner when you visit the rainforest biome.**



The Mandina Lodges on the water at Makasutu Culture Forest

## Makasutu upstaged Muse

MAKASUTU'S link to the Eden Project dates back to the night Devon rock giants Muse performed their Eden Session in summer 2006. On the band's guest list that evening, as friends of one of the stage crew, were British uncle and nephew adventurers James English and Lawrence Williams. They had acquired the swamp and bush forest known as Makasutu (or Big Forest) in the heart of the Gambian countryside alongside a beautiful bolon (meaning river tributary in the local Mandinka dialect).

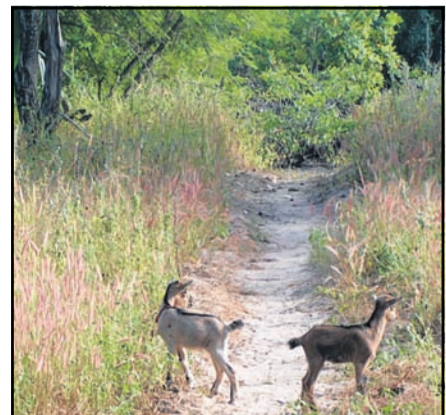
When they discovered the area it was being destroyed by tree-felling and over-farming; while they had persuaded the local people to halt the decline of the area, they were struggling to know how to proceed. On their way down to watch the show, they started chatting to a member of staff about their little piece of The Gambia and got so involved that they never saw the

gig. Keen to discover more, Eden horticulture director Don Murray visited Makasutu, met Malang, and the connection blossomed. In harmony with their conservation aims – and for essential income – Lawrence and James operate a small, upmarket tourist resort in the forest where visitors can stay in beautiful floating lodges on the bolon waters. They employ more than 100 local people as drivers, chefs, managers and guides; they host regular cultural evenings with traditional music and dancing, and encourage tourists to support local craftspeople and fortune tellers.

**● The Gambia Experience, with flights out of Bristol in our winter months, is the only UK tour operator booking accommodation at Makasutu. For more information visit [www.the.gambia.co.uk/mandina](http://www.the.gambia.co.uk/mandina).**



Top, the Gambia corner in Eden's rainforest biome; above, Malang Jambang on his visit to Cornwall and, below, advising on Eden's Gambia exhibit



Domestic goats in the Makasutu Culture Forest in The Gambia; inset, a baby girl plays in the sand at her Makasutu home

