
Malawi: forests, health and life

To the reductionist viewpoint of Western silviculture, forests are mainly -if not exclusively- a source of roundwood for industrial purposes. Nevertheless, forests are not only the home for thousands of indigenous people in different regions of the world, but also a rich source of different goods -wood included- and services. Medicinal plants are one of such valuable products which indigenous people use in traditional medical practices. Unluckily, some of them -together with the associated traditional knowledge- are also coveted by multinational pharmaceutical companies, which are actively involved in appropriating them for profit-making.

The accelerated process of deforestation that affects Malawi (see WRM Bulletin 24) is also provoking the loss of botanical species with a present or potential medical use. Joseph Gangire, chairman of the National Herbalists Association of Malawi has recently denounced that the future of traditional medicine in the country was menaced by the fast rate of deforestation.

"Cutting down trees aimlessly will make us lose our cultural beliefs in traditional healing" expressed Gangire during a national symposium on plant genetics celebrated in Lilongwe on January 14th. He also said that there are many diseases afflicting Malawians that cannot be cured by conventional medicine, adding that in many cases patients are discharged from conventional hospitals and referred to traditional healers who go deep into the forests to look for herbs, roots and leaves to cure them. But as forests disappear, the possibility to cure or alleviate the pain of many people in a non expensive and accepted way will also disappear.

There is also the risk of a cultural loss, since, if the present process continues, the elders will not be able to pass on their knowledge to the younger, simply because there will be no more forests and herbs left to practice on.

Even if the links between the health of the forests and human health is not always apparent, the case of Malawi shows that forest conservation is capital for the maintenance of the lives of many people.

Source: "Deforestation Threatens Malawi's Traditional Medicine" by Raphael Tenthani, PANA Correspondent, 17/1/2000