

# Allanblackia oil: supporting local livelihoods and conservation in Ghana

**Samuel Kofi Nyame of the IUCN Ghana office reports on an initiative to help rural communities in Ghana sustainably harvest and sell an alternative to palm oil.**

The Allanblackia tree is found in parts of West, Central and East Africa. It grows primarily in tropical rainforests, but can also be found on cultivated farmland areas. The oil obtained from the seeds has already been used by local communities but, until now, the extracted seed-oil has never been used on a commercial scale.

Several years ago, Unilever became interested in using Allanblackia as a substitute for palm oil to produce commercial products such as margarine and soaps, as its physical and nutritional properties offer great potential for many products. Thus began in 2002 a partnership that brought together Unilever, IUCN, ICRAF, UNDP, SNV (the Netherlands Development Organisation), SECO (the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs) and a number of governmental agencies and civil society organizations in Africa. The partnership set up the 'Novella Africa' project for the sustainable harvesting, processing and sale of Allanblackia seed-oil by local communities, initially in Ghana, and later in Cameroon, Nigeria and Tanzania. In addition to securing a sustainable supply of Allanblackia oil, the project aims to help improve the welfare and livelihoods of rural poor communities and foster biodiversity conservation and management.

As part of this project, IUCN is implementing, through several of its members and partners, an initiative in Ghana to investigate the socio-economic, species and botanical impacts of Allanblackia commercialization, to provide tools that will ensure sustainable harvesting and equitable sharing of benefits among the stakeholders. The results of the project will feed into best-practice guidelines for the wild picking of Allanblackia. A draft version of the guidelines was developed by an interdisciplinary team in 2003 and this is currently being tested in the field to ensure their usefulness for all the stakeholders involved.



Harrie Hendriks

*So far, the Novella Africa project has generated a total income of US\$85,000 for the 3,000 farmers participating and by 2011 it is hoped to involve 30,000 farmers with a total income of US\$2,000,000.*

The project will also contribute to biodiversity conservation through the use of Allanblackia in forest landscape restoration programmes and agroforestry systems. Although the tree has frequently been used as a shade tree in cocoa farms, the increasing use of shade-tolerant hybrid cocoa is leading to the disappearance of these shade trees from farms. Now, this project will help provide cocoa farmers with an economic incentive to maintain these trees and inter-plant Allanblackia seedlings between their cocoa trees. The project will also help restore degraded forest lands in Ghana using the native Allanblackia as an alternative to the exotic species plantations that have had negative impacts on local biodiversity and livelihoods.

Using Allanblackia in forest landscape restoration also entails some risks to biodiversity. These include the possibility of over-harvesting the seed sources, the impact it may have on the regeneration of the tree species, the evolution of Allanblackia into a plantation tree (which would be contrary to the project objective) and habitat disturbance by seed collectors. These risks can be reduced through careful management and by promoting legislation that favours the sustainable use of Allanblackia, and enhances livelihood security and forest governance.

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**A farmer drying Allanblackia seeds on the steps of his house**

## Research in brief

**Birdsong breaking up:** Forest fragmentation in Spain and Morocco is making it difficult for birds to hear and copy each other's songs, according to a study published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology*. The study by two Spanish biologists found that birds are living in more isolated groups and learning songs only from their closest neighbours. The researchers believe that these changes in song patterns are an early warning of habitat fragmentation which could eventually erode the genetic diversity of less mobile animals such as insects and small mammals.

**Source:** www.guardian.co.uk, November 30, 2005