



SUCCESS STORY

Traditional Skills, Modern-Day Jobs

A USAID-supported training center helps youth preserve indigenous knowledge



Photo: SAREP/IRDNC

Youth from the San people in Namibia are learning animal tracking and other increasingly rare indigenous skills. Reclaiming traditional knowledge can lead to lucrative work guiding tours in Bwabwata National Park, where their people now live.

The USAID Southern Africa Regional Environmental Program is improving natural resource management and livelihoods and helping to preserve indigenous knowledge and culture in the Okavango river basin and the Caprivi section of the Kwando and Zambezi river basins in Angola, Botswana and Namibia.

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The San people, who today have large populations in Angola, Botswana, and Namibia, have relied on their exceptional animal tracking skills and knowledge of their land for generations. Hunting and gathering continues to be one of their major economic activities and secures 75 percent of their food requirements. As with many indigenous traditions, the sustainability of this rich San culture is threatened, causing the transfer of skills between generations to diminish a little more each year. USAID's Southern Africa Regional Environmental Program (SAREP) is working to reverse this trend by connecting youth to employment opportunities that require traditional skills.

Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), a Namibian NGO that promotes sustainable, community-based natural resource management and works to improve the quality of life of rural communities, recognized this trend and sought a solution in partnership with USAID and other donors. With grant and technical support from SAREP, IRDNC established the Traditional Environmental Knowledge Outreach Academy (TEKOA) to support the transfer of traditions and improve the prospects of youth in Bwabwata National Park, in the Kavango and Caprivi regions of Namibia.

TEKOA has now trained more than 150 San youth in animal tracking, knowledge of native plants, and traditional medicine. Transferring indigenous knowledge increases employability as young people develop skills that prepare them for job opportunities in tourism and environmental and wildlife management.

One trainee, 23-year-old Gideon Peter, expressed a renewed sense of connection and opportunity, saying, "Many youth like me in my area and village have no jobs and are just wandering, looking for something to do. When I was selected to be part of the group, my heart jumped, I was very happy."

After completing the animal tracking course, Gideon is inspired to share what he has learned, whatever he does next: "This TEKOA tracking school is great and I want to also work there as a teacher. I want to teach other young people like me about our valuable traditional lifestyle and knowledge. If I don't become a teacher, I can now become a tourist guide, with all the new knowledge I have learned." TEKOA-trained trackers are now conducting trainings for others, from government personnel to elementary school students, paving the way forward for the sustainability of San cultural traditions.