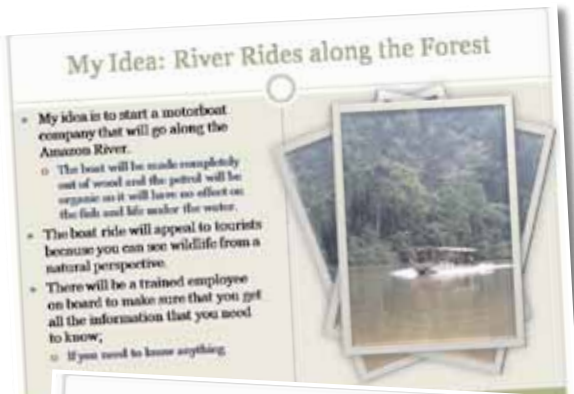


# United Nations International Year of Forests 2011 – celebrating forests for people

**Jil Hrdliczka**, of Knowledge Networks, tells *QUEST* about school students' innovative approaches to sustainability.



Above: Grade 7 learners Katherine Redding and Sonal Kalidas cannot imagine school life without the cool shade of the many trees at St Katharine's School. Image: Knowledge Networks

Left: Kayla Liversage's PowerPoint presentation slides.

Not a day passes without a child in a school somewhere in the world daydreaming about forests – the warmth of the filtered sunlight on your face, the clouds resting on the canopy, the cool mist from the spray of a waterfall, the hint of a rainbow, the freshness of the air, rich with the smells of life, the gentle sway of fern fronds, the sound dry leaves make when you walk on them, the connection a forest creature makes with you when your paths cross, the whistles, calls and signals of exotic birds, the silence, calm, comforting memories of good times shared, the thought of adventure, of being re-energised and feeling truly alive.

The United Nations International

Year of Forests 2011 is about people. It is about celebrating forests for people. The United Nations' web site 'It's your World' provides a global platform to celebrate people's action to sustainably manage the world's forests. The United Nations General Assembly declared 2011 as the International Year of Forests to raise awareness of sustainable management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests, in other words keeping the forests alive for people.

On the United Nations Year of Forests web site, there is a message – 'tell us how you plan to celebrate forests for people during 2011 so that we may showcase your stories and initiatives through this web site'. For the Grade 7 learners in schools in South Africa implementing the Knowledge Network IT Learning System, this message from the UN was all that was needed to confirm that they have a voice, a chance to make a difference and an opportunity to turn daydreams into action.

Action was in the form brainstorming sessions with educators, research, dialogue on forests, using the computer tools they love to present their ideas and packaging their work into viewable and motivating slides. All the work was done in the hope that investors and stars

such as Richard Branson, Warren Buffet, Bill Gates and Leonardo DiCaprio, while surfing the net, may find the work and be inspired by the ideas on making forests man's real or virtual playground and in return saving the forests and 80% of our terrestrial biodiversity.

The Knowledge Network/United Nations International Year of Forests Project involved selecting a forest and research on the environment, people, animals and plants. Maria Luchies, the Computer Skills teacher at The King's School West Rand said, 'The learners then had to come up with their own idea on how to save their forest. The impact on the environment had to be minimal and animals had to remain wild. The learners had to think of how their idea would start and how they could grow it, constantly being reminded that their idea should be able to raise funds which could then be used to finance further phases of their idea'.

'As part of integration with their other subjects, the learners had the opportunity to present their slides and do a speech as if they were presenting their ideas for real. Other teachers and visiting teachers asked questions and the overall interaction and learning that took place was phenomenal,' said Maria.

Kayla Liversage, a learner at The



Katherine Redding working with mentor Linda van der Walt in the computer centre at St Katharine's School. Image: Knowledge Networks

Right: Ernesto Jardim's PowerPoint presentation slides.

King's School, West Rand, said she enjoyed the project very much because 'you learn so much that you've never put into perspective before. The research was hard, because obviously, you need to find the easiest information to understand, but you also need information that makes you want to go and do something about the continuous problem (of deforestation).'

The United Nations states that forests cover 31% of the Earth's total land area. Primary forests account for 36% of forest area. It is clear that ongoing positive action is required to maintain these figures and possibly increase the figures over time. Wild forests and forests that are used for the production of wood products are required; 30% of forests are used for the production of wood and non-wood products.

Halima Beale, an educator at Helderberg Primary School, said that during the brainstorming sessions the roles that the Earth's forests play were discussed, from the obvious oxygen production to the lesser acknowledged, but equally important homes of indigenous peoples. The United Nations states that forests are home to 300 million people around the world and that the livelihoods of over 1.6 billion people depend on forests.

'It was very important to me that the students understood the need for logical thinking and how, even by starting small, they could make a huge difference in the long term. They were able to come up with amazing ideas from creating reserves to rainforest pharmacies where tourists could be taught by the indigenous people in the medicinal uses of plants that are all too often overlooked and destroyed along with acres and acres of trees every minute,' said Halima.

Ernesto Jardim, a Grade 7 learner at Helderberg Primary School, enjoyed the entrepreneurial aspect of this project. 'I thoroughly enjoyed inventing my own organisation. And when the opportunity

presents itself again, hopefully, I would, without a doubt, do it again.'

There is no question that forests are big business. In 2004, trade in wood-based forest products was valued at US\$327 billion. Global trade in non-wood forest products such as bamboo, mushrooms, game, fruit, medicinal plants, fibre, gums and resins has recently been estimated at approximately US\$11 billion per annum. More than 50% of the most popular prescribed drugs in the United States are derived from natural forest-based compounds (Groombridge and Jenkins 2002). The trade figures quoted are from a 2007 report on changing trends in forest products trade and from the United Nations web site.

The economic value of social, leisure, educational, environmental and medicinal products and services derived from forests is difficult to estimate but is surely on the increase. The crucial economic and environmental role forests play as a carbon reservoir and sink for mitigating climate change has yet to be evaluated or fully understood.

Linda van der Walt from St Katharine's School said 'through collaboration with each other and with me, the girls were able to come up with exciting ideas to sustain a forest and to piece their presentations together with content, graphics and ideas. As the mentor for the class, I tried hard to inspire the girls to come up with new and exciting ideas'.

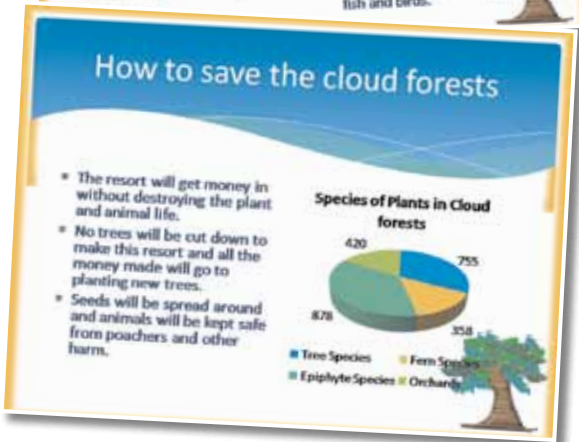
'At first, the concept (of this project) was quite daunting. We all went to the school's auditorium and discussed what sustainability means and why it is important to make our forests sustainable. The girls split themselves into groups and brainstormed various ideas. The girls' response to this process was positive and each group was excited to share its ideas with the others,' said Linda.

'The girls spent time in the computer centre to research different



kinds of forests and to choose a topic that appealed to them. They enjoyed researching the topics and loved preparing a PowerPoint presentation that drew on all the skills they have learnt over the years. They were also motivated to use graphics in a creative way and they made every effort to ensure that their graphics were relevant to the information on each particular slide,' said Linda.

The United Nations International Year of Forests is about celebrating forests for people. The words used by the United Nations in their message about the Year of Forests invites an entrepreneurial approach and challenged the learners to >>>



Katherine Redding's PowerPoint presentation slides.

package their projects into products through which their ideas could be marketed to viewers.

Linda says that this project differed from those covered during previous years as there was a component that required the use of personal ideas rather than just pure research. Through this project participants learnt that ideas need to be sold through easy-to-understand text, emotional wording to connect with the viewer, such as a shared memory or promise of a pleasant experience, and appealing graphics that look professional, complete, balanced and inspiring. They learnt that using colour is important – blues and greens



Sonal Kalidas's PowerPoint presentation slides.

to create a feeling of calm or reds and oranges for warmth or to remind viewers of the beauty of forests in their full autumn splendour.

Katherine Redding, a Grade 7 learner at St Katharine's School, explained her motivation for her presentation package. 'I have always loved the idea of being in the clouds and, when I had the opportunity to complete a project about a forest in the clouds, I was very inspired and excited. Throughout the project, I wanted to create the effect of being in the clouds and this prompted me to use a blue and green colour scheme for my presentation. I have also loved the idea of flying, so a lot of my information and pictures are about birds. I wanted to create a sense of stability and balance to match the trees and what takes place in a forest. Creating my own tree using PowerPoint's autoshapes was probably the hardest part of the project because I became obsessed with getting it just right. However, I enjoyed working in a group in which we brainstormed ideas of how to sustain forests.'

Sonal Kalidas, also a Grade 7 learner at St Katharine's School, said that at the start of the project the Grade 7 class discussed the meaning of sustainability. 'I tried to be different by not choosing a particular type of forest and decided to focus on a small forest in Japan because it is remote and many people don't know about it. All the time I was putting my presentation together, I kept thinking about forest trees, green and sustaining life. These thoughts inspired me to use the images in my presentation.'

'The bare trees at the bottom of my slides were drawn to create the idea of growth. I tried to keep this idea consistent throughout the project by placing the trees on every slide. I used all the skills that I have learnt in my weekly computer lessons to put this project together in a way that I think best communicates my ideas on how to sustain this forest,' said Sonal.

The United Nations International

Year of Forests 2011, celebrating forests for people, based on the presentations submitted by the Grade 7 learners to Knowledge Network, has achieved its objective.

The learners' action to sustainably manage the world's forests is being celebrated. We are raising awareness on sustainable management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests.

We are giving our learners a voice and a chance to make a difference. We are telling our stories and initiatives. We are creating an environment for dialogue on forests and building a solid foundation for awareness, lifelong learning and appreciation of all that forests have to offer.

Most importantly, we are not looking at forests in isolation. Forests are not only about trees. Forests are about people, biodiversity, about science, the seasons, life cycles, about the buying and selling of products, about colours, livelihoods and homes, medicines and about looking at a potentially negative topic such as deforestation and turning it into positive action about sustaining life.

Forests are also about learning together and working together, about brainstorming, sharing, building an organisation, selling ideas, preparing speeches, working with graphics on the computer, obeying copyright rules, communication and having a choice.

From the many quotes received from learners about the Knowledge Network/ United Nations International Year of Forests 2011 Project, we have learnt that forests are also about memories of fun times with the family, adventure, wildlife, ideas, beautiful visions, hope and daydreams. □