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## **Permaculture Training Centre, Uganda and Sustainable Agricultural Support for Orphans, Rwanda**

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*[Presentation Report]*

John Hunwick set up the Permaculture Training Centre, Uganda, and Sustainable Agricultural Support for Orphans (SASO) Rwanda.

John would like to thank Tim and Maddie Harland from the British Permaculture Magazine and Alliance Airlines for making his attendance at the conference possible.

When John lived in Australia he had a peanut farm, and like a lot of farmers he used DMBP to control weeds in Peanuts. One day his son got accidentally covered in the spray and got very sick. From then on he switched to one hundred percent organic farming methods because of the experience within his own family. He converted his farm to mainly growing soy beans.

In the late 1980s, life on farms in Australia got very difficult particularly with the export enhancement program and the American subsidised grains which were sold all over the world. He made the decision to sell the farm and decided to spend a couple of years working in Kenya at an agricultural college. He worked there at Katali Agricultural College which teaches courses in biodiversity. After six months there many farmers asked him to go and visit their properties. This evolved into a situation where he started running community seminars. Also in the same surroundings he had people asking him to visit particular orphanages.

John visited some orphanages and saw some very hungry and bored children. He looked around and saw an area where they could be growing things. He told them that he couldn't give them money but he could give them something which is much more important which is sustainability and sustainable food production. He started working with orphanages through putting in food systems.

He made a mistake in Kenya, which is very dry. He looked around and thought old man salt bush would be a good inclusion, so he went down to South Africa to a salt bush research centre and brought back two kilograms of salt bush. This project was

very unsuccessful. He made a very quick exodus to Uganda. The Ugandan people were very welcoming and he started running community seminars. The people in Uganda show a lot more interest in Development. They are really keen on developing themselves. They are not so obsessed with getting aid because for twenty years they were insulated from it. It was very fulfilling because he would hold a meeting and there would be people just jammed in everywhere. He also started working with some of the orphanages there and started an organisation called SASO to provide agricultural support for orphans because the AIDS epidemic in Uganda is chronic. In some parts of Uganda it is up to twenty seven per cent and in other parts it is as low as four or five per cent. Probably about eighteen per cent of the country is HIV positive. So it is a big problem, particularly in areas where the military have been very active. Where the military are there is no real security for women or the civilian population. They are just exploited. So AIDS infection in those areas is very high. Consequently there is a need to bring food to the children in the orphanages. So SASO are doing that and they also work with the community because many organisations come in and say that they are just working with orphans and they shun the rest of the community. SASO make the orphans something special when the other children in the community are suffering just as badly. When the big organisations build these orphanages and give them special privileges it alienates the community against these children because they are perceived as getting everything, so it becomes a problem. Consequently John started working with the orphans and the community which has had phenomenal repercussions because some of the women in the community came and started doing things in the orphanage. Sometimes the women would come up and help build rock swales. With the community seminars he was becoming very aware that he personally could not heal Africa or heal Uganda. He realised that he needed to get a team of indigenous people around Uganda that were going to do this work.

The conception of setting up the Permaculture Training Centre of Uganda came about. They started the negotiations to get land. They looked at areas outside of Kampala and in other areas and then they were offered this land which is in Kampala in an inner city area. You would never believe that it is inner city because it was so basically open and very heavily treed. He took the option of being in Kampala rather than out of Kampala because many business people and many non-government organisations bring people to Kampala for seminars already. That means that they are paying for the women or the farmers or whoever to come from distant places. By having it in Kampala it means that they are able to network very strongly. It means that people coming to the seminars learn about the centre, have a look at it and at plants that seed. By having living displays they see an idea and they grasp it and say that they want to come back for training. They can apply to their NGO for funding to come and do it. There is a serious lack of information. It is very difficult in most African countries to get information so he also wanted to set up a resource centre.

They saw on CNN the massive out-flux of refugees from Rwanda and he went down to the refugee camp to have a look in the second or third week of the war and it was extremely bad, much worse than any of the television stations could ever show you. Down there he found that many of the young children had been picked from the massacre sites and brought out of the country and there was no milk.

John went back to Kampala and bought milk and sugar and went back down to Uganda Red Cross and set up small child-feeding centres where they could at least feed the children. So they started this program. The greatest thing that was also a difficulty was that many of the children had witnessed an entire village being slaughtered. The way they slaughtered them was to send messages on the day back in the village because everyone knew the war had started. They said “quick, quick run to the church, you’ll be safe there.” The community ran to the church. It was all pre-planned years before. They devised these plans where everyone ran to the church and they were slaughtered there. It was extremely bad. That was how they accomplished such an enormous number of deaths in such an incredibly short time. Many of these children were traumatised.

John was driving back to get some more milk and thought about what children want. He came up with the idea of African beads. So when he got back home he managed to get hold of a big box of beads. Those children that were somehow ok came and lined up very orderly but there were still many sitting in the houses but they just started the distribution. Then as these children left the queue and started threading the beads and getting excited it also excited those who were sitting in the houses. They started making a move to find out what this excitement was. Then adults started bringing them across. The Red Cross claimed that it was one of the most successful trauma control efforts that they had ever seen because it just got to so many people. They provided exactly what the children wanted. Because with westerners its very easy to come and dominate and tell people what is best for them. You need to really analyse and think what do these people really want. That’s where many of the big organisations go wrong. They are blinded to the reality.

Because John was emotionally captivated by all of this he sold his house. Within three weeks of putting his house on the market he had a cash buyer as if it was meant to be. Then he continued to do what he had been doing and got in to Rwanda. There were still women and children wandering around massacre sites where there was nobody. There was nothing at all. When he drove in the first time from the Ugandan border to Kigali all that he saw were soldiers. John kept pouring injured people in to the back of his Toyota and taking them to receive medical treatment. He was particularly targeting women and children because he perceived them as the innocent victims. They set up an orphanage. He arranged for tourists to come down from Kampala and volunteer but they kept finding mines. From the experience that he’d had in the Australian army, John removed the mines himself. Then they started to bring in children. These children were very traumatised. Many of the children were totally mute, they couldn’t talk. They took them back. The children saw the volunteers starting to implement a permaculture system. The children themselves decided to get involved. The therapy was unbelievable. The children really came out of their shells. The kids were so enthusiastic about tree planting , they seemed to know where to put the things. It was already within their thinking patterns. What we’ve got to do as permaculturists and trainers is just to build on the steps that are already there, to get back some of the traditional knowledge that’s been taken off them by Westerners. Rwanda just got too unsafe and they had to pull out.

They went back to Uganda and pushed further along with their project. It took eighteen months to get clearances to buy three acres of land. Initially it was totally dilapidated. The soldiers looted it, there was not a tree around. John and his team

took possession of the land on the first of August last year. John needed funds and there were tourists around. These tourists were a resource so John and his team turned half of the area into a campsite. They also developed plans to put in a biogas latrine. Tourists came and saw permaculture and they will take ideas back to their country. The Ministry of Tourism has put John's permaculture display board in the front window of their ministry as an example to the rest of the tourism developers of Uganda that they should also be looking at this system. He's given the Ministry a plan for Biolatrines and they are trying to get developers to use them. They want the people in charge of national parks to put in Biolatrines. Because if you don't do that, methane is still going to go up in to the air. Why not capture it and put it to use.

Many of the murals that have been painted really excite the local tourists. There is going to be a permaculture garden restaurant. Many of the excess vegetables will be sold to the backpackers. The profits will leach across to the Permaculture Centre. It won't fund the entire Centre, you can probably never dream to do that because of the expanse of training that is needed. But it will certainly fund the base so that if no funding is coming in, the training within the centre will be able to continue.

They have collected more than forty medicinal plants. John is very, very keen on medicinal plants because many of the Governments in Africa, as a result of influence from drug companies, have passed legislation to ban medicinal plants. He has managed to turn that around, the governments have become more liberal.

They have established a resource centre which will have books on all different developmental subjects such as health, appropriate technology, permaculture, biogas construction and that will be accessible to the general public. They want to get a photocopy machine so that people can come and photocopy it and take the information away with them.

John wants to set up some volunteers. They have got some of the universities in England to send volunteers over with partial university funding. The students do this of this as part of their curricula.

The young children love being in and around permaculture. There are rabbits as an income generating source for people. So many people feed chickens artificial foods and grain. People can eat that grain too and there is not enough there to feed the people. Rabbits are eating the chickweeds and sweet potato vines and all sorts of other things which people don't eat. They have goats which they keep in a pen and hand feed. These goats produce three to five litres of milk per day which is a fantastic resource for the families to build the bodies and bones of the children. The local people are obsessed with the black and white cow mentality: they must have a European cow. These cows take an enormous amount of energy to feed them. Some of the goats out-produce the cow and it doesn't take so much work to feed the goats. Because its locked in a pen it is not running around expending energy, it is also prevented from eating the trees. On the swale they have comfrey, elephant grass and Tanzanian grass. The comfrey is used for the chicken and the pigs. On that one swale they are looking after all of their livestock. The goats are thriving. Any trimmings that are taken off any of the trees are also fed to the goats.

The biggest problem that they have is white ants. The white ants eat maize. Uganda used to be all lush tropical forests. Most of the trees are semi deciduous. When the forests were there the termites were in balance with the entire ecosystem. Now they've taken all of the trees and left termite mounds. The termites now have to eat something. Man just destroyed the ecosystem because in Africa they see all of these beautiful pictures of England where there's not a tree in sight with rolling lawns of grass for the cows to eat and they all want that because they think that that is success.

If anyone's got any interesting seeds then John is very keen to get hold of them. They have fifty inches of rain in Kampala. The altitude is four thousand five hundred feet. All of the north of Uganda is very dry Savanna country. The West which is coming in to Rwanda is very, very steep. The other big problem which Uganda has is hyacinths. America is now giving a grant to Uganda. They are now spraying chemical sprays on to the hyacinths. The grant is for the chemical companies, not for Uganda. There are phenomenal islands of hyacinths. You could run across them. The cause is the chemical fertilisers uplifting the nutrient content of the lake. The United States have just granted millions of dollars to spray Lake Victoria with chemicals.

Bill Mollison suggested the use of a nitrate fertiliser and to use some kind of beetle: in order to get rid of the hyacinths. If they spray the lake it will be an environmental disaster right down to the Mediterranean because that's where the river goes.

There is currently an information block in Uganda. Any seeds or any information that they can get will be gratefully received.