

Conservation wins 'tribal friendly' support from Gambian intern

By Doris McCartney

"Tribal friendly" describes soil conservation efforts in The Gambia, the smallest independent nation in Africa. With a population of 800,000, the country is about half the size of Vermont with a multitude of environmental problems.

Iowa State University engineering student, a national from The Gambia, Kebba Manka, 36, talked recently about conservation programs in his country. Kebba has been spending the summer as an intern in soil and water conservation district offices earning on-the-job training. This month he has worked out of the Iowa County Soil Conservation Service office, Williamsburg.

With a ready smile, Kebba says, "Earth dams, terraces and diversions, grass waterways and farm ponds are part of new engineering experiences for me.

"In The Gambia, conservation means cooperation with the government, civil servants, village tribal leaders and the families who farm in the rural areas. I will be a civil servant. Yes, some say, an enviable position."

In the past, The Gambia was once a slave-trading center, where ships took loads of blacks to America.

People of his homeland belong to one of the five leading tribes: the Mandingo, Fulani, Wolof, Jola and the Serahuli. Tribal chiefs name members from among themselves to the Parliament.

Experience

Kebba worked first as an intern at the soil conservation office in Keokuk County, Sigourney, and next moves to Grand Island, Neb., gaining similar field experience.

Steve Johnston, who heads the Iowa County SCS office, directs Kebba's duties here. He says, "Kebba has had

some interesting discussions with local farmers. All are curious and learning. This is helpful especially for Kebba."

In the steamy corn-growing climate, Kebba often wears his national shirt, a lightweight cotton fabric with wide, colorful shoulder borders, which drapes loosely over his work pants.

While his shirt gives him international style, Kebba's British-tinged accent is a giveaway that he comes from another continent. English is the official language in his country, yet he studied too in Great Britain.

Conservation is urgent

The urgency for The Gambia's soil conservation program began in 1978. In less than a decade, the country has hastened to invest in measures to counter massive destruction of the nation's resources, especially because of The Gambia's major river, which bears the same name.

At floodtide, there is loss of crops, families that till the land along the river must be removed and soil is damaged. The Gambia is a country which covers 4,361 square miles, stretches 180 miles east from the Atlantic Ocean and is narrow, measuring 15 to 30 miles north and south.

With the nation's economy based on agriculture, some 30 to 35 Gambian nationals are being trained and hired for the soil conservation staff. Sponsor of the summer program is the U.S. Agency for International Development. The Gambia has modeled their new Soil and Water Management Unit after the United States Department of Agriculture SCS.

The Gambia has completed its first integrated watershed management plan that included agroforestry, rangeland and upland conservation practices.

Peanuts and rice are the main crops the small farmers count on for harvest returns.

More than 95 percent of the country's export income and most of the food requirements come from agriculture.

"The Gambia's economy depends on the soil," Kebba emphasizes.

The growth problem has compounded the need for soil conservation. In the past, small tracts were cleared and cultivated by hand, followed by natural fallow. As more land was cleared and needed, soil erosion accelerated following intense rains.

The steady intrusion of salt water
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The Gambia

A Republic, multiparty system

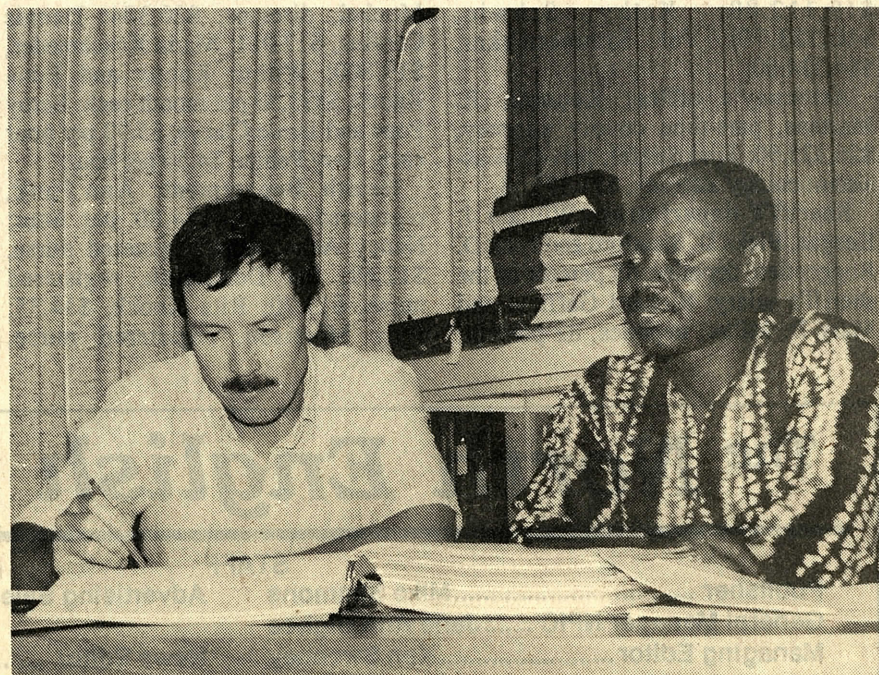
Independence: Feb. 18, 1965

Natural Resource: Fish

Area: 4,361 square miles

Industry: Peanut products, brewing, soft drink, agricultural machinery assembly, small woodworking, metal working, clothing.

History: 1807 slave trading abolished from The Gambia.



Intern on the job

Kebba Manka, who is studying for a degree in engineering at Iowa State University, Ames, is working with Steve Johnston, conservationist, this month at the Iowa County Soil Conservation Service, to gain on-the-job skills he will need when he returns in May, 1992, to his native The Gambia, a small country located on the west bulge of Africa.