

Mashi Crafts

Mashi Crafts beginnings were modest. They pioneered the way for crafts in Caprivi. Craft makers were discontent with the way other outlets in the region were run, and wanted to try on their own. Their vision was:

1. Social: to help local people, especially women and those men not able to enter the job market, to develop their creative skills and to assist them to establish a viable collectively owned business that would earn income for the craft makers thereby providing financial stability and empower them with ownership and management of their own enterprise
2. Economic - to break the model of local people getting very low prices and business people elsewhere making the real profits
3. Environmental – to ensure that natural resources are sustainable harvested as the market for natural resource based products increases

They started selling locally made crafts at a roadside stall and to Mud Hut Trading at the Namibia Craft Centre in Windhoek. A group of eight basket makers from Choi came together in 1996 working in pairs on a voluntary daily basis to sell each others crafts under a roof. Transport from Choi, 5km down the road to Kongola junction was paid from a commission earned from sales. Today Mashi Crafts has over 230 members, men and women, from across the East and West Caprivi. Each craft group has its specialities and all make baskets.

The emphasis is on the use of easily acquired but sustainable harvested natural resources such as palm, bark, grass, wood, shrubs, seeds and reeds. Numerous different types of crafts are made, some traditional and some that have been modified for modern day usage. The products include baskets, reed mats, bags, beer strainers, traditional drums, thumb pianos carvings and necklaces. Community Resource Monitors employed by the conservancies in the region monitor and study the use and harvesting of resources, such as the primary bark used for dyeing the palm, *Berchemia discolor* (Bird plum) and *Hyphaene petersiana* palm plots that were established to try to provide a closer source of basket making materials and community foresters control the harvesting of wood resources such as *Pterocarpus angloensis* (Bloodwood or Kiaat) and *Baiaiaea plurijuga* (Zambezi teak). .

Having become a popular outlet Mashi Craft Market underwent some refurbishment in 1998 and the original roof structure was enclosed to enable the selling of crafts to be done with relative ease.

Previously the market was open and stock was carried out in the morning and re-housed in the store room at night. This became very time and energy consuming. Since it was run on a voluntary basis by the resident craft group at Choyi. But sales opportunities were lost because the market was frequently closed particularly during the planting and harvesting season when the women worked in their fields.

A Management Committee was elected from the members of the eleven craft groups that the market supported. Of the eight members, seven were women and they drew up and instituted a constitution. A local NGO active in conservation and community development in the area IRDNC (Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation) gave support and mentorship and provided the salaries initially for two revolving sales assistants who ran the craft market opening on a daily basis. They worked one week on and one week off doubling up on the last Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of each month when craft people brought their crafts to be registered, priced and labelled and receive the money from the sales made in the last month. The sales assistants salaries are now paid from the commission charged on the sale of crafts and a Centre Manager has been employed by Mashi Crafts since 1997. The centre is now fully independent of financial help. The craft market manager oversees the running of the market. Their work is overseen by the Management Committee which now has 10 members from five different conservancies, with a chairperson, treasurer and secretary and 7 additional members.

The first national craft festival and basket competition took place in 1998, and with the exception of a couple of years during the instability within the Caprivi region takes place on an annual basis.

With tourism in the region taking off an idea was formulated in 2010 to expand Mashi Crafts and provide more services and facilities to tourists whilst maintaining their focus on crafts. A centre was designed to house the crafts, with other satellite buildings planned for honey, wood and natural product sales, information, and a base for guides. Mashi Crafts has become a true success story and a model upon which many other craft enterprises base their business. Over 230 craft makers have been economically empowered from craft sales in 2008, contributing a direct household income. Mashi crafts represents crafters from eleven different conservancies and emerging conservancies, the majority of whom are women and many of whom are the sole income earners. It helps support their families and provide clothing, food, medicines and pays school fees.

Lifestyles have improved. Female-headed households are able to support many dependents from crafts and CRM salaries. Working with all groups irrespective of background allowed for diversity and richness of traditions keeping all cultures alive.

Crafts are on display at the National Art Gallery and sold at the Namibia Craft Centre and some other craft shops in Windhoek.

Predominant language groups: Fwe, Yei, Totela, Subiya, Khoe