

Sitting on a choc goldmine

By VASEMACA RARABICI

Cocoa farmers in Tailevu are excited over the revelation that they are sitting on a goldmine. A goldmine that will enable them to plant cocoa trees, harvest the beans, dry them and produce Fiji's own nutritious chocolate.

The news has also reached those farmers who had abandoned the industry in the early 1990s following a global disease outbreak called black pods. A hurricane around the same time also badly affected the cocoa plantations.

"The farmers who had left are now returning because they have heard that cocoa farmers are sitting on a goldmine just waiting to be explored," said Joseva Serulagilagi, the chairman of the Tailevu Province Cocoa Growers and Producers Co-operative Association Limited.

"These farmers know that with the right knowledge and resources, the cocoa industry makes good money at \$1,500 a tonne. In the 1980s and early 1990s Fiji was producing 200 to 300 tonnes at the time, but now we have gone down to 30 and 40 tonnes a year.

"We are now embarking on a new cocoa project with an international partner that aims at reviving the local cocoa industry. We are all excited about it."

This goldmine or the prospects for Fiji developing a major cocoa industry was first identified by a Swedish tourist, Fabian Rimfors, who came to Fiji for a holiday. While traveling past Wainibuka in Tailevu, he saw all the cocoa trees and was shocked when told that the cocoa beans were not cultivated trees because at first glance he thought the cocoa beans were of high and nutritious value.

"He said Fiji had all the prerequisites for creating a sustainable cocoa industry and that all the ingredients for making high quality chocolate were already cultivated in Fiji," said Mr. Serulagilagi.

"The only thing missing has been a widespread knowledge of processing and understanding of the opportunities which lie in adding value to the commodity. This can be done by transfer of knowledge and the right stimulation."

Mr. Rimfors returned to Sweden with the promise that he would come back and help local farmers create a sustainable cocoa industry. Last month he was back in the country as project manager for Cocoa Bello, a Swedish non government cocoa organisation, sponsored by the Swedish International Development Agency.

He came to look for a Fiji sister group that would work with them through an exchange project to develop Fiji's cocoa industry. It was then that he was introduced to the Tailevu Province Cocoa Growers and Producers Co-operative Association Limited.



Partners... Joseva Serulagilagi (left) and Fabian Rimfors.

After the decline in cocoa production - from 200 tonnes a year in the 1980s and 1990s to 30 tonnes a year today – the Tailevu cocoa association remained active.

Mr. Serulagilagi said the association had money invested which kept it alive and over the years it had been dreaming of a way to revive the industry. He said the exchange programme with Cocoa Bello was a dream come true.

Mr. Rimfors said the exchange project aim to create a greater understanding of the needs of sustainable cocoa cultivation and fair trade within the cocoa industry. He said that by the transfer of knowledge in both directions, there was hope to revive the local cocoa industry which has been in decline since the early 1990s.

The exchange will consist of a Swedish and a Fijian delegation. They will visit each country respectively for two weeks. Mr. Rimfors said members of the delegation will comprise of representatives from the cocoa industry and related industries in both countries and will cover the whole process of chocolate manufacturing from farming to retailing. This exchange will take place next year.

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“Fiji is probably better known as a paradise island than as a cocoa producer, nevertheless there is a modest production with great potential. The potential is constituted by the fact that the varieties of cacao cultivated here are regarded as the most exclusive ones, as well as the fact that only a certain amount of the cultivated cacao is harvested,” said Mr. Rimfors.

“To develop and re-establish the know-how of how to process and refine cocoa beans among the Fijian cocoa farmers would contribute not only to diminish expenditure by not buying imported chocolate, but above all it would contribute to the production of an organic and more wholesome high quality chocolate.

First of all we start with a knowledge exchange between Sweden and Fiji where all the steps, from farming to retailing, are represented, to bridge the existing gap of knowledge between cultivation and processing,” Mr. Rimfors said.

“If cocoa farmers are provided with a greater understanding of their commodity and the possibilities offered by value added processing, motivation will encourage production.

Since Fiji already has the basic prerequisites of creating a sustainable cocoa industry, Mr. Rimfors said the main investments on the behalf of the cocoa farmers are basically only time and interest.

He said the exchange project would also develop and establish the know-how of how to process and refine cocoa beans in Fiji.

Mr. Rimfors said this would contribute not only to diminished dependence on world market prices, but above all it could contribute to the production of an organic and nutritious high quality chocolate which could be enjoyed by everybody.

He said Fiji could set a good example when it came to sustainable deployment of available resources.

“The nutritional value of the cocoa bean is very high and the same in all varieties. On top of that chocolate also contributes with other healthy benefits, it contains phenols and flavonoids, chemical substances that facilitate blood circulation and lower the risk of heart diseases and vascular disorder,” he said.

Fiji has many different varieties and hybrids, although the Amelonado, locally called Waimaro, is the predominant in the Tailevu province.



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