

Putting Down Roots in Kenya - John Mitchell's Year in Africa



Mitchell cutting a trail on Bedford's leased land

Bedford Biofuels has just started planting in Kenya, largely thanks to John Mitchell, General Manager - Kenya, who transplanted himself into Africa and has been instrumental in the company's progress over the past year.

November marks one year since Mitchell made the move from Canada to Kenya and while his experience has had its ups and downs, he says he is committed to seeing Bedford's Jatropha project established and dripping oil.

Jatropha curcas is a drought resistant, oilseed bearing tropical tree. When pressed, Jatropha nuts produce 35%-40% oil, and lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions from Jatropha jet fuel are up to 84% lower than traditional jet fuel emissions.

Bedford is growing Jatropha in Eastern Kenya. Mitchell is based in Malindi, a town in close proximity to Bedford's 160,000 hectares of leased

land in the Tana Delta District of the coast province of Kenya.

"When David McClure (President and CEO) asked me to go to Kenya for Bedford, I told him I'd put in five years here," says Mitchell. "But I can see myself staying for 10 years or more depending on what needs to be done in the long run."

Mitchell was previously Bedford's GM in Edmonton. However, his life experience in a number of fields shaped him for the transition to Kenya. As the General Manager in Kenya, Mitchell is responsible for all hiring, dealing with contractors, suppliers, media and managing relationships with the ranchers. The detail that was not outlined in his job description was the necessity for his gradual integration into the community. He has been determined from the day he set foot in the country to get to know the people and the land and also to be aware of all

activity and projects in the district.

“When I drive around the land and in the villages, people yell my name and chant Jatropha or, ‘Bedford Biofuels.’ They want jobs and to see progress in their communities,” says Mitchell. “It has taken time for me to earn their respect and their acceptance and for them to want me around. I go to the ranches almost every day. I have always loved the outdoors, so I enjoy exploring the land and keeping on top of everything that’s going on. I make it a priority to learn the names of the people I meet, to talk to them about the land, as I visit every village, and to let the people know Bedford cares about them and their future.”

Mitchell says Bedford has hired approximately 50 people this year, will hire 500 by next spring and many more as time goes on.

“They understand that Bedford’s not going to give them a handout, instead Bedford’s going to give them jobs. For that reason, we have almost 100% support in the region. Even though we can’t hire everyone, the employment we bring will ignite change in the region.”

The company’s EMPOWER (Every Member Prospers On World Energy Resources) program will bring food security, improved housing, education, health care and access to clean water to the local people.

Mitchell says he tries to do little things to let the local people know he cares. Whether stopping on the side of the road to give water to people, working in the field, or passing out licorice to children, he is slowly but surely winning acceptance and friendship.

“The first time I really felt accepted was when Benjamin Gololi died in April,” says Mitchell. “Gololi was the chairman of the chairmen. He was the head of the ranchers’ forum. I did him a simple favour and his entire village has now really embraced me.”



Mitchell with children in the town of Garsen in the Tana Delta District

On a trip from Mombasa to Malindi, Mitchell and Joel Ruhu, VP Human Resources, stopped at the Hospital in Kilifi to visit Gololi, who had been diagnosed with throat cancer and had been sick and in the hospital for three weeks. He hadn’t eaten for more than two weeks because of his sickness and was emaciated.

“His family was at the hospital with him and they hadn’t had the means to pay the hospital to discharge him until Giritu Ranch gave them the money. They were then still faced with the problem of getting him home which was 160 Kilometers away. They had no money to pay for an ambulance or to pay for his prescriptions.”

Mitchell said “I have a pickup outside with a canopy on it, why don’t we take him and his family home right now?”

He bought a mattress for the back of his truck, picked up and paid for Gololi’s prescriptions and bought the family groceries as they hadn’t been home in three weeks and drove a very grateful



John Mitchell holds a meeting at the land on Kitangale Ranch where Bedford started planting on October 17

Gololi and his family home. Just two weeks later, in his own home surrounded by his family, Gololi died.

“They invited me back to the village and asked me to speak at his funeral,” says Mitchell. “It was a simple favour I did for Gololi and his family, but it meant the world to that village.”

Mitchell says that while most days are good, the hardest thing about life in Kenya is working with antiquated methodologies.

“The way they do things in Kenya is not the way they do things in the west. And when you try to introduce efficiencies, the standard response is, ‘But this is how we do it in Kenya.’ It’s frustrating and I’m trying to help them understand. I tell them in Canada we only have 90 frost free days to plant and harvest a crop. In Kenya, you can grow food year round. In Canada only 3% of the population are farmers and in Kenya 80% of the population are farmers but they can’t feed themselves. One Canadian farmer feeds 135 people while in Kenya, one farmer feeds 0.8 people. Bedford is introducing modern farming technology to replace peasantry.”

Mitchell says a lot of progress has been stifled in the region by conservationist groups from

Europe who want to prevent the area from changing. Sadly for the people in the Tana Delta District, you can’t eat a nature reserve.

“We have slowly earned the respect of the people and share a vision of a better life for this region,” says Mitchell. “We don’t just stand there and tell them to work. We work hard right along with them and they respect that. Also, in Kenya, people don’t have much but they love to share what little food they have. While most foreigners won’t eat food from the locals, I will sit down with them and eat their goat meat, rice, Ugali (thick cooked corn meal) and beans. I think that says a lot and builds trust between us.”

He says the highlight of living in Kenya is that the people are so happy. When Mitchell drives by and people look at him suspiciously, wondering who he is and why he is here, all he has to do is extend his hand and wave and they wave back and a big smile appears on their faces. They are a happy people.

“The people of the Tana Delta District have embraced our project. They really need it and they really want it,” said Mitchell. “They will do anything to make this happen and I’m just happy I’m here to see it through. Every day is an adventure.” ■