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Rwanda tea reigns, makes good cattle fence

By [Perry Beeman](#) | October 02, 2009 | Rwanda

Here I am in a country that grows some of the best coffee in the world, and I don't drink the stuff. (I know, a journalist that doesn't drink coffee. What's next, no laptop?) Oh, I sampled the coffee, and I can understand the appeal. But the tea — also world-renowned — has me hooked.

You should know there is Des Moines angle to the tea boom in Rwanda.

Today, I paid a visit to Pfunda Tea Co. in Gisenyi to discuss whether the tea operations in Rwanda are as good for the environment as they are for the palate.

Tea and coffee growing were the cream of the economy in Rwanda until last year, when ecotourism became the No. 1 business. But the government realizes the leaves and beans are still gold here. There are 11 tea factories, some government operations that soon will go private. Pfunda took over a government plant in 2004 and now wants to double the amount of tea it processes in a year.

Rwanda's 11 tea factories produce 22 million kilograms of tea a year, and the government would like to see 40 said Pfunda General Manager A.P.S. Shaw . By comparison, China puts out 1,000 million kilograms, India 880 million and Kenya, 360.

"It's a small percentage," Shaw said of Rwanda's share. "But because it is so high quality, the blenders want to buy it."

Pfunda hopes the government will help the firm find land, perhaps in grasslands. "Land is a very touchy issue in Rwanda," said Shaw, whose family runs a farm in India.

Said Pfunda deputy manager A.S. Nain: "Our intention is not to take land away from farmers."

This country of 8 million to 10 million people covers an area one-fifth the size of Iowa and is still taking in refugees gone since before the 1994 genocide. The shortage of land colors almost every debate.

Pfunda gets most of that tea from farmers working their own land. The firm does not own large tea plantations. Across the country, you'll see women picking the tea leaves by hand and carrying huge bags of it on their head. When they get to the plant, they are paid 22 Rwandan francs (or 4 cents) per kilogram of tea leaves. Workers fertilizing and cultivating the fields get 700 francs a day, one of the highest payments from any tea company That's \$1.23 US.

There are those who don't think growing coffee or tea on hillsides is a good idea, environmentally speaking. But for Shaw's part, he said the plants are dense and hold the soil.

"There shouldn't be any objection to growing tea," Shaw said. "It controls erosion. It provides regular income to farmers."

Shaw notes that no pesticides or herbicides are used on his company's tea. The fields are fertilized with nitrogen, phosphorus and potash, a blend used often in Iowa.

The tea can keep cattle out of what's left of Rwanda's forest. The Gishwati Area Conservation Program — co-created by Des Moines-based Great Ape Trust of Iowa and Earthpark — has welcomed the tea planting around Gishwati Forest. Cattle-grazing in the forest has been one of the biggest conservation issues in Gishwati. The tea serves as a fence of sorts, and a buffer between the forest and agriculture in the area. The program is reforesting a large area in western Rwanda, and also researching an isolated chimpanzee population there.

I'm in Rwanda on a fellowship through the International Reporting Project.

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