

THE KARATARA PROJECT

Africa's first Rural (Self Sustaining) Free Eco-Business School

...and 14 more like it coming!

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"Sounds crazy doesn't it?... ", says a smiling Steve Carver, businessman, philanthropist, entrepreneur, farmer, and founder of the Karatara Project "...and that's exactly what everyone told me when I said what I wanted to do, but now it's happening, it's there and growing



furiously – Africa's first FREE rural eco-business school for entrepreneurs! For over a year we've had an amazing, dedicated team of people working on the campus and some smart business people driving our first eco-projects full time. It's magic in motion!"

There are two elements to the mad, beautiful new bit of hope for Africa – Education and enterprise, working hand-in-hand. "It's like pedalling a bicycle, you need two legs to do it or you won't end up going far!" explains Steve.

The project's goal is simple – create wealth for Africa's rural communities in harmony with our environment. This unique idea came about 3 years ago when Steve was inspired by his great friend Taddy Bletcher's remarkable Cida City Campus – a free university for bright kids from impoverished backgrounds in downtown Jo'burg – and so began his dream: "Working with rural community leaders including sangomas and church leaders we had to hand-select students. With them, a couple of dedicated volunteer teachers, and a huge amount of faith, we began to create the first campus out of nothing. We had no budgets, no curriculum, a dilapidated old building without desks or chairs; – I gave our very first lecture in the shade of a tree outside Karatara's town hall!"

Steve runs a Marketing Communications Business in Jo'burg called the WinWin Group, but also raises Eland on his farm near the small Garden Route town of Karatara, near Knysna and that's how he discovered this truly beautiful little sanctuary. "This has really become a testament to the incredible transformation happening in our country" says Steve, "Karatara was a whites only town built years ago to house government forestry workers and protect their jobs. For ages it was overlooked and until 2005 very, very little had changed in Karatara." In 2 short years the town has transformed and continues to do so at an increasingly rapid rate!": Eden Campus (www.edencampus.org) , as the Karatara Project's campus is known, is now in its second year and has had tremendous support from local residents and the Knysna municipality. For an annual registration fee of **R450** students from surrounding rural villages and communities sign up to live on campus full time for the 4 years of their tertiary education. Students can specialise in one of 3 areas: Eco-Agribusiness, Eco-Construction Business or Eco-Tourism Business.

"But there is more to it than that" says Gary Shearer, the Enterprise Project Leader for Karatara, "here it's all about helping to bring about a complete change in the mindsets of our students, immersing them in what we like to call 'Afro-positivism' - a get-up-and-go attitude, an attitude that says 'here's my chance to excel, to break free from a mindset of poverty and go for it!' From day one our students are encouraged to believe in themselves and start thinking about how they will succeed AND transform their communities through starting businesses." Steve adds: "We don't want to teach them to grow tomatoes, we want them to run

and market the best organic export tomato eco-processing plants Africa has ever known!" Looking serious, Gary continues, "They also work damned hard." Gary looks serious, "Unlike my days as a student, our guys are up early with a packed programme each day. You see, they help run the whole campus themselves, so when not in lectures you'll find them painting, repairing gutters, maintaining the computer network, they even grow their own food – well as much as they can." "Our syllabus is about 'Action Learning'" says Steve," that is learning and immediately doing. So our 26 second year students are planning to set up businesses, 4 of them in fact. They will start off small and gain extremely powerful hands-on experience, in understanding the very basic business skills like planning, budgeting, profit, fair trade, integrity, tax and Vat, BBEEE, healthy competition, and so on. We would like our students to be in business way before they've qualified. We need Richard Brandson types, not corporate suits, that's key."

Nidhi Chaitow, a long-time resident of the area is at the campus to run things on a day to day basis. The other members of the Eden Campus Team, Milla McLachlan, Amanda Boardman and Elizabeth Smith Work closely with Nidhi to develop the administrative systems, curriculum and replication model. "We have many local part-time teachers who are supported by professors from abroad to provide the best and latest in curriculum content. Accreditation is through the George campus of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Things come together in amazing ways to meet the needs of our students" says Nidhi who also leads Life Skills courses. "It just kind of happens...it's amazing! Our students have grown and developed on a deep emotional level this past year due to constant reminders of the possibilities available to them. They are inspired, nurtured, held and loved in order for them to grow and develop themselves in Mind, Body and Spirit."

AN EXCITING & AMBITIOUS VISION TO REPLICATE, 'UBUNTU-STYLE'

The Karatara founders have a big vision, huge in fact. They don't want to stop at Eden Campus. They want to see southern Africa's rural areas peppered with at least 15 similar campuses by 2020. They have known from the start that the secret to their success is to replicate Eden Campus and grow lots of 'small giants' as Steve calls them. That's how transformation happens, the same way that nature works, organically.

THE MODEL – A SELF-SUSTAINING SYSTEM

"Africa doesn't need hand-outs, they have failed her over and over again. In fact, the last thing we need is handouts from the northern hemisphere. What Africa really needs is smart, cutting edge businesses that unleash her rural wealth without upsetting the balance. This will create jobs, lots of them, and allow communities to live happily where they are, not force them to migrate to cities looking for their fortunes and further straining already stretched urban resources. As I see it this is the only way to slow crime, pollution and housing demand and, just as importantly, avoid the decay of our rich and diverse countryside. It's all there, we want the people to unlock it...in the right way by learning from all the mistakes of the north" says Andrew Page Wood, a director of the project working with Steve to get Karatara's first eco-businesses started.

"The really great thing about the Karatara Project and we're very proud of this, is that we will be self-sustaining. Not only do we intend to break the rules around education by providing green, holistic, Afro-entrepreneurial rurally focussed campus (wow, that's a mouthful, sorry!), but we also believe that there's a lot of opportunity in OUR green future, so we're going to make money through real eco-business ventures, to build our vision, and here's where we're not shy about profit!"

To do this the Karatara Trust has set up a model that links the campus to related businesses in Eco- Agriculture, Eco-Tourism and Eco-Construction, all designed to provide a platform for students and revenue for the campus and surrounding communities.

The model comprises 3 separate but linked entities:

- The Karatara Trust – a registered Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) that collects and distributes funds
- Multiple Rural Campuses – section 21 (not for profit) Companies
- Karatara Enterprises – eco-business ventures that are wholly or partially owned by the trust, make profit for it to operate and expand its campus network and provide experience for students

KARATARA ENTREPRISES AND THE MIRACLE COMPANY

Dealing with profit and non-profit organisations under one umbrella is going to get tricky. Also, projects in Africa have a habit of going badly wrong, particularly those run as not-for-profit ones. To solve this, the team working on Karatara's Eco Businesses, headed by Gary Shearer and Andrew Page Wood have set themselves up in a totally separate entity – The Miracle Management Company. Simply, the trust mandates them to set-up and run businesses that make profit with the trust as the benefactor. So, it's clean from a governance perspective and most importantly they have a team of business-minded people mentoring students into their careers.

The Miracle Management Company is already involved in Bio-Diesel and Green Building Projects and is expectantly looking for more to link to tourism along the Garden Route. The team doesn't claim to do it all. "They only raise capital or funding with our help, then initiate the projects while building the important links to the campus and its students" claims Jono Heinemann, Karatara founder and trustee.

HOW GREEN IS GREEN?

"Look, there is so much to learn about environmentally friendly business and we see no end to the opportunities for sure. But we are by no means claiming that everything that we do from the word go is the best, latest, greatest environmental alternative – we'd never have started! However, we are completely committed to environmental sustainability as the very core of our curriculum and its related businesses. Part of our vision is to be the leading centre of excellence for Eco-Living in Africa, now that's cutting edge!" says Andrew.

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

The project started from nothing and the team is very accustomed to 'recycling' everything, but this needs to be balanced with state-of-the-art learning and high tech equipment and there's still a long, long way to go. So, they're always on the lookout for opportunities to build the dream, donations and funding as well as partnering with organisations as part of their BEE strategy. The campus is also keen to involve more volunteer lecturers and experts. But literally anything that you think may help probably will – that's just the way Karatara works!

If you think you can help or for more information please contact Andrew Page Wood on 082 929-9191 or email Andrew@winwin.co.za.