

2. Production from alien wood in Kamieskroon



In the small town of Kharkams in the Northern Cape lives a talented man called Pieter van Niekerk who, with the help of SKEP, has managed to build up a business that is boosting interest in the sleepy town, earning him an income and putting the alien doringboom trees of the area to good use.

Van Niekerk's business – Kharkams Wood Crafters – stands as a great example of the ecologically-based enterprise that SKEP promotes. It also illustrates how small-town skills can be honed to create big-city products with just a bit of creative thinking and the right level of support. Surprisingly, Kharkams Wood Crafters is best known for a creation not usually associated with rural South Africa or even wood: memory sticks. The memory stick concept was introduced to van Niekerk by Leonard Shapiro of Craft South Africa. Shapiro is a crafts enterprise developer who visited the area on a mandate from SKEPPIES, SKEP's small grants facility, in 2007. With a background in fine arts as well as the social sciences, Shapiro was asked to identify which skills the town's residents had to offer, and how they might be adapted into a sustainable business model.

"I was asked to come up with a product idea that had a conservational element as well as an enterprise element," says Shapiro. "At that point in time I was hooked on the idea of combining high-technology with traditional craftsmanship and that is why this memory stick was introduced. "Often you see these beautiful ethnic crafts but they are not adapted to the needs of today's market," he adds.

It was with this in mind that Shapiro walked through the streets of a nearby town called Kamieskroon asking to be directed to any talented woodworkers in the area. He was soon told about Van Niekerk living just 20 kilometres away with a fully functional workshop ready to be put to good use. The two met and Van Niekerk was immediately taken with the opportunity presented to him. Shapiro helped with training, sourcing the needed materials and a bit of marketing to help get the business off the ground. Soon Kharkams Wood Crafters was employing a total of five men and producing orders for the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, SANParks, Conservation International and a ministerial conference in the area, amongst others.

Although the product was introduced by Shapiro, Van Niekerk greatly improved the technical idea of how to insert the actual USB mechanism into the wood, he has also refined the original design and created two new versions of his own, which is where his real strength lies – sitting alone in his workshop working with the natural material that he loves. In addition to the memory sticks, the business continues to produce more traditional 'low-tech' products like the wooden salad forks and spoons that Van Niekerk has been producing for years – and is proving that unwanted alien vegetation does have a commercial value when paired with the spirit of enterprise.