Cogon grass – public enemy n°1

■ According to a recent study carried out by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) station in Benin, farmers consider cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) to be the most damaging weed for their crops. In places where it thrives, yields are reduced by up to 80% for all food and forage crops and even for trees such as palms. Cogon grass deprives vegetables of light and nutrients and damages tubers by piercing them with its rhizomes. It spreads very quickly — in some cases, it can grow up to 40 t/ha. Simple hoeing is an ineffective approach to eradication of this weed which can grow back from a fragment of just 2 mm. In a bid to tackle this invasive species, the IITA is planning to use biological control and has selected six species of pathogenic fungi which are natural enemies of the *Imperata*.

Responsible fishing in the Indian ocean

■ The recently launched South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission (SWIOFC) aims to promote responsible fishing and the development of sustainable fisheries in the region. In the western section of the Indian Ocean, 75% of fishery resources are currently being fished at their maximum yield. The other 25% are over-exploited and require better management. The new commission's first task will be to help improve the collection and monitoring of data on catches. At a later date, the fishing body will set up a mechanism that will let countries set binding management regulations for responsible coastal and high-seas fishing.

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Bulldozers and the rubber tree

■ Since the 1980s, a necrosis of unknown origin has been affecting the bark of the *Hevea brasiliensis*, the tree from which natural rubber is made. This condition causes a sharp drop in latex production and serious economic losses for rubber producing countries in Africa, America and Asia. It is now known that this complex disease is not caused by a pathogen but is partly the result of strong mechanical resistance in soil, which disrupts the circulation of water and its absorption by the tree roots. This accumulated resistance can either be caused by weak levels of porosity or by a hardening of soils in areas where bulldozers have passed. In fact, diseased trees tend to be more common in places where bulldozer activity has been most intense.

Eradicating rinderpest

■ Following the complete eradication of smallpox in 1979, rinderpest looks set to become the second disease in history to be wiped off the face of the Earth. Although it does not directly attack humans, its devastating effect on livestock is responsible for high malnutrition and mortality rates in people living in several countries of the South.

In Africa, the Pan-African Programme for the Control of Epizootics (PACE) is heading a network to combat and monitor the disease. To date, 12 of the 30 member countries have already been declared "free of rinderpest infection". This is the top level of animal health certification offered by PACE. It comes into force 3 years after a country has declared itself to be "provisionally free of rinderpest", provided that international controls, carried out under the auspices of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), have not revealed any fresh cases in the meantime. This stage of certification is given when animals have neither been vaccinated, nor contracted the disease for a period of 3 years. After a further period of at least 1 year, a country that respects the strictest standards for rinderpest may be given the highest grade of certification available from PACE: "freedom from rinderpest infection". Five countries were due to be declared rinderpest free during the course of 2005.

Photo: © Terre nourricière

The goal of the rinderpest programme is complete eradication before the 2010 deadline. OIE sees current progress in tackling this disease as particularly encouraging since it marks the first time that a significant number of sub-Saharan African countries have been able to collectively satisfy international animal health standards. Eradicating the disease will not just enable these countries to feed their people. It will also put them in a position to access regional and international markets for animal products such as meat, hides and dairy products.

Radios for farmers

Photos: © A Ibbo Daddy

A rural radio network in Niger: small radio units broadcast to the surrounding village

■ "Before, when animals got lost there was virtually no chance of finding them. Now that we have our radio, we can issue a simple alert for FCFA100 (less than €0.20) and, very soon, you have your animal back…" explains one Nigerian livestock farmer from Filingué, around 100 km north of Niamey. Farmers in Bankilaré, a small and remote village in the far west of Niger are equally enthusiastic.

Both locations are now served by a Canadian-designed radio kit which weighs about 20 kg and consists of a broadcast unit, a set of solar panels, a microphone and two radio receivers. The broadcasts reach villages in a radius of 20 to 30 kms. Thanks to support from the African Centre of Meteorological Applications for Development (ACMAD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), Niger now has almost 80 such radio units. "We prefer radios to sacks of millet. We eat the millet in just a week while the radio remains for much longer, ready to teach us how to grow more millet…", observes village chief Albakoye Ali.

Villagers are happy to be able to communicate in their own language on agricultural issues, livestock keeping, health and education. For the past 6 years, they themselves have been managing and conducting radio broadcasts. Listening committees offer practical or financial support as well as criticism of programme content.