

A visit to the water harvester

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While visiting Bulawayo recently for an Oxfam International meeting, I took the opportunity to go to Zvishavane to visit a Zimbabwean hero I had not seen for over 15 years. He is Zephaniah Phiri Maseko, the water harvester. 'Mr Phiri', as everyone calls him, is now a veteran of 79. He travelled to Washington last month to receive a Leadership in Conservation Award from the National Geographic Society. In the accompanying press release, the NGS spoke of his outstanding lifetime work and leadership and described him accurately as an 'inspirational conservation advocate who serves as a role model and mentor to his community.'

I first met Mr Phiri in 1987, when I joined Oxfam GB, and travelled regularly in Zimbabwe. He was an inspirational and charismatic figure then. He had been tortured and jailed by the Rhodesian authorities for his political beliefs, denied employment and so had turned to the land to support his family. With a little help from Oxfam, he had just set up the Zvishavane Water Project to help spread his self-taught conservation messages. Mr Phiri has only Standard Six education, but this has not deterred him from 'learning by doing' water conservation on his communal area farm 20km outside Zvishavane just off the Shurugwe road. One of the many remarkable things about his enterprise is that he always envisaged it as helping his community, not just himself.

So it was with immense personal joy that I met him again at his home. Age is beginning to take its toll, as he freely admitted, but he had lost none of his enthusiasm. He took us on a vigorous tour of his 'Garden of Eden', a perennial wetland which is now 40 years old. His home lies beneath a large rock formation. He has harnessed the water that flows beneath and captured it in 'Phiri pits' so the water can seep through the

pits which prevent the rain water flowing away from his fields. The water retained here is used for fish ponds. He has significantly raised the water table under his land and that of his neighbours. He farms organically, which has helped sustain the fertility of the soil.

For me the most rewarding thing was being accompanied by three young Zimbabwean colleagues working for Oxfam in Zvishavane. They had not known of Mr Phiri before my visit and it was moving to observe the obvious and genuine respect for him and his achievements. At a time when we are all concerned about global warming and climate change, Zephaniah Phiri Maseko stands as a true