

SHARED INTEREST

INVESTING IN SOUTH AFRICA'S FUTURE



In Franschhoek, in the Western Cape, where there are virtually no black farmowners, Elizabeth Abrams (on left) and Sylvia Dampies (on right) are raising trout. For years, they have worked as farm laborers on the same white-owned wine farm that still employs them, and pays them salaries between R350 and R500 a week. But now, despite the fact that they possess no land, they own and operate their business as members of the commercially successful Hands-On Fishing Cooperative. Unable yet to afford land of their own, they use the water in their employer's irrigation reservoir. In exchange, he receives the fish droppings (which he uses for organic fertilizer) and 25% of the proceeds after the fish are sold to Three Streams, one of the largest trout supply companies in South Africa.

Trained by the Departments of Aquaculture and Science and Technology of the University of Stellenbosch, the three and their colleagues manage a highly sophisticated system to feed the trout from the time they are tiny "fingerlings" until they are full-grown and harvested. They mix and weigh the special blend of nutrients (calculated according to the age and biomass of the fish), and then, three times a day, pull themselves out on

their platform to the middle of the reservoirs to deliver the mix to the underwater cages of trout.

Sylvia and Elizabeth, like the other members of the cooperative, work extremely hard. They must feed the fish twice a day – at 9:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m.—without fail for six months. In the process they grow the trout from fingerlings into plump fish between 10 and 15 inches long.

"We are really pressured when we have to harvest our fish and the farmers' apples at the same time," noted Elizabeth. "But at least our older children help with the little ones." The children attend a farm school for their elementary education, where the government has taken responsibility for improving the previously inferior school. Sylvia says there is an advantage, since there are only 15 to 20 students in a class. When they transfer to attend the local high school, it is harder for them, since the classes are much larger.

Although the project began with initial finance from government and local white farmers, it needed more capital to grow to become self-sufficient. A Shared Interest guarantee has enabled this precedent-setting cooperative to expand from 27 to 37 farms and train 64 additional farmworkers to be supervisors. The cooperative sells to the country's largest trout company, serving domestic, European and Asian markets, and has increased production from 35 to 56 tons. It is currently producing 10 percent of South Africa's trout.

Elizabeth said emphatically, "We believe in the project, and we have lots of hope. It must succeed. I need to put my kids through school. What you put in is what you get out."