

Rearing snails, Eating Snails, and Breaking the Taboo

What comes to your mind when you hear snail? Well, not the types you may have known or heard of that live in water or the sea. We mean the ones that live on land with humans and after whose speed of movement the phrase “snail’s pace” was coined. What comes to mind could vary from person to person. But generally, a snail has the following physical attributes: a hard spiral shell; a soft, unsegmented body that usually withdraws and hides inside the shell; and a continuous flowing of very slippery mucous on its body which makes gripping hardly possible. That is a snail.

One thing that brings a snail closer to human reference is its food value. Just like domesticated and wild animals, snail is a very good source of protein that can be deliciously prepared and served as food for both household and public meals. The fact of this part is as old as human existence. However, eating snail is not that popular in some parts of the world. To many people, barriers exist especially along cultural and religious perceptions which mark the meat out clearly as taboo.

In a bid to contribute to the improvement of nutrition status in Kenema and Pujehun Districts, SEND is implementing a nutrition focused project called LANN+. ¹ Part of its focus is to educate beneficiary communities about food sources and available food stuff in and around their communities, the healthy preparation of those foods and consuming foods in adequate proportions that can nourish, protect and energise the body. The project also focuses on supporting communities in the pilot of domesticated animals as easy and reliable sources of protein, which is where snails come in.

Out of 60 project operational communities spread across Gaura, Nomo, Tunkia and Barri Chiefdoms, only two communities (Tilorma and Kamasu, Tunkia Chiefdom) opted to pilot snail rearing in their communities even though options existed to rear duck, chicken and grass cutter.

Established in a shaded and naturally cold section of the community, the snail pen in Kamasu Tunkia, is roughly 15 by 3 feet. It is erected with two coaches of mud bricks, plastered all round and sealed with wire sieve for both ventilation and prevention of the newly hatched from creeping back into the wild. The interior walls are equally plastered but the ground left bare to absorb liquid waste from their feed. The top protective sieve has two wooden doors at both ends of the pen’s length.

Stocked in March 2019 with 15 medium sized snails (see photo), their sizes have doubled in three months and have hatched hundreds of eggs which are currently about thumbnail sizes. With all conditions – their feeding, protection and environment – being normal, the Kamasu pen is likely to become too tight for the pilot population by the same time one year later.

¹ LANN+ stands for Linking Agriculture, Nutrition Natural Resource Management Plus WASH

In neighbouring Gaura Chieftdom, three more communities (Tikonko, Lower Baoma and Sandaru) have voluntarily taken up the initiative to construct and stock their own pens all by themselves. Edison Kanneh, a field staff working with SEND on the LANN+ project says this is as a result of practical application of theories on the nutritious value of snails. A nutrition training manual developed for the project dedicates a separate module to encouraging beneficiaries to break some “imaginative taboos” around otherwise nutritious foods that are freely available in and around their communities. Facilitating that module goes along with cooking some nutritious foods: crabs and plantain for pregnant women, eggs for children and snail stew for every participant make common recipes at the trainings.

However, while transformation of target communities’ minds from the taboo perceptions they hold of snail is already happening, popularizing consumption will not be an immediate achievement. Baby Bockarie, a beneficiary of the LANN+ project in Kamasu Tunkia agrees that although she and her children eat snail, her husband does not, no matter how it is prepared. Hopes are that for Baby and her last child, Muniru, their future meal plans will very likely constitute snails as often as they have it in stock and in the wild. Unborn generations might do same and have permanent spaces on household food menus for snail soup.