



## Nothing scarce is wasted

First in a four-part series about a former Vail resident's work in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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It is visible in the common objects used for day-to-day survival. A banding strap that has been discarded by an airline or freight hauler is quickly scavenged by a young boy to be used as building material for a hut or as a means to secure a load to a bicycle. Empty plastic soda bottles are collected and used to transport water. Nearly everything has a use.

Even the cars driven by the Congolese serve as an example of how things in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are used until they become unusable. Their engines spew blue smoke from rusted exhaust pipes held in place by wires as they sputter down the pothole-strewn streets of Lubumbashi, the second largest city in the DRC, located in the Katanga Province in the southeastern corner of the country.

The engine of such cars will be tinkered with and the tail pipe patched until the vehicle can no longer be repaired. When it finally reaches this state, the car will be stripped, and every part will find its way to another car or another use. Eventually the unrepairable parts will be discarded, the front seats will become someone's lounge chair, and the back seats made into a child's bed. Piece by piece it will be disassembled and sold to be re-used until one day the skeleton-like frame will be abandoned and left to rust by the side of the road.

People who have nothing find a use for nearly everything and waste little, but the people of the DRC, and many other parts of Africa, have taken those simple principles to extreme. The fundamental concept that the scarcer the resource the more expensive it is when demand is high applies here in the most basic of terms. The interesting thing about the DRC is that with few notable exceptions nearly everything is scarce.

One thing that is not scarce is the little bits of paper and plastic bags that are commonly discarded around the cities. Much of this waste finds its way to small piles and burned on the sidewalks. This is less common in the rural villages, because few people there can afford large quantities of anything that comes in a plastic bag or wrapped in paper.

Trees, which are in abundance away from the cities, are regularly cut down and partially burned out in the bush. The incomplete combustion of this natural resource results in charcoal, which when reignited, burns with relatively little smoke. It is an inexpensive and easily obtainable source of fuel for cooking and heating. A common sight along the roads of the Katanga Province is a steady stream of heavily laden bicycles whose riders make their way into Lubumbashi from the more wooded areas to the north or south. The cyclists load their bicycles with as much as 400 pounds of charcoal and make the 40-mile trek into town to sell their bundles.

Currently, charcoal is readily available and costs about the equivalent of five dollars per 50-kilogram bag (about 110 pounds). Add an extra 100 Congolese Francs (20 cents) if you want to keep the bag. That amount of charcoal will last the average poor Congolese family, who eats one meal per day, about one month; however most families can afford to buy only a small amount of charcoal at a time.

Even with all of its abundance, it is a cultural taboo to steal charcoal. The large bundles are often left



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unattended by the side of the road, and it is rarely, if ever stolen. It is commonly believed that if charcoal is stolen, the thief will be cursed. It also has other magical properties. If a woman is barren at the time of her death, a piece of charcoal is placed in the coffin and buried along with her to chase away the spirit of infertility.

The desire to ward off spirits of infertility is ironic because another resource that is not scarce in the DRC is its people. There is such a surplus of labor that in the local Lubumbashi "Super Store," it is cheaper to pay a day's wage to have an employee sit at each aisle watching for theft than to risk someone pinching a \$5 can of potato chips.

As a result of this surplus, there is a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, and in general, the Congolese appear to have little regard or courtesy for each other. The rich drive around in expensive cars and put on airs of indifference or contempt towards the minions around them. Many others, a few out of necessity, are only concerned with fulfillment of immediate needs or wants, with little regard for consequences. This may explain why a driver will stop his vehicle in the middle of a busy street to let out passengers even when there is room to pull over to the side of the road, or why HIV/AIDS is epidemic here.

A final result is the "surplus" children who are cast aside by mothers who either do not want them or cannot afford to feed them. They are left to fend for themselves and can be found begging in the street or rummaging through the rubbish piles looking for scraps of charcoal, banding straps, or empty soda bottles.