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# THE BARK

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WINTER 2004

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## Good Deeds with Beads

Hand-beaded dog collars help send Maasai girls to school

ECO BUSINESS



By Lisa Wogan

FOR A YOUNG MAASAI GIRL IN RURAL Kenya, the future often looks like this: If her parents can afford high school, her brothers will attend in her place. At puberty, she'll be forced into an arranged marriage to a much older man, as his second or third wife. She'll be expected to bear as many children as possible. Once a mother, she will be in no position to educate her children or improve her family's standard of living.

"But if you get a Maasai girl through high school, she's probably going to pick her own husband, probably going to be the only wife, and probably will have far fewer children," says Debby Rooney, co-founder of BEADS, a nonprofit business development, conservation and education program in Isinya and the Amboseli region of Kenya. With education, she says, these girls will find careers, run businesses and take charge of their futures.

In a little more than ten years, Rooney has found a way to send 127 Maasai girls to private school, and her success has a most unlikely launching pad: dog collars.

As a New Jersey-based environmental educator traveling frequently to Kenya, Rooney recognized that many tribal families wanted to educate their daughters but couldn't afford to. She decided to help create a sustainable solution—a community-based micro-enterprise for Maasai women, most of whom were illiterate and had no business experience.

One day in the early '90s, she took a friend and drove down a dirt road south of Nairobi, stopping to talk to the first woman they saw beading. "We asked her if she'd like to bead



dog collars, which is a hysterical thought," says Rooney, who'd realized that collars might have a better profit margin than belts. "They don't name their dogs, feed their dogs, and rarely put collars on them. It's a ridiculous idea. But that's where it started."

Since 1993, the 25 beaders in the Dupoto Women's Group have been creating dog collars with tribal, snake and traditional patterns for sale halfway around the world. They live with their families in traditional mud huts or small wood-and-metal homes on dry plains. Gazelles, zebras and other wildlife from nearby Nairobi National Park migrate through their lands.

In the past, the women would attempt to sell their beadwork at crowded tourist markets—mostly in vain. Through BEADS (Beads for Education, Advancement, Development and Success), their collars and other beaded products are sold online and at a few museum and zoo shops in the US.

All of the profit is returned to the women. It is their primary source of income and helps underwrite school fees.

"But it's not just a financial difference," says Karen Zulauf, co-owner of Safari Africa, an adventure travel company that began arranging small group visits to the Dupoto project last summer. "The whole program really transforms these women. It takes them from soft-spoken and retiring to people who are positive about themselves and positive about the progress their families can make."

In 1998, Rooney expanded the program's reach by launching a direct sponsorship component. Sponsors commit to sending a girl to private school at a cost of roughly \$30 per month. BEADS, which is affiliated with the Africa Wildlife Foundation and the International Women's Democracy Center, also supports AIDS/HIV training, conservation education and internships.

The headmaster at a BEADS-affiliated school recently told Zulauf that it was time to sponsor boys. "Now we have all these really intelligent girls and we have no one for them to marry," he told her with a smile. "Once our girls get educated, they want to marry an educated man."

It's the sort of problem Debby Rooney will be happy to tackle next. **D**

Purchase hand-beaded dog collars, traditional coasters, bowls, bracelets and miniature baskets, and learn more about sponsorships at [www.beadsforeducation.org](http://www.beadsforeducation.org). Visits to the Dupoto Women's Group can be arranged via Safari Africa, [www.deeperafrica.com](http://www.deeperafrica.com), 888.658.7102, or Global Impact Tours, [www.globalimpacttours.com](http://www.globalimpacttours.com), 866.858.6877.