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Most readers of “Headlines” (if there are any!) will remember that I’ve been to Senegal several times because of my role with the VT-led USAID-ERA project. Despite a half-dozen trips during the past two years, I’ve always visited during the dry season. Senegal, like many tropical countries, has pronounced dry and wet seasons. For a small country (about the size of S. Dakota), Senegal has a startling rainfall gradient, with amounts increasing from north to south. The northern-most part of the country receives less than 300 mm (12”) of rainfall per year, while southern Senegal receives more than 1000 mm (39”) of rainfall in an average year. This results in some amazing differences in flora and fauna. Northern Senegal is well into the Sahel region, crops can’t be grown without irrigation, and nomadic herders still live. In the south (less than 250 miles as the crow flies), you’re in tropical Africa with towering teak and other typical tropical trees. It’s an amazing country in this respect.

The wet season in Senegal begins in June or July (starting from S to N) and ends in November or before. I recently returned from Senegal and was able to experience the country during the “green” season for the first time. The transformation of the barren dry-season landscape is remarkable. Like all deserts, the more arid regions of Senegal explode with germinating seeds as soon as the rains begin. Farmers are more conservative...they normally wait until the second or third rain to plant millet or peanuts. Every season is a gamble for these farmers, and guessing the best time to plant in relation to the rains is one of the keys to success. In the far south, rainfed rice is king. Farmers in this region also hedge their bets by waiting until they feel comfortable that the rains will continue. But, those who wait too long to plant may pay the price in outrageous populations of weeds. Few farmers can afford to use herbicides, so weeds must be removed by hand. Near the city of Ziguinchor, I witnessed rice fields that were covered by pure stands of yellow nutsedge, a particularly noxious weed, which was in full reproductive mode. The only available option is to remove these plants by hand, requiring huge labor costs.

Speaking of weeds, I observed a couple of seriously invasive weeds—kudzu and Palmer amaranth. Virginians know about the ability of kudzu to overwhelm all other vegetation. It may not be so aggressive in Senegal—because of the long dry season it may grow only as an annual. Palmer amaranth has been in our news recently because it is developing resistance to the Roundup herbicide in some parts of the US. That probably hasn’t happened yet in Senegal, but it is a scary weed no matter where it grows.

I had three other unique (for me) experiences on this trip. First, I actually saw Ozzie Abaye and spent time with her during this trip—somehow we had managed to avoid each other up to now. I spent a few hours transplanting rice by hand in research plots with CSES graduate student Thioro Fall. I think I was actually pretty good at it, but I don’t want to earn a living this way! I also experienced the full force of a tropical



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thunderstorm first-hand. While transplanting rice, several of us were caught in the open when an intense storm blew in. The wind was at least 50 mph, and it rained about two inches in about half an hour. I forgot my rain coat! That’s an experience I won’t soon forget.

Sincerely,

Tom Thompson



Lunch in Dakar with Ozzie



Transplanting rice



Field of nutsedge (weeds)



A new fruit for me—*Saba senegalense*
Acidic, difficult to eat, makes great juice.