

IN VANUATU, TAMANU OIL IS BEING EXTRACTED FOR EXPORT

It could become a significant revenue earner

The timber of the 25 to 30-metre high tamanu tree is strong and was once sought by Polynesian boat builders as material for canoe hulls and boat keels.

In French Polynesia, it got cut out for that reason. In Vanuatu, tamanu is a common coastal region tree and the nuts it produces are used as substitute by children unable to buy marbles.

The nuts are good for something else; tamanu oil. Port Vila accountant Rob Agius and his son Simon believe the oil can become a significant export for Vanuatu with a long-term future.

Tamanu oil is good for the treatment



business in the region.

of cuts, burns, abrasion and insect bites.

It is easily absorbed in the skin and in the past has been sold locally in French Polynesia in small bottles.

Scientific research on it began in the 1930s. And now there is demand for

it as an ingredient for moisturiser purposes.

One potential American buyer told Agius that he needed 1.5 tons a year. That, Agius says, exceeds the present world supply of the stuff.

At their factory at Santo, through their company, Industrial Botanicals Corporation Limited, the Agius family has been working on turning tamanu oil into a serious business for the past two years. Small consignments have been sent to the United States and Australia.

But the company wants to build up its stock to be positioned to become a reliable supplier.

Nuts are bought from about 700

suppliers who collect them as they fall from tamanu trees in the forest.

The company is encouraging landowners to plant it as a near zero-cost long-term investment.

Last year, the company bought 70 tons of nuts and, Simon says, is still buying.

The Santo factory was set up to move towards the production of high quality oil.

The trick with tamanu, Simon says, lies with the drying of the nuts. It takes three months to move through the drying and extraction process, one that in the development stage became a matter of "drastic complexity, sensitivity and timing".

Another Pacific pioneer in extracting money from plant substances is, Camille Isnard's Cosmecal laboratory, 15 kilometres outside Noumea, New Caledonia.

The company works with aloe vera, sandalwood, kava, noni, hibiscus, niaouli and goyavier, and supplies raw materials to pharmaceutical and cosmetic buyers. This is in addition to producing its own lines of skin care lotions, balms, hair lotions and natural food additives.

Cosmecal holds some international patents and has a laboratory approved under the French regulatory code of manufacturing practices for therapeutic goods.

Some of company's products are:

- Niaolu — a small tree common on New Caledonia's hillsides. Niaolu products include syrup, sweets, balm, essential oils.

It is said to aid digestion and sleep, clear the sinus, warm muscles and deodorise room.

- Sandalwood — the company claims to be the "only one which has developed a concrete and absolute (use) of sandalwood for great perfumes." Product lines include balm, body milk and essential oil.

- Hibiscus — hibiscus powder, capsules and lotion for the treatment of blood circulation conditions, heavy and swollen legs and intestinal trouble.