

Did the FSC Plantations Policy Working Group get it right?

Background

As part of a two-year process to review FSC policy on the certification of timber plantations, members of the policy review working-group (PWG) recently visited South Africa for their final meeting. The meeting was originally to be held in Bonn at the FSC headquarters. However, with financial support from Mondi, a company with international pulp and paper interests that has had all its local timber plantations certified by FSC, the meeting venue was moved to South Africa. It was to be preceded by a two day 'field trip', on Monday 3rd and Tuesday 4th April, with the idea that this would expose the PWG members to various aspects of real-life plantations in order to facilitate better informed decision-making during the last meeting of the policy review process.

Conflict Arises and is Resolved

In keeping with FSC policies, local environmental organisations, as represented in the Timberwatch Coalition, were invited to participate during the field trip, and even to make suggestions for items to be included in the field trip programme. Before very long it became clear to Timberwatch that there were some problems with this situation: Firstly, NGO representatives were apparently expected to participate at their own expense. Secondly, the organisation of the field-trip programme was in the hands of a member of the PWG who also happened to be employed by the timber industry association 'Forestry South Africa'. The first issue was resolved once agreement was reached that Mondi would pay for NGO transport and accommodation, and funding for other NGO costs would be covered by a grant from the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC). However the second issue was not as easily resolved, and it soon became apparent that the request by Timberwatch for an equal allocation of time (One day for Industry and one day for NGOs) would not be agreed to. The PWG FSA representative seemed to be pushing for a programme that was strongly biased in favour of industry interests, and it would be up to the NGO participants to find ways to level the playing-field.

Meeting the PWG in Durban

The first opportunity came on the day the PWG members arrived in Durban, and there was some time available before they would need to leave by bus for the meeting venue. Timberwatch arranged for those that were interested to meet with members of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), that operates in an area where local communities are negatively affected by industrial pollution, including that from a large pulp mill situated in the midst of a residential area. The object of this exercise was to demonstrate to PWG members that industrial timber plantations have far wider impacts on people and the environment than just in the areas where they are grown. Hopefully the point was taken!

Highlights of the Field Trip

Day One

The first stop on Monday was at a Eucalyptus plantation where an industry – funded organisation ‘The Institute for Commercial Forestry Research’ (ICFR) was conducting research to demonstrate ‘sustainability’ in timber production. It soon became obvious that the outcomes of this project, which is run as part of an international programme together with CIFOR, had been pretty much pre-determined using a very narrow set of criteria that hardly considered any issues other than crude wood production. The presenter from ICFR made the amazing claim that natural grassland would recover fully within ten years (with appropriate management) if the Eucalyptus plantations were to be removed. He also claimed that the plantations would enhance soil quality and fertility!

The next item on the programme was a demonstration of herbicide application within a young pine plantation. There seemed to be no need for weed-control here as the trees had already grown past a height where competition from weeds might have presented a problem, and very little fresh weed growth was evident. It also became obvious that there were some issues around how the spraying could affect the workers involved who were mainly women employed indirectly through a contractor. One of the concerns that there was no health monitoring after people stopped working for the contractor. If they leave due to health problems or allergies, and later fall ill or die, there is no system in place to monitor their situation. It will be interesting to see if or how the timber industry deals with this anomaly. One interesting aspect of the use of pesticides is that this provides a way to see how plantations and forests differ. The very thought of using chemical poisons in a biodiverse forest, where all creatures exist in harmony should be rejected outright. Though, in a plantation situation, the unnatural monoculture of usually alien tree species is in conflict with the natural environment, and that is why it is necessary to use chemicals to control Nature. A forest certification standard should declare the use of pesticides inappropriate.

The trip continued onwards through ‘certified’ pine plantations that clearly failed to comply with the timber industry’s own guidelines in terms of distances from forest margins, riparian zones and wetlands. In some instances plantation trees could be seen growing right in wetland zones, and evidence of adequate attention to invasive alien plants was very hard to see. Once we had passed through the sterile and depressingly monotonous pine plantation area, the road led us to an elevated vantagepoint within an area of grassland that had mercifully escaped destruction by plantation. The tour stopped at this point for lunch and another lecture from the FSA representative. This time the topic was ‘Plantations at landscape level’ and it was clearly intended to convince the other PWG members that the massive destruction caused by timber plantations could be balanced against some token patches of grassland and forest within the so-called ‘forest (read plantation) management unit (FMU)’. The view from this spot took in a varied landscape in which the dark green timber plantations stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, but from which something also appeared to be

missing. Naturally it was that signs of human habitation were almost completely absent. It appeared for a moment that the grasslands, farmlands and plantations before us were miraculously able to exist without people. Not so of course, but where were all the people hidden away?

Those who continued with the tour and were able to visit the tribal area known as Ozwatini might have seen where some of the people now live. In isolation and poverty, communities displaced under apartheid remain displaced and are very unlikely to ever recover their social status or self-respect. Not even FSC certified woodlots purporting to give formerly disadvantaged people a share of the timber industry cake could ever change that. There is more than enough evidence that industrial timber plantations, large or small, do little if anything to uplift rural communities and if anything undermine their livelihoods and traditional culture.

Due to accumulated delays during the course of the day, the final programme items could not be included. Timberwatch had proposed a visit to a once-scenic spot at the Karkloof Falls, but that is now overwhelmed by Pines and Eucalypts. But it would have unfortunately been too dark to appreciate this wonder of Sappi's conservation efforts even if it had been possible to get there by the programmed time of 5-30 p.m. Luckily we had the Karumbidza card up our sleeve to make up for this.

Back at the Hotel John (Blessing) Karumbidza treated the group to a stirring slide-show and presentation on a recently completed research project that had been funded by the World Rainforest Movement (WRM). Blessing had truly ventured where none had dared go before in documenting the way industrial timber plantations in South Africa have impacted and still continue to impact on rural communities in timber growing areas. Copies of his research report were also distributed to all the PWG members, who mostly responded appreciatively. Blessing's presentation was able to explain where some of those missing communities had gone. It also showed how timber plantations continue to exploit, terrorise and displace rural people even in the present time. During his talk he had emphasised the point "Plantations are not Forests", and hopefully those listening were able to internalise this fundamental truth!

Day two

Timberwatch held the high ground at the beginning of the second day's programme. We kicked off with a showing of our brand-new video on illegal plantations, followed by a devastating presentation on the impacts of habitat loss on threatened species by ecologist James Wakelin from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the provincial government conservation service. His presentation focussed on the loss of grasslands, but perhaps unintentionally also demonstrated statistically how the recent growth of the area under timber plantations had coincided with the movement of people away from rural areas where this expansion was happening. Plantations displace or destroy both people and biodiversity!

On the road again, and the first stop was at another Sappi pine plantation where a contractor used by the timber industry to supply labour in the plantations was on hand to discuss issues around worker employment conditions. The contractor was quite open and freely admitted that his workers were not unionised, and that employee turnover was very high. Of course there were no actual workers there to discuss how they felt about the working conditions! Both of the above issues should warrant steps by the FSC social chamber to investigate the certification of the plantation companies involved.

Timberwatch had asked for an opportunity to show the PWG some examples of alien invader plants within the same Sappi plantation area, but somehow this request seemed to be forgotten, or perhaps it was felt that time had run out.

The vehicle convoy moved on, and after a long drive into a remote rural area in the Ncwadi river valley, arrived at a small country school where Mondi has supported the establishment of a vegetable garden project and a mini-plantation of Eucalyptus trees. The object of this visit was supposedly to demonstrate how Mondi's corporate social responsibility programme was benefiting rural communities. Unfortunately, it soon emerged that the company was not really doing the project out of the goodness of their heart. The reality was that it was more about trying to discourage the community from setting fires that could potentially damage timber plantations, and to recruit labour for the plantation industry, than anything else. Even a hastily bulldozed 'football field', a R58 000 (Less than US\$10 000) gift to the community, raised a number of questions. Was this done specially for the benefit of the visiting FSC PWG members, and was any prior environmental investigation undertaken before deciding to send the bulldozer in. The open scar they have created across the grassy slope is very far from being a useable football field, and will need to be properly grassed and stabilised before it can serve its purpose. Back at the school dilapidated buildings with smashed windows and broken furniture tell a story of other perhaps more important needs. Could Mondi possibly have spent their money more wisely?

Before leaving the school, one of the school project committee members asked if he could take the group to see his own garden on the other side of the river. Imagine the surprise that awaited the PWG members when Mr Mkhize showed them a vegetable garden even larger than the one at the school that he and his family managed. It seemed that his entire (large) family lived from the produce of the garden, and were even able to produce a surplus that could be sold, without any support from Mondi!

After driving back along the long and winding road, the group was at last given a opportunity to hear what Timberwatch had to show and say about some of the FSC certified Mondi plantations near their regional office at Hilton. We first stopped to look at a wetland area that had previously been used as a waste dump, before being restored by Mondi in partnership with the community. However there were still signs of neglect, with wattle plantations established dangerously close on the one side and eucalyptus saplings marching in from the

other. Assorted alien weeds dotted the rest of the area, but it had to be agreed that the area was still in reasonably good condition as wetlands in plantation areas go. The group of vehicles then moved on deeper into the plantations where a very different situation awaited them. It is difficult to describe exactly how badly managed or rather mismanaged the plantation area was that we drove through for the next few kilometres. Wetlands jam-packed with all the most invasive alien weeds and with plantation tree seedlings encroaching from all sides! Plantation roads built right through wetlands or within wetland buffer zones! Roads running vertically up steep slopes causing unacceptable soil erosion! Further along the way we were able to view an area of scruffy wattle plantation where aerial insecticide spraying had taken place directly next to a school, with uncertain implications for the children that might have been affected. And this had been certified as a “responsibly managed forest” by a certification body accredited by FSC. How could this have been allowed?

The Timberwatch Position

Trees are in themselves neither good nor bad, but if trees are going to be bad then there is no worse way to manifest this badness than through bad timber plantation practice. Timberwatch has repeatedly spelt out its standpoint on how we believe industrial timber plantations in South Africa should be established and managed, yet the timber industry in South Africa has continued to abuse people and the environment, both actively and passively. We believe this abuse has been perpetrated with the knowledge of the FSC and its certification bodies, and by some strange quirk also seems to have the implicit support of the South African government.

Timberwatch is not opposed to there being a management certification system for industrial timber plantations, but also believes that using the FSC **FOREST** certification system to certify timber plantations is not acceptable. The reasons for this are clear, and there is no room for any kind of wishy-washy compromise in this regard. If industrial timber plantations are to be certified, by FSC or any other organisation, then there needs to be a fully separate system operating under a plantation standard with clear terminology, definitions and principles. Appropriate regional criteria and indicators will need to be developed through transparent and fully participative processes, unlike many of those currently in place. If they are to be regarded as having any credence, it is vital that such standards are maintained. This can be achieved only if there are adequate numbers of industry independent inspectors thoroughly familiar with their local industry to monitor industrial timber plantations, and/or forest exploitation, with frequent random audits. Their costs should be covered from a timber levy.

There needs to be stronger enforcement of correct plantation management practice, both through industry self-regulation in terms of their own commitments to good management, as well as by the relevant government agencies through the legal system. At the present time neither of these appear to be effective, and it has been left to the environmental NGOs exert pressure for change. Offences committed by timber plantation companies or their agents need to be properly

punished, with penalties that are appropriate to the crime, and where possible, perpetrators of anti-social and anti-environmental crimes in the plantation industry should be exposed in the public media. Naming and shaming is undoubtedly a most effective means to eliminate unacceptable behaviour.

The way ahead

As a matter of principle, all existing FSC plantation certification must be withdrawn or not renewed when they expire. The entire system has fallen into serious disrepute and there is no possible way to rescue it at this stage.

The accreditation of all certification bodies must be reviewed as soon as possible and all current and future complaints against certification bodies should be thoroughly investigated. If it should become clear that some organisations have abused their positions in the past, then they should be excluded from future accreditation under both the existing **FOREST** system as well as under a new **PLANTATION** certification system.

Monitoring of the certification process also needs to be put under close scrutiny. Unless auditors and certification body personnel are completely independent and able to do their work objectively, no certification can be considered legitimate. It is imperative that a system is put in place to guarantee impartiality.

In the future, it should also be necessary for all FSC certified plantation or forest owners to commit to supporting international campaigns to promote a reduction in wasteful paper consumption. This could be done via a levy imposed at the pulp mills that is administered by an independent trust established under the auspices of the FSC.

Conclusion

At the end of the second day of the field trip, the NGO contingent parted company from the PWG members who were now faced with several days of intense debate. I believe many bridges of understanding had been crossed, but there could still be no certainty about how their deliberations would fare.

The Timberwatch participants hope that they were able to make the right choices.

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Blessing Karumbidza
Refilwe Madela
Thoko Makhanya
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