
South Africa: Timber industry and not medicinal plant gatherers behind forest loss

Recently, an article on the major "threat" posed to South African indigenous forests by illegal gatherers of medicinal plants has been widely disseminated. Michael Peter, Director of Indigenous Forestry Management of the South African Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, said that "The medicinal plant trade is the single largest cause of indigenous forest degradation in South Africa".

However, Wally Menne, from the South African NGO Timberwatch Coalition, has something to say about this. He stresses that "it's time to open our eyes and face the reality that the timber industry is really the biggest culprit when it comes to damaging forests".

According to data compiled by Timberwatch, native forests are estimated to cover less than 0.25% of southern Africa's surface area, making this the smallest biome on the subcontinent. These forests, which tend to occur in belts made up of patches --such as in the Drakensberg, or in contiguous strips such as along the Southern Cape coast and the coastal dunes of Kwa Zulu/ Natal-- have suffered a substantial decrease as a result of human activities including agriculture and grazing. The pressure has increased as a result of the expansion of timber plantations and industrial crops --such as sugar cane-- into natural areas which in turn has displaced local people. Thus, the process has indirect or off-site impacts on forest, since the people tend to go further inside the forest in order to make a living.

According to Wally Menne: "Putting the blame on nameless 'commercial gatherers' is rather weak when you consider that plantation roads have provided access to forests for underpaid contract workers who are hardly likely to pass up an opportunity to make a bit of money from gathering medicinal plants. Usually they are from outside the area (often even outside the country) and are too poor to care about the consequences of their actions. The full-time 'commercial gatherers' who usually just transport the plant material, often employ people like these to do their dirty work. The contract labour system used by the likes of Mondi and SAPPI [the two largest tree plantation companies in the country] needs to be put on trial to see what the real problem is."

Article based on information from: "Illegal gatherers threatening SA forests", March 26 2003, Richard Davies, <http://www.iol.co.za> ; "Forests in South Africa under Threat", Timberwatch Coalition, http://www.timberwatch.org.za/forests_in_south_africa_under_threat.htm ; personal communication from Wally Menne, Timberwatch, e-mail plantnet@iafrica.com