South Africa: Tree plantations ravaged by fire turned a lurking tragedy into a sad reality

Monoculture is against nature, which is diverse. That is why an unnatural system like industrial plantations of tree monocultures triggers off several negative impacts. One of them is fire.

Unlike forests, whose humidity and dense greenery of shrubs act as a barrier against fires, industrial tree plantations lack the structural and biological diversity of forests. Tree plantations have “single-layered” canopies (ie. all the trees are of similar height), “closed” canopies that block out the sunlight –resulting in shaded understories with fewer plants-, poorer water conservation qualities, poorly developed canopy epiphyte layers (ie. mosses, lichens, and ferns living on tree trunks and branches) and suspended soil (which form from the decay of these epiphytic plants), less overall biodiversity, all of which make them highly prone to set on fire. They represent a tragedy lurking out there.

And the tragedy has just come over South Africa.

According to NASA’s Earth Observatory, “A river of smoke several hundred kilometers wide flowed off the southeast coast of Africa in early September 2008. The smoke was coming from hundreds, probably thousands, of fires burning in Mozambique, South Africa, and Swaziland. September is near the end of southern Africa’s dry season, and intentional agricultural fires as well as accidental forest fires are common.”
(http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Newsroom/NewImages/images.php3?img_id=18139)

However, "This particular situation has never been experienced before. Reports are coming in from all over the country," said Percy Morokane from Johannebsurg's Emergency Services in an interview with the BBC.

On the last weekend of August, fanned by strong winds, more than 100 wildfires across South Africa have left at least 20 people dead and 26 injured in the blazes. Fires raged across 50,000 hectares of land, 15,000 of which are industrial stands of trees in Mpumalanga. Three men were caught in a fire in the Sappi Escarpment tree plantation owned by the FSC certified pulp conglomerate Sappi.

Several different fires left 14 dead in KwaZulu-Natal province, three people including two children dead in the Eastern Cape, three people dead in Mpumalanga province, and dozens homeless in Cape Town.

Unfortunately, it is often on tragedies that awareness is raised. Let’s hope mourn gives rise to good sense to stop the expansion of monoculture tree plantations.

Article based on information from: “South Africa: Three More Injured in Mpumalanga Fires”, BuaNews (Tshwane), http://allafrica.com/stories/200809030578.html; “South Africa bush fires 'kill 20'”, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7591950.stm