
Swaziland: Timber Plantations Impacting on People and Nature

In many respects, there is very little difference between Swaziland and South Africa. Climate, topography, and geology are similar, so it is no wonder that the natural vegetation is much like that found in the South African Provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, that virtually enclose the Swazi Kingdom.

Before the arrival of large-scale timber plantations in Swaziland, the area that they now occupy was grassland, interspersed with patches of evergreen 'mist-belt' forest in moist, sheltered spots. The characteristic climax grasslands evolved over thousands of years with human influence and fire playing a big part in their development. A mischievous theory has claimed that the whole region was originally forested, and that grassland is a secondary vegetation type that manifests where forests have been destroyed. This has been used to help justify so called "afforestation" which aims to plant alien monoculture timber plantations wherever conditions will allow, in particular in grasslands.

It is known that there were Bushmen in these parts from the evidence of rock paintings in caves. Swazi people farmed cattle and other livestock as well as some food crops. Their domestic crops and animals, hunting, and natural resources from the forest and grassland provided all they needed to survive. Establishment of more than 100,000 hectares of plantations meant the displacement of these people and their livestock to adjacent steep, rocky and dry land, where they would be more prone to disease and attack by wild animals.

The issue of industrial timber plantations in Swaziland must be viewed within the larger southern African context. The timber industry in Swaziland could not survive if it was not linked to the extensive (1, 6 million ha.) plantations in South Africa, and heavily dependent on capital from that country. This anomaly is supported by the way the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) lumps certified Mondi plantations in Swaziland together with those in South Africa. From the FSC website, it appears Mondi has no certified plantations in Swaziland!

About 9% of Swaziland is under timber plantations. Sappi Usutu, owning more than half the plantations in Swaziland (70,000 ha), and the only pulp mill, employs about 3,000 people directly and indirectly. 1044 people are employed by Mondi Peak in two sawmills and 19,000 ha of plantations. Shiselweni, the third largest plantation area covers about 12,000 ha. The Mondi and Sappi plantations were originally established about 50 years ago by the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) that also started the Usutu pulp mill at Bhunya. These were sold to the present owners quite recently - Mondi in 1984, and Sappi in 1992. The Shiselweni plantations were established in 1967, also by CDC, but later sold to the Transvaal Wattle Growers Co-operative (TWK) also based in South Africa.

How do these plantations benefit the Swazi people? Swaziland imports most of its finished timber products from South Africa, whilst nearly all of the local timber production leaves the country as logs, pulp or rough cut planks.

The extent to which plantations impacted on water resources must have had serious consequences

for people relying on water from streams and rivers flowing from the highveld catchment area. People born in the area before plantations remember waterfalls and deep streams that no longer exist.

An analysis of the negative impacts of plantations shows that there are two main categories: Ecological, and socio-economic, or more simply put – impacts on biodiversity and impacts on people. Further analysis shows that within these two main groups, some can be direct or primary, and many others indirect, consequent or secondary. Examples of primary impacts: destruction of natural vegetation; loss of grazing for livestock; loss of medicinal plants, depletion of water resources. Secondary impacts: increase in grazing pressure elsewhere; conflict over access to resources.

Impacts that manifest over time can be described as cumulative, downstream or tertiary – such as the accumulation in organisms of toxic agricultural chemicals, used to kill plants and animals that are an obstacle to plantation establishment; and invasion into wetlands, streams and forests by alien trees and weeds.

All of these impacts come with a cost, sometimes easily quantifiable, but mostly causing long-term losses to the natural environment and to people's health, welfare and wealth that are difficult to put a value to. Like the future cost of the loss of a wetland, or poisoning of a river, or the effect of toxic fumes on workers in a pulp mill. One thing that is clear however is that the timber industry does not cover these costs. This 'externalisation' of costs by the industry enables them to continue to operate profitably, keeping their shareholders in some distant city happy, and no doubt increasingly wealthy. On top of this, it seems that timber companies have benefited from special deals that exempt them from paying certain taxes, and also receiving cash handouts from government if they plead poverty! All the plantation companies in Swaziland claim to be struggling to remain profitable. If they were to carry the full true costs of their operations, whilst operating on the current basis, it could mean they would no longer be viable.

The reality is that it would be virtually impossible to undo what has been done. However, new approaches that ensure most proceeds generated by the plantations remain in Swaziland and benefit local people are needed. Ownership and control of the plantation resource should revert to the people of Swaziland. Maximum beneficiation at the local level is needed to ensure the greatest possible number of work opportunities is created in Swaziland.

The CDC needs to take responsibility for the mess it has left. Ideally they should instigate and finance a process to restore ownership of the plantation areas to the communities that were displaced. The CDC should fund the costs of restoration of the natural areas that became degraded as a consequence of the establishment of plantations. This could create much needed employment for many people in the future, especially those that suffered as a consequence of losing access to land and water.

The social and ecological debt of the Sappi Usutu Pulp mill will need to be carefully assessed and remedied. Community health will need special attention. The workers' village at Bhunya should be flattened, and workers provided with alternative opportunities for accommodation away from the polluted environment near the mill. The three schools at Bhunya, where young people are exposed to polluted air, should be relocated as a matter of urgency. An alternative would be Mhlambanyatsi, where there is good infrastructure, and a healthier environment.

On a final note, I feel compelled to comment on the attitude of disdain and disrespect for local communities displayed by management at all the three timber plantation companies where interviews were held. It seems that as is still often the case in South Africa, the rightful owners of resources

being exploited for foreign profit are viewed and treated as second-class citizens in their own land. The natural environment has been abused in a similar way, and the land under plantations overexploited.

All of this must change.

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