
[South Africa: Timberrr.! As the plantations go on growing, more South Africans are crying out a warning](#)

A wide range of stakeholders from environment and community groups, research bodies and decision-makers from government and industry came together in Nelspruit, South Africa in mid-November to discuss a burning issue - the impact of timber plantations.

The conference, on Timber Plantations: Impacts, Future Visions and Global Trends was hosted by GEASPHERE in coalition with TimberWatch S.A. on 13 and 14 November. It gave a chance for the growing number of environmentalists and stakeholders to vent their mounting concern, and to allow them to interact with representatives from government and the industry, to discuss issues, and search for common ground to develop a future "forest" vision.

They are afraid of the continuing impact of what one local landowner described as: "billions of rows of thirsty pine, gum and wattle masquerading as 'forests' which cast a sterile blanket over huge areas of Mpumalanga, KwaZulu Natal and elsewhere, to produce pulp, planks and poles for the profit of shareholders. The negatives outweigh the benefits."

One keynote speaker was Professor Braam van Wyk of the University of Pretoria, on the threats to a most precious resource - "Southern African Grasslands: Aspects of their Biodiversity, Dynamics and Management". He pointed out that in traditional timber-producing countries, plantations are used to produce timber trees through modifying a natural resource, where boreal forests in the northern hemisphere are either selectively used or "clear cut" and replanted with species very much native to that part of the world.

But in Southern Africa, he said, we destroy a natural resource before we establish another resource - which must then be artificially maintained. "What are we destroying?" he asked. "Is the destruction worth what we replace it with?"

Grasslands - that's a misnomer, said the professor - because most of the flora consists of non-grassy herbs, shrubs and wild flowers, with grass making up a mere 11 per cent of the plant diversity in some grasslands, notably in the North Eastern Mountain Sourveld, where most heavy "afforestation" has occurred. The grassland biome is home to around 4,000 plant species (compared to a country like Sweden with 1,700 plant species) thus providing a very valuable genetic resource. Also, plants create habitat - a place to live - for other species. Many animals endemic to the grassland biome are severely threatened by their habitat being destroyed. Amphibians in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands have been severely affected - some species may even be extinct - due to excessive destruction of the grassland.

An essential component of grassland management is fire, known as the "life blood" of the grassland. "You take away the fire - you destroy the grassland". Obviously, management of industrial timber plantation compartments excludes this vital regenerator, so the grassland destruction is total.

Grassland destruction by ploughing or establishing timber plantations is considered irreversible,

because grassland, as a culmination of millions of years of different vegetation types superimposed on each other, is impossible to recreate.

Eucalyptus, wattle and pine trees are notorious for the "hydrophobic" quality they induce in the soils. A waxy layer coats the sand grains and impairs water penetration. This effect is worsened by fire. Grassland however, provides for increased water retention and helps to prevent flooding.

Most grassland studies have focused on grass species which are important to livestock production, so "we know essentially nothing about the precious grassland biome," said Van Wyk. "Should we continue to destroy it?"

In his travels through rural areas he sees row upon row of eucalyptus and pine monocultures - newly established - in the primary grasslands. This is a problem the forestry industry must admit, he says, and it must dialogue with all affected parties to find a solution. He called for the launching of a National Grassland Day, to generate grassland awareness and appreciation.

David Lindley from the Mondi Wetland Project spoke of wetland management within the forestry industry. He produced a document stating that the Mondi Timber Company is committed to removing all trees planted in wetlands and riparian zones by the year 2010.

Researcher Dirk Versfeld outlined a programme for the timber industry to convert gradually to indigenous hardwood timber species or "slow wood", which is a long term investment with a high value. He is co-author with Mike Warren of "Indigenous Forestry Alternatives for Rural Development". (For a copy of this document please mail owen@soft.co.za) Nhlanhla Msweli from Swaziland Campaign against Poverty and Economic Inequality (SCAPEI) spoke about the impact of timber plantations on the rural people of Swaziland, where huge areas of the grasslands have disappeared beneath monoculture timber, denying people a choice of livelihood.

In a timber plantation cattle cannot be grazed, food cannot be grown, and animals cannot be hunted. People who have lived sustainably, using the natural environment as subsistence farmers, have been removed from their land and displaced to the mountains where they cannot continue their lifestyle. Msweli spoke of low wages and job retrenchments in the forestry industry, coupled to water and air pollution in the vicinity of the paper mills. He bemoaned the fact that large multinational corporations continue to annex and exploit the land to the benefit of multinational shareholders, and to the disadvantage of the people of the land.

George Dor from the Jubilee S.A. movement spoke on "Ecological Debt: Reparations for Damage by Industry, Mining, Large Dams and Forestry". He pointed out that the huge debts which many developing countries struggle to pay back to institutions like the World Bank and the IMF have often been incurred to finance projects which had little significant benefits to the people of the borrowing country, and now lay a burden on development.

New loans have to be taken out to finance old debt, and these come with conditions benefiting the corporations of lending countries. Activities in South Africa such as mining, building large dams, establishing industrial timber plantations and developing tourism directly benefit corporations from northern countries, often at the expense of the people and environment of the South. "Ecological debt" is what the countries of the north owe those of the south for ecological destruction - similarly huge corporations "owe" the affected people a debt. Dor noted that social and environmental movements work in isolation from each other - they should be networking much closer around common issues.

Maria Rydlund from the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) came specially from Sweden for the conference, and gave an international perspective. She outlined how monoculture timber plantations impact on many developing countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Brazil. Most timber produced in the southern hemisphere supplies consumers in the north. Forest people in the south are displaced to make way for privately-owned monoculture timber plantations from which they derive little real benefit. They are no longer forests - they have much more in common with an agricultural monocrop.

Human Rights lawyer Richard Spoor explained how the legal framework allows corporations to externalize costs. The legal system is inherited from the Romans of 2000 years ago, when there was an abundance of water, soils and wildlife. By exercising their "legal rights" to own property and profit, people could destroy the natural environment with nothing to fear from the law. This attitude persists to today, where people affected by big business "exercising its right to own and profit" have no recourse to the law to receive compensation for their losses. Spoor argued that the true costs of the timber industry are not taken into account. When the water dries up on a farm downstream from a big timber plantation the cost to the farmer should be borne by the timber industry. The impact of pollution from pulp mills on farmers and other downstream users needs to be quantified. Peoples displaced from the land and losing their livelihoods should be compensated. If all these hidden costs are quantified the timber industry would be shown up as much less of a corporate profit-maker. Spoor called for much more environmental, social and legal activism, aiming to make people more aware of how big industries impact on our natural and social environment - and the real costs to society.

Wally Menne from the TimberWatch coalition gave feedback from the recent World Forestry Congress, and he spoke about the vast differences between forests and plantations. He spoke of the physical impacts of plantation management on local forest systems, such as biodiversity loss, erosion due to timber extraction, and heavy impact on water supply. Plantations have been called "thieves" of water, as they consume more water than is actually delivered through rainfall, said Menne.

Morne Lizamore from the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAf) delivered a presentation outlining the regulations the forestry industry is bound by, and the processes involved in obtaining licenses to establish timber plantations. South African legislation allows for broad public participation, he said, and more people should feel empowered to be part of the process and make informed interventions about developments which will impact on their environment.

The industry was represented by Mike Edwards, Chief Director of Forestry South Africa. He said that due to increased demand the industry needs to establish another 250,000 hectares of industrial eucalyptus monocultures to supply the growing demand for pulp, but that the main obstacle to this growth would be availability of water and soils. Also, the industry would lose a significant amount of trees through removing them from wetlands, riparian zones and illegally planted areas to comply with legislation and certification regulations. He mentioned that the industry would make increasing use of "out-growing" schemes to obtain raw material. Edwards committed the industry to sustainable management and transparency, thanking the organisers for the opportunity to contribute to the event.

Linda Mossop, the government's Chief Director of Forestry in DWAf, shared the platform with Mike Edwards and strongly sided with the industry, using the opportunity to publicly thank the industry for their assistance, specially with the government's "afforestation" program in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal, by which the government aim to "open the industry" to more players. She also welcomed the opportunity for dialogue, and proposed more workshop events to focus on specific plantation impacts.

During discussions after the presentations, some stakeholders said they are uncomfortable with the way government embraces the "forestry" industry. They feel strongly that the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry should act as more of a regulator and less of a promoter of timber plantation activity in South Africa.

On the second day participants traveled by bus through the north eastern mountain sourveld where extensive eucalyptus and pine plantations cover huge tracts of the Mpumalanga uplands. Several practical problems were pointed out, such as trees planted contrary to the law in wetland areas and riparian zones. The tour took in the thousands of hectares of plantation recently destroyed in one of the biggest ever fires, which caused massive losses to the industry and severe damage to the soils.

By: Philip Owen, Geosphere, e-mail: owen@soft.co.za (A document containing presentations and minutes of proceedings on 13 November is available on request to owen@soft.co.za)