
China: Following the trite pattern of monoculture tree plantations

The Great Leap Forward in 1958 and the Cultural Revolution had thwarted in China the establishment of high yield timber plantations put forward in the late 1950s by the Chinese Ministry of Forestry. However, since 1980s, along with the implementation of the reform and open-door policy (namely China's entry to the global market arena), the existing imbalance between wood demand and supply was altered. This seems to be not very different from the process undergone by other countries which end up engulfed by the global commerce and its packaging demand. Apparently, the response to the gap has been also very similar to the one implemented in most of the free market economies: large scale monoculture tree plantations of high yielding species (generally alien) which are even mainly the same. That's how Australia's national tree is expected to become a new choice for China to ease the soaring pulp needs of its cardboard and paper industry.

The Chinese Government decided in 1988 that, in the next 30 years, fast-growing and high-yielding timber bases of 20 million hectares would be established. China's forestry scientists have developed eucalyptus varieties and created a plantation area dubbed Asia's largest "eucalyptus gene bank" in southwest China's Zhuang Autonomous Region, a subtropical region where the trees are widely planted to provide more cost-effective pulp material. New varieties grown at the base are generally "ultra fast-growing eucalyptus" which can be felled six years after planting with a yield of more than 60 cubic meters per hectare per year.

However, the pulpwood rush has been at the cost of food. Last year, China's tree plantations increased 1.53 million hectares from 2001, while farmland acreage decreased by a total of 1.68 million hectares since China turned 1.42 million hectares of farmland into tree plantations, according to the Ministry of Land and Resources in its "2002 China Land and Resources Communiqué".

As usual, the World Bank is meddled in. In order to boost State investment, the World Bank Forestry Development Project (Credit 605-CHA) had been introduced in 1985 to establish and transform commercial timber plantations, construct forest roads and procure accessory equipment. In 2002, the total area of tree plantations reached 230.72 million hectares, of which 3.4 million hectares were fast-growing and high-yielding timber plantations, with 980.000 hectares being established under the 1991 National Afforestation Project Financed by a World Bank loan of US\$ 300 million and domestic funding equivalent to US\$ 200 million.

Also foreign companies have sought to enter the coveted huge Chinese market. Since the late 1980s, a number of large foreign companies have invested in plantation development in China, especially in south-eastern coastal provinces that are characterised by a favourable investment climate and natural conditions. Singapore-based Asia Pulp and Paper Co. Ltd.; Thailand-based Soon Hua Seng Group; Hong Kong-based Sino-Wood Partner Co. Ltd.; Japan Princes Co. Ltd., have projects under way. Asia Pulp and Paper plans to establish 1.3 million hectares of fast growing Eucalyptus and Acacia plantations throughout China. By May 2000 it had 65,300 hectares of tree plantations.

The Swedish-Finnish integrated forest products giant Stora Enso has been also a major agent in

research and development on this field. Together with the Government of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, it has conducted a pre-feasibility study for industrial-scale plantations and integrated pulp and paper operations. Stora Enso also signed in 2002 an agreement for co-operation with the Chinese Academy of Forestry in Beijing.

China has been entering the global economy at its own rhythm, no doubt. Restrictions on foreign investment and private land ownership mean that foreign companies have gained access to forest land by forming agreements with local communities, which are in turn approved by government. However, the process has eventually made room for the same pervasive elements of the western unsustainable pattern of production, consumption and commercialisation. In this case, the large scale plantations of monoculture trees with all their notorious harmful impacts on the people and the environment.

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