South Africa FAO Forest Definition a Threat to Biodiversity

Wally Menne, a member of the South African Timberwatch Coalition, sent the following message to Magnus Grylle of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):

“The information given [by the FAO] in respect of the total area covered by forest in South Africa is misleading as there are probably more than 3 million hectares of alien monoculture industrial timber plantations and thickets included in your total of 8.9 million ha. In fact, a more accurate figure for actual forest would be 4.5 million ha. Industrial timber plantations are a temporary crop with rotations of 7-20 years and an average of about 10. They destroy indigenous culture and biodiversity, displace communities, and irreversibly degrade the land. It is dishonest to pretend that they are forests."

"Thank you for your input. We are of course much aware of the plantations in South Africa. For the global accounting, we include them in the term "Forest" which has, given the context, a precise definition. See: http://www.fao.org/forestry/fo/fra/defin.jsp?lang_id=1&parent=978 and http://www.fao.org/forestry/fo/fra/index.jsp

This definition does not take into account the quality (which can be perceived very differently depending on the point of view). It is simply a gross value for "areas with trees", if using a very loose explanation. This gross value can be used as is, for instance for carbon balance calculations, or be broken down for more specialised analysis. Themes for these more specialized analyses can be "naturalness", "wood supply capacity", or any other. For each purpose, the overall Forest could be broken down into more precise categories. What to call the categories is up to the analyst.

I hope this clarifies our position. Forest plantations are areas with trees, and therefore a (kind of) forest.

Best regards, Magnus Grylle "

It seems that according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), even when every last patch of forest has been destroyed, there will be nothing to worry about, as long as there were timber plantations to take their place.

It does not even appear to matter that the areas previously covered by forest are left to degrade into wastelands of alien weeds. It also does not matter that vast areas of land that were formerly grasslands, wetlands, pastures and food farms are converted into industrial timber plantations.

After all, what is important is that there should be sufficient trees on the earth, to be able to show the plebs and the politicians that nothing has changed; that there are still the same areas of ‘forest’ -- ‘Deforestation’ has slowed right down (don’t tell people that there is very little left to de-forest). “In fact, in many parts of the world there is an increase in forest cover!”

In South Africa there is a growing uneasiness with the simplistic view of forests taken by the FAO. Our forests are amongst the most complex and diverse in the world --this in spite of their historical

abuse at the hands of human settlers. The forests that have survived are those in more remote areas, where human pressure has been in balance with their capacity to regenerate. But this is changing fast as local population pressure combined with demand for resources from first world nations starts to mount.

Paradoxically, the timber plantations that were expected to be the saviour of South Africa's forests (by providing alternative sources of timber to local consumers and taking pressure off indigenous species) have become the greatest threat to biodiversity in this country. This is not to say that timber plantations do not play an important role in the local economy. There is legitimate cause for the cultivation of exotic tree species in South Africa, and it can be argued that they have played a role in preventing the further exploitation of our forest resources. This is all very well in the context of meeting local demand for timber products, but what has happened is that production has expanded to a level far above local demand. Recent figures show that exports of timber plantation products (mostly raw logs, chips and pulp) are now more or less on a par with local consumption (mostly end products such as construction timber, furniture, paper and board).

The ways in which plantations have contributed to the degeneration of the natural environment are many and complex. Some negative impacts on biodiversity are only felt much later, and then quite far away from the event that caused the impact. So-called downstream impacts are usually ignored when assessing environmental costs, yet they can accumulatively cause major devastation in natural ecosystems.

The Dukuduku Forest, which is part of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park World Heritage Site, is a case in point. An estimated 30,000 people settled in the forest between 1990 and 2000, at the same time as timber companies were aggressively expanding their interests in the area. Not only were they buying up farms that previously engaged in varied agricultural activities, and combining them into large timber estates, but there was a concerted drive to establish 'woodlots' in communally owned tribal lands nearby. Both of these ways of increasing the supplies of timber for their hungry pulp and paper mills, led to the displacement of thousands of farm workers and rural poor.

To make matters worse, the timber companies embarked on 'rationalisation' programmes that resulted in the retrenchment of thousands of plantation workers. In a single day, SAPPI retrenched more than 600 workers at their Kwa-mbonambi operation. Permanent workers were replaced with contractors, who could employ people on a temporary basis without having to provide normal employment benefits. Many illegal immigrants from countries such as Mozambique were attracted to this kind of employment, as it was possible to get money to take back to their families without questions being asked. A combination of all of the above actions created a situation where poor contract workers (paid about 1 US dollar a day), were left with little choice but to make their homes inside the forest, and to supplement their meagre income by cutting down or burning the forest to open up areas where they could grow food or Cannabis.

The more easily measured direct impacts of timber plantations are also often disregarded, especially in the case of community land, where the companies are effectively obtaining the free use of land, without any of the responsibilities associated with ownership. Loss of grassland and wetland vegetation to plantations leads to the loss of grazing for cattle and sheep. Associated with this loss is the negative effect of fast growing plantations on the water table. Sources of water such as streams, springs and seasonal pans often disappear after plantations are established. Not only does this affect people and their livestock, but it also has serious implications for the natural species diversity of the area.

As wetland areas dry out, wetland species become locally extinct. There are many areas that have not been thoroughly surveyed, yet are being transformed before this can happen. It is quite possible that species that have not been recorded are being lost without our knowledge.

Displacement of people from their land creates a situation where alternatives must be found. In the same period that plantations have spread through rural areas, there has been a marked increase in the number of people leaving their rural homes to try to find work in the cities, and living wherever they can find vacant land to erect a temporary home. For many who were not prepared to give up their traditional lifestyle, it has meant having to take their livestock into areas where they can browse rather than graze, and this usually means sensitive riparian zones along rivers and streams. To get to water to drink, cattle open up paths on steep banks, which in turn lead to soil erosion problems.

The indirect effects of plantations on nearby natural areas has never been properly researched and quantified. Perhaps the FAO will consider providing the funds to do this research .

Direct impacts of timber plantations on biodiversity could fill several volumes, but available space and time mean that only the major ones can be included here.

The most obvious and possibly the worst effect of plantations has been their tendency to spread beyond the area where they were originally planted, or to re-appear in areas where plantations were discontinued. The invasive tendency of exotic tree plantation species has had devastating effects on vast areas of this country. The worst is the Australian Black Wattle (Acacia mearnsii), but Eucalyptus species and hybrids have also made a major contribution to the problem. Although there are government-coordinated programs to eradicate alien trees, especially in sensitive catchments, the damage to biodiversity has already been done. Herbicide sprays and other applications form a substantial part of the process used, and it is not properly understood what the effects of the use of these chemicals will be on native species. It has been reported that these efforts have failed in some areas due to poor methods or management as well as inadequate follow-up.

Emerging from the above is a picture of timber plantations causing both direct and indirect damage to the natural environment. By extension, this damage must extend to a substantial loss of biodiversity.

Managed plantations in this country cover an area greater than 1,7 million ha. And most of these have been established on species diverse grasslands and wetlands. It has been estimated that land that has been invaded by alien tree species, or left unmanaged after being used for plantations, amounts to more than 1,5 million ha, mainly in grassland areas, but also significantly in wetlands and riverine areas.

Is it right to call these artificial impositions on the landscape ‘forests’? No matter what arguments are presented by the FAO, it is clearly a problem to make the inference that tree plantations are a “kind of forest”. By the same token it could be claimed that locusts are a ‘kind of bird’ or that cornfields are a ‘kind of Prairie’. Clearly this is ludicrous to say the least, so why is the FAO determined to obfuscate the true nature of timber plantations?

The most obvious reason is political. Southern nations are supposedly independent, and have sovereignty over their people and resources. Or do they?

Coupled with the neo-colonialist farce is the perceived need to maintain ‘standards’ in the first world. It makes so much sense when you can call timber products from industrial plantations ‘products of sustainably managed forests’!

Thank you very much, developed nations of the North --you can keep your euphemisms and your plantations. We want our grasslands and our forests.

By: Wally Menne,