
South Africa: Quo vadis FSC?

Certification of monoculture timber plantations as “sustainably managed forests” by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) makes an absolute mockery of the concept of sustainable environment and ecosystem management.

In recent years vast tracts of industrial tree plantations in South Africa and many other countries, have been given the FSC stamp of approval.

How can this be possible? The natural vegetation in the areas where these plantations have been established was originally highly bio-diverse grassland or woodland. After conversion to plantations, these areas stand little chance, if any, of being able to revert to the natural climax vegetation type. The environment is subjected to a terrifying range of harmful impacts, starting with the construction of primitive roads and ending with huge, computerised mechanical harvesters compacting the soil, thereby destroying its function.

In between these environmentally catastrophic events, the land and its rightful inhabitants are subjected to an extensive suite of chemical, physical, biological and demographic alterations to their natural state. This all as part of the process that is imposed to meet the demands of first world greed for wood-fibre products:

- 1.- As a first step, the natural vegetation is either bulldozed or killed with herbicides to prevent competition with alien plantation trees for water, light and nutrients.
- 2.- Alien tree saplings are artificially fertilised to speed up their rate of establishment and other unnatural chemicals that absorb moisture are added to the soil to prevent the young plants from drying out.
- 3.- Spills of herbicides, insecticides, diesel fuel, engine oil and other human trash enter the natural environment without invitation.
- 4.- Alien invasive plants carried as seeds on vehicle tyres and worker's boots become established in the vacuum created by the destruction of the natural groundcover.
- 5.- Plantation contractors do not normally provide appropriate toilet facilities for their workers. Human faeces are deposited in the field, leading to pollution of streams, rivers and lakes with bacteria such as that which causes cholera. The recent cholera outbreak in the eastern region of South Africa could well have originated from this source.
- 6.- Contract workers are poorly paid and have little choice but to build makeshift homes within areas of natural forest near the plantation sites where they work, causing substantial ecological damage in the process.
- 7.- Animals and birds that are disturbed by the plantation establishment activities either flee the area

or are hunted and snared as food for the contract workers.

8.- Local people who would have had access to the area if plantations had not been established, could have used the area to graze their cattle and sheep, harvest thatch grass for roofing their homes, and collect food and medicinal plants for their own limited use. They are now deprived of this resource and are forced to move into previously undisturbed areas in search of these commodities. This often leads to conflict with the management of protected natural areas.

9.- Surface water in the vicinity of new plantations is soon depleted and is usually only evident during the rainy season. People have to turn to the use of boreholes and wells that often are saline, or polluted with bacteria from pit toilets.

10.- Timber plantation contract workers are commonly unmarried men from other parts of the country and to a large extent from neighbouring countries. This can often lead to the problem of women in local communities being sexually harassed. Outcomes of this situation include unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and destroyed relationships. There is a high likelihood that the increasing incidence of HIV infection in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) can be attributed in part to the employment practices of the timber plantation industry.

11.- Contract workers add a new dimension to local health care needs. Those that are recruited from remote rural parts of neighbouring states can be carriers of diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. Coincidentally both these diseases have been increasing proportionately during the period that industrial timber plantations have been expanding (over the last 15 to 20 years).

12.- The loss of beneficial soil organisms in timber plantations has been well documented. Monocultures are inherently prone to the rapid spread of pathogens. Natural buffers that are present in bio-diverse ecosystems cannot be replicated in the timber monoculture environment.

13.- The establishment of timber plantations upsets the natural balance of species. These plantations create barriers that disrupt the normal migration and breeding patterns of birds, animals and insects.

14.- Community food security is one of the first victims of timber plantations. Areas used traditionally for growing fruit and vegetables become too dry or are shaded out when plantations are established too close to the fertile areas along streams and rivers. The remaining residents are left in a position where they have to use their limited financial resources (usually state pensions) to buy processed food from trading stores.

15.- Transport systems, especially roads, are subjected to high levels of usage for which they were not designed. The cost of upgrading or maintaining rural roads is usually borne by the state, which means that the timber industry benefits from an indirect subsidy.

16.- Negative effects on non-timber neighbouring farms are numerous. In much the same way as genetically engineered food crops will pollute fields of nearby non-GMO or organic crops, there are off-site impacts that undermine the economic viability of other farmers. These include an increase in alien invasive plants, loss of ground water, increased crime and poaching and the disruption of normal pasture management by burning, due to the risk of fire spreading to the timber plantations,

Large-scale timber plantations destroy whole ecosystems and rural economies. For some strange reason this calamity is virtually ignored by governments and research institutions. The onus should be on an organisation like FSC to insist that thorough, impartial research is conducted before

certification can be considered.

In place of the natural landscape is a new visage dominated by fake forests. Fake not only in that their owners pretend that they can substitute meaningfully for the real thing, but truly fake in terms of how their economic benefits are exaggerated and inflated at the local level.

There is no doubt that a consumer commodity like paper, or pressboard, has great value in modern society. What is not acceptable is that the rate of consumption of paper products is increasing whilst the living standards of poor communities where the timber is produced do not. The growth of the throwaway culture of so-called developed countries has a direct correlation to the eroding natural environment, and standards of living in the countries that have been colonised by the tree plantations of the multinational corporations concerned.

The FSC must take a large share of the responsibility for this social and environmental injustice.

Plantations are not forests !!!

By: Wally Menne, member of the TIMBERWATCH Coalition.