
South Africa: what are the true costs of woodlots?

What is a woodlot? Is it a patch of land planted to trees for the purpose of supplying the fuel and timber needs of a rural community? Or is it a small portion of a giant industrial plantation, meeting the pulp and paper needs of first world industrial society?

An exact answer to these questions would help to erase the uncertainty that exists in my mind. However, clear answers have not been forthcoming, and over the past twenty years, whilst living in Zululand, I have come to these conclusions.

The conversion of grazing or other agricultural land into Eucalyptus plantations has been driven by the two larger timber-plantation companies in the area. In their eagerness to obtain control of suitable land for growing Eucalyptus, both SAPPI and Mondi embarked on a land acquisition spree in the late 1980's. Vast areas that once consisted of hundreds of independent, privately owned farms were purchased at what was then thought to be excessively high prices. These high prices were motivated by competition between the two major players and it was important to "close the gaps" that stood in the way of consolidating these farms into vast, mono-culture estates. This made it profitable for the last few farmers to hold out as long as possible, while SAPPI and Mondi battled to maintain their sources of raw material.

After acquiring the land the timber companies embarked on a course that involved firstly, removing all former farm workers and the destruction of worker accommodation. Even expensive farm-houses and buildings, such as workshops and store rooms, were bull-dozed to make way for seemingly endless tracts of gum trees (Eucalyptus species).

Where did the people who once lived on these farms go? Well, the white farm-owners received a great deal of money and were able to move away to comfortable homes in the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal or the Western Cape (two provinces in South Africa) or Australia. What happened to the farm workers is anyone's guess. Over-crowding in the tribal lands made returning to these areas impossible. I suspect that most of them were left with little choice but to head for the squatter settlements of Durban (South Africa's largest harbour) or Dukuduku (an area of sub-tropical forest adjacent to the Greater St Lucia World Heritage Site) where they could eke out a living.

Once they had dealt with the problem of unwanted workers and buildings on the farms that they had purchased, the timber companies were then faced with another problem. This was the large numbers of staff that were inherited with the acquisition of the privately owned Waterton Timbers and Shell Forestry, (a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell), by SAPPI and Mondi respectively. On a single day, SAPPI retrenched more than 600 workers from its Kwa-Mbonambi operation –all in the name of "rationalisation". This meant that the company would save a lot of money through not having to pay benefits to permanent employees. The risks of "unionisation" and strike action were passed on to the contractors who were appointed to supply labour and other services at cut-throat rates. Workers, who had formerly enjoyed all the normal benefits of permanent employment, were now reduced to having to beg or bribe for casual jobs on a daily basis. To make matters worse, this was in competition with desperate informal migrants from Mozambique. Many local people simply refused to work for the

offered daily rate of R12.00 (approx. 2 US dollars).

What does all of this have to do with woodlots? Particularly woodlots on community land which belongs to the Ngonyama Trust, representing His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelethini (monarch of the Zulu people)?

Woodlots, which total thousands of hectares, but have never been subjected to planting permit applications, which the law requires.

Woodlots, which are de facto the property of the large plantation companies, but stand on land that they have neither purchased, nor paid any rent for.

Woodlots, grown from seedlings supplied by the timber companies concerned, yet who refuse to take responsibility for the negative social and environmental problems that they cause!

In the Sokhulu tribal area, situated to the north of Richards Bay, it is quite obvious that the dominant land use is Eucalyptus plantations. How did this come to be? Well, the answer is quite simple: Mondi had purchased as much white owned land as was possible, between the towns of Gingindlovu, Babanango and Hluhluwe, yet could still not satisfy the need for wood at their mill at Richards Bay. They had no choice but to start looking at the community owned land in former Kwa-Zulu apartheid homeland.

The Mondi RDP (Reconstruction and Development) “woodlot” project has been so “successful” that hardly any land at Sokhulu remains unplanted to Eucalyptus. Poor SAPPI, desperate not to lose the supply of raw material needed to keep it’s Mandeni and Mkomazi mills going, was forced to look further north, to the rolling grasslands of coastal Maputaland. So desperate in fact, that they even tried their luck in southern Mozambique – thankfully without success!

Reconstruction and Development cannot be served by removing peoples’ means to survive in the rural environment.

So what is happening? Slowly but surely more and more land is being planted to Eucalyptus. More and more water is sucked out of the Earth, to create wood fibre, which is exported to destinations like Japan and Europe, at a fraction of its true cost. A “privileged” minority appears to benefit from the sale of timber to Mondi and Sappi, but for the vast majority of members of traditional communities it means the end to the natural resources upon which they relied for survival. Grazing for cattle and goats has disappeared under the spreading plantations. The loss of surface water has ruined prospects of growing food crops and people’s traditional lifestyle has been left in tatters. Where will these people go? Well, some may move to informal settlements around towns in the area, but many more have moved to the squatter-cities around Durban. Here the people can taste the benefits of “civilised society”.

Breathe the rotten air, polluted by factories, freeways and landfill sites!

Roam the streets, scratching in waste-bins and sniff glue for pleasure!

Become economically active in the lucrative crime and prostitution industry!

Give their kids Coca-Cola and GE chips for lunch.

Thank you SAPPI, thank you Mondi for your great contribution to the Reconstruction and Development of South Africa!

It must be admitted that there are other culprits. South Africa’s Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has failed to recognise the monstrous problems arising from the proliferation of so-called woodlots, using nice-sounding names like “community forestry” which is hardly the case.

