
South Africa: The Big Lie

The Tourism industry has done, and is doing much more for Responsible Environmental Management than the "forestry" industry. Maybe for this one reason only. . . It is rooted in Biodiversity.

Alien tree plantations destroy the indigenous vegetation they replace. The basis of the food chain destroyed, local fauna and flora can not adapt and live in a plantation. When calculating the profit associated with tree farms, is the cost of the destruction to the natural environment ever brought into consideration?

In a water stressed region, the negative effect of alien plantations manifests dramatically in the availability of water. During the dry winter months, the indigenous vegetation is dormant, dry and bare. But the alien trees are green. Clogging the catchment, their roots penetrating deep, they use water all year round.

There is thousands of hectares of "unmanaged" plantations, invader plantations. Everywhere you go in Mpumalanga, you see loose standing pines, bluegum and wattle. Clumps of it in difficult to reach valleys. Who is responsible for this problem? Surely the responsibility lies with the plantation industry themselves.

That the industry like to refer to itself as "forestry" is misleading. A monocrop should never be called a forest.

The paperless office is becoming a global reality. It is much easier, more efficient and economic to record your decisions, relay information and communicate via the electronic medium. Is the price for pulp not going to fall in two or three decades, leaving huge alien plantations standing in many of the developing countries?

The majority of South Africa's timber farm products is being exported to fulfill the pulp need of the North. These developed countries make use of our cheap land, and cheap labor. How profitable is it to be an average plantation worker on a contractors team?

In Mpumalanga province, managed plantations occupy 615,000 hectares and the industry employs 28,000 people in the same province. That makes one person on every 22 hectares. On that same 22 hectares the rights of all other indigenous living organisms have been totally denied. Can this be called responsible?

The plantation industry will act responsibly if they commit to NO further afforestation of our remaining natural areas. The plantation industry will act responsibly if it diversify, and spend more energy prospecting indigenous pulp alternative to Pines. Indigenous hemp is just such a example. It is much more water wise (as it is seasonal), it uses no fertilizer and it is more labor intensive. Industrial hemp is much more versatile and higher yielding.

The plantation industry would act responsibly if it uses its power derived from profit and growth to lobby government to legalize industrial hemp and experiment with this crop on their plantation degraded land. I am not suggesting that the plantation industry expand with hemp, I am suggesting that the plantation industry replace their exotic trees with indigenous hemp.

It is true that profit and growth is the reality of this world. One only needs to drive from Piet Retief to Blyde River Canyon to realize that. But in order to ensure the survival of the human race, the emphasis will have to shift to sustainable development. We have to become aware that we are an integral part of the environment, and our impact on it, affects us directly. We have to concentrate our efforts into working with the environment, minimizing our impact and raising environmental awareness in each and every individual.

By Philip Owen