
South Africa: exotic tree plantations are green wastelands

What follows is a contribution sent by a new friend of the WRM for its dissemination, which highlights problems caused by tree monocultures in his country:

Adapt or die

I live in the province of Mpumalanga (where the sun rises), South Africa. I live on a protected reserve, close to the Sudwala Caves and Rainforest. The immediate area surrounding the reserve is under exotic plantations, and it is obvious to see the effect of this model on the environment.

I often think of the mountain. I imagine every living thing being luminous, so that they would glow at night. I like to think that plants would have a soft glow, trees like the giant wild figs or beautiful Stinkwoods would glow brighter. Insects would glitter, a mouse would gleam, an owl radiate, a leopard shine. In the reserve I see the mountain, shimmering with life. When I look beyond, at the vast areas of exotics I see a monotonous feeble glow. Exotic tree plantations ARE green wastelands. They smother the indigenous life, not allowing enough water and light to sustain growth. No plants, no insects, no birds, no reptiles, no mammals. Small pockets of indigenous growth is preserved, mostly as a public relations exercise, and it is not enough to compensate for loss of habitat.

Programs are in place to clear clogged water ways, but much too slowly, and, it seems, as if it has little effect on the overall runoff, as huge areas of water catchment should be cleared. Many residents of this region experience escalating water shortages, due to plantations. Legislation are in place to secure wetlands, but it is not enforced due to lack of man power. I believe exotic plantations should be cut back drastically. No more new planting permits should be issued. Plantation managers should change to environmentally friendly products, which would be more labor intensive as harvests occur on a yearly basis.

It is not nice to be thirsty, that is why water is such an emotive issue. Water shortage could lead to serious conflict in the future, as many countries in southern Africa share rivers as borders. In September 1998, troops from South Africa and Botswana invaded Lesotho to quell political uprising. Fierce fighting occurred to secure the Katse dam, a vital link in the Lesotho Highlands Water project. This project holds water reserves for use in South Africa. It has been suggested that the "war" was motivated, at least in part, by the need to secure the strategic water reserve.

In the face of ever increasing energy consumption man-kind is on the verge of a major crisis. This is a time when we should be taking care of the earth, treating it with respect, correcting the wrongs of the past, as our own survival depends upon biodiversity. I think we should adapt our way of thinking, recognize our dependence upon nature. Our environment shapes us, therefore we need to keep it healthy."

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