
South Africa: the ways of the powerful pulp industry

Timber plantations have been a part of the South African landscape for more than a century. Colonial settlement brought a wide range of exotic tree species. Not all were successful, but it soon became clear that Australian acacias and eucalyptus were well suited to conditions in the Eastern part of South Africa.

It has always been accepted that these trees, together with Pine species introduced more recently, play an important role in the local economy. As natural forests had been seriously depleted during the nineteenth century, it was considered necessary to obtain alternative, fast-growing trees to meet the growing demand for building timber, mine-props, packaging material and of course more recently, to feed the local paper mills. This situation soon began to change when it was realised that external demand for timber products could stimulate exports from South Africa.

A Rayon mill was built by an Italian company at the coastal town of Mkomazi around 1950. Effluent from the mill was pumped directly into a river which entered the sea a few kilometres downstream. This gave South Africans their first taste (and smell) of serious atmospheric and marine pollution.

Subsequently the SAPPI mill was built on the Tsekela River at the town of Mandeni. The smell of this mill was detectable up to 50 km away, and liquid effluent was sprayed onto a large tract of land near the mill.

Only after the giant SAPPI mill at Ngodwana, and the MONDI mill at Richards Bay, were put into production did people start to take a more serious view of the situation. Environmental awareness helped people to make the connection between respiratory disease and atmospheric pollution. A serious effluent spill at the Ngodwana Mill put shocking pictures of dead fish on the front pages of newspapers and people started to ask questions about the true impacts of these mills.

As raw timber was desperately needed to feed the hungry mills, the two companies already mentioned, SAPPI and MONDI, together with a number of smaller players, went on a buying spree, paying very high prices for land in close proximity to their mills so that they could consolidate their operations into vast estates and take advantage of lower transport costs.

In their hurry to plant up all this new land, very little consideration was given to environmental impacts - trees were planted in wetlands and streams and estate managers were paid bonuses to maximise production in these areas. Even public land including road reserves and commonage was ruthlessly planted to trees with no thought given to the consequences.

At about this time the South African government decided to “commercialise” the state-owned timber plantations and SAFCOL (South African Timber Company Ltd) was born. Before very long they (SAFCOL) too had jumped onto the bandwagon and got busy with planting more trees into all the natural grasslands that had been excluded previously due to their ecological sensitivity.

The ways of Corporate tree-planters

It has been estimated that the larger corporate entities responsible for the expansion of pulpwood plantations in South Africa spend more money and effort on propaganda than on actual environmental protection and restoration. Their reaction to public criticism of their actions is to spend more money on advertising in journals and newspapers. They sponsor a wide range of “Environmental” projects -from bird and flower books to education and waste recycling.

In recent years it has been part of the timber companies’ strategy to employ “environmentalists” to interface with their critics. In many cases these people are recruited from government conservation agencies who appear to be easily tempted by prospects of employment in the corporate world. These paid “environmentalists” are used as spokespeople -making statements to the media- speaking at schools and clubs, spreading the false message that their employers are actually improving the environment by planting millions of exotic trees. At shows and fairs, pine tree seedlings are given to schoolchildren as part of the brainwashing exercise. Poorly informed people are duped into believing that all trees are good.

In order to defuse public anger over loss of natural surface water caused by plantations they install boreholes in the affected areas. People who previously had clean water virtually at their doorsteps are then forced to carry water over long distances to their houses and gardens. Areas where crops such as bananas, potatoes, cabbages and many others could be grown without irrigation before are now too dry.

Cattle and goats are forced to overcrowd the few remaining natural springs and rivers -damaging rivers and stream banks- trampling and polluting springs and ponds, making this water unfit for human consumption.

The two large pulpwood producers have embarked on promoting “community woodlots” on an extensive scale in rural areas. MONDI has claimed that their scheme is part of the RDP (Government Reconstruction and Development Program), to fool the community.

The companies provide seedlings and basic information on how to establish the woodlot, after persuading subsistence farmers that they will become wealthy when their trees are ready for harvesting in seven or eight years’ time!

What they fail to do is to inform prospective “woodlot” owners of the environmental and social consequences of their actions.

- They do not warn them not to plant in wetlands or close to rivers and streams.
- They do not tell them that they will have to find other land for their livestock to graze on.
- They do not warn them about loss of income from their land for the next seven years at least.
- They are not warned that their water supply may be affected negatively.
- They are not told that there is no guarantee that the company will buy their trees when they are ready.
- They are not adequately informed about the costs of services provided by the company.
- They are not told how difficult and expensive it will be to convert their land back to pastures or other

crops.

Claims of creating employment for local people do not explain what happened to people previously employed on the land. With the expansion of the plantation companies' landholdings, many people who were employed in vegetable, sugar cane or livestock farming are ejected from homes and land they have occupied for many years. It is the policy of the plantation companies to consolidate smaller farms into large "blocks" which can be managed by a single "forester". Farm houses, sheds and staff accommodation cottages are demolished to make way for contiguous plantations. People who may have lived on these farms all their lives are forced to relocate to overpopulated tribal areas where they have to build new houses -relocate their children to already overcrowded schools- look for new jobs in sectors where they lack appropriate experience and know-how.

To make matters worse, most of the work opportunities created by the timber companies is sourced out to contractors who are not obliged to offer normal fringe benefits associated with permanent employment. Many of these contractors prefer to use desperate illegal immigrants who are prepared to work for lower wages and cannot belong to a labour union.

State complicity in the development of the industry

Pulp and paper mills in South Africa have benefitted from massive financial incentives, both directly through assistance from the IDC (Industrial Development Corporation) and indirectly through access to cheap water and electricity, free pollution, and very favourable tax laws.

This gives the industry a significant advantage, together with its ability to manipulate the price of roundwood through its own extensive plantations. By holding the raw log price as low as possible, it is possible to ensure that maximum profits are accrued to the mills.

Both MONDI and SAPPI have acquired mills in Europe and other northern countries. The simple explanation for this is that they need a guaranteed outlet for the products of their South African operations. The less obvious explanation may be that these investments are a way of laundering the surplus accumulated profits made at the expense of South Africa's environment and people.

Planned expansion of plantations

It is the stated intention of the industry to increase the area in South Africa by 600,000 hectares more -which would add to the existing 1.5 million- and they also aim to establish extensive plantations in Mozambique.

What is of serious concern is that intensive research into the development of cold-resistant strains of eucalyptus species is being undertaken. If this research is successful it could mean that vast tracts of the interior which presently consist of grasslands and grain production farms, could fall victim to tree plantations.

The grassland areas inland of the sub-tropical coastal belt are vital to water production in South Africa. They are able to absorb rainfall in the summer which is then released slowly to feed rivers and streams during the dry winter. If extensive tree plantations were to be established in these areas, it would jeopardise the supply of water to farmers and townspeople situated downstream as well as exacerbate soil erosion.

Computerised mechanical harvesting machines have been imported by MONDI. These machines

operate 24 hours a day, felling, pruning, debarking, cutting and stacking. Three eight-hour shifts employing three people as opposed to an estimated 200 workers using manual methods -leaving 197 workers made redundant by a single machine.

Most plantation operators have also converted from labour-intensive weed control methods to using herbicides applied by specialist contractors. Once again resulting in fewer people being employed directly by the industry.

In sum -as elsewhere else- this forestry model is clearly showing that, although highly beneficial for large corporations, its social and environmental impacts make its unsustainable in the long run. People in South Africa are already organizing oposition and its environmental and social impacts are becoming clearer as the industry expands over larger areas of the country and even to neighbouring countries.