

# Regional perspectives on plantations

## An Overview on Southern Africa



## Timber Plantations in Southern Africa

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Timber plantations in southern Africa are concentrated in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland, but they are also expanding in Mozambique. There are smaller areas in Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania. In South Africa, the largest areas are in the provinces of Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, covering 1.5 million hectares of land. Additionally, an estimated 1.6 million hectares have been invaded by plantation species such as acacias (wattle), eucalyptus (gum) and pines. Although the area planted in Swaziland is much smaller (100,000 hectares) it occupies a large percentage of the country's land area (9%), and is aggravated by the fact that these plantations occupy the best agricultural lands. In the case of Mozambique, major plantations are still at the initial stage, but there are plans to establish large areas of pulpwood, sawlog and agrofuel plantations.

The industry in the region is dominated by two large South African pulp and paper companies: Mondi and Sappi, with plantations and pulp mills in South Africa and Swaziland, as well as paper manufacturing operations all over the world. Plantation species have changed from mainly wattle (planted for the extraction of tannin and woodchips) and pines (for sawn timber) increasingly to eucalyptus for producing pulp for paper and cellulose products.

The history of the social and environmental impacts of plantations and pulp mills in the region is now well documented. In 1996, WRM

included a full chapter on *South Africa* in the book "Pulping the South"<sup>1</sup>. Since then, WRM has published 48 *articles*<sup>2</sup> in its WRM bulletin, and in December 2005 published "A Study of the Social and Economic Impacts of Industrial Tree Plantations in the KwaZulu - Natal Province of South Africa"<sup>3</sup>, a report based on research carried out by John Blessing Karumbidza. In June 2007, Wally Menne (Timberwatch Coalition) produced a report on "The social impacts of certified timber plantations in South Africa and the implications thereof for agrofuel crops"<sup>4</sup> with support from the Global Forest Coalition.

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<sup>1</sup> Pulping the South. Chapter: "South Africa: A Fibre Exporter with Few Forests", <http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/material/pulping10.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SouthAfrica.html#articles>

<sup>3</sup> A Study of the Social and Economic Impacts of Industrial Tree Plantations in the KwaZulu - Natal Province of South Africa By John Blessing Karumbidza - December 2005, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SouthAfrica/book.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.globalforestcoalition.org/img/userpics/File/publications/Certification-agrofuels.pdf>

Two South African organizations have been campaigning against plantations and documenting their impacts for a number of years: the Timberwatch Coalition and GeaSphere. Both have web sites that contain information about the impacts of plantations and pulp mills<sup>5</sup>.

In Swaziland, WRM first published *articles*<sup>6</sup> on the impacts of plantations in 2003. In December 2004 Wally Menne (a member of the South African Timberwatch Coalition), published his research findings in: “*Timber Plantations in Swaziland: An investigation into the environmental and social impacts of large-scale timber plantation in Swaziland*”<sup>7</sup>. In March 2007, WRM published “*Swaziland: The myth of sustainable timber plantations*”<sup>8</sup>.

In Swaziland, the local member of Friends of the Earth (Yonge Nawe) has been struggling against the impacts of Sappi’s polluting pulp mill at Bhunya<sup>9</sup> over many years. More recently, GeaSphere (Swaziland) started to work on the issue of plantations and has included a specific section on this country in its *web page*<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Timberwatch web site: <http://www.timberwatch.org.za/>  
Geosphere web site: <http://www.geosphere.co.za/i>

<sup>6</sup> Articles on Swaziland available at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Swaziland.html#articles>

<sup>7</sup> Timber Plantations in Swaziland: An investigation into the environmental and social impacts of large-scale timber plantation in Swaziland by Wally Menne Timberwatch - South Africa - December 2004, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Swaziland/Plantations.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Swaziland: The myth of sustainable timber plantations*. By Wally Menne and Ricardo Carrere - March 2007, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Swaziland/book.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.yongenawe.com/02programmes/esej/spm.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.geosphere.co.za/swaziland.htm#timberplantationimpacts>

The case of Mozambique is different because there are still few large-scale tree plantations. However, the government plans to establish 2 million hectares in the next 20 years and besides the existing ones, there are some experimental plantations established to provide companies with knowledge about the adaptation and growth rates of the main plantation species (pines and eucalyptus).

An interesting aspect of plantations in Mozambique is the involvement of a new actor: the Global Solidarity Forest Fund (GSFF). The GSFF was founded by the Lutheran Church of Sweden (Diocese of Västerås) and the Norwegian Lutheran Church Endowment, both of which are investors in the fund. One of the world’s largest pension funds, Stichting Pensioenfonds ABP, a pension fund for employers and employees in service of the Dutch government and the educational sector, is also an investor in GSFF. This organization plans to plant some 155,000 hectares in 4 sites in Mozambique, mostly pines and eucalyptus (120,000 ha.) and 35,000 hectares of teak<sup>11</sup>.

GeaSphere-Mozambique is involved in monitoring plantations and there is a specific section on this country in the GeaSphere *web page*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.vasterasstift.nu/PDF/GSFF.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.geosphere.co.za/images/rollovers/mz.gif>

## **An overview of opposition to plantations**

### **South Africa**

Opposition to plantations has become very visible in South Africa as a result of the work carried out over many years by a number of individuals and organizations concerned about the social and environmental impacts of plantations. Those activities later resulted in the creation of the Timberwatch NGO coalition in 1995, which has carried out a large number of activities under the slogan “Plantations are not forests”. GeaSphere – a Timberwatch coalition partner - has also contributed significantly to the issue, with a strong emphasis on Mpumalanga, which is the province with the largest area of plantations. Both organizations have generated awareness of the social and environmental impacts of plantations, ranging from impacts on people’s livelihoods to the depletion of resources such as water, grasslands, forests and soils. At the same time, they have strongly opposed the licensing of new plantations at the EIA level and encouraged truly sustainable land use

The situation in South Africa is unique in one aspect: all actors (government, corporations and civil society) accept that plantations impact negatively on water. Such consensus is based on the findings of long term research proving that plantations do impact on water resources. As a result, legislation for approval of new plantations has been exclusively based on their possible impact on water, which means that they have not been approved in some areas (arid and semi-arid) but allowed in others with higher rainfall. However, plantations are also limited in the latter areas, to a large extent as a result of the work carried out by Timberwatch and GeaSphere. For

instance, most river catchments in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Mpumalanga are now closed to further industrial timber plantations. In KZN where Timberwatch was started, this has become an integral part of the water licencing assessment process. Considerable respect has been gained for Timberwatch’s professional guidance and, as a result, many applications for timber planting licenses have been rejected, reduced considerably in size and/or, in a number of cases, applicants have been encouraged to plant food crops. During site inspections, on their request, impromptu presentations and debates are given on the negative aspects of timber growing, and the benefits of food crop production. Other appropriate beneficial land uses are also suggested to the substantial groups of rural community leaders and members who normally attend these site inspections. Efforts in KZN have set standards that have assisted improvements elsewhere.

An exception to this is where previously disadvantaged people in these catchments are being granted planting licenses. Timberwatch is opposing this decision and campaigning to have the multinational companies reduce their plantations to the extent these others are granted licenses for, so the actual land area under plantations is not increased. An alternative would be for the companies to hand over some of their existing industrial timber plantations to these new applicants.

It is important to note that legislation has not been updated to cater for the modern type of fertilized, weed free (herbicides) and genetically uniform plantations that grow much faster than before, thereby consuming much more water and further degrading the nutrient status of soils. This could provide an opportunity for

stopping the further expansion of plantations, by making legislation much more strict on this.

On the other hand, plantation companies are extremely powerful in this country, both in economic, social and political terms.. The fall of apartheid has not changed this situation at all and a number of “black empowerment” projects have in fact strengthened the plantation industry through outsourcing of plantation work.

Plantation companies have been further strengthened by FSC certification of most of South Africa’s plantations. In this respect, it is interesting to note that two major companies (Komatiland Forests and Mondi) are members of the FSC and that the latter’s support to the FSC General Assembly that took place in Cape Town in 2008 led to it being elected as “the Gold Partner of the FSC GA 2008”.

Although there are many land claims from local people that were evicted from their lands during apartheid to make way for plantations, the fact is that this took place years ago and many of the impacted people have left the area. Though there have been successes, others are finding it very difficult to get their lands back especially from multinational timber companies.

Additionally, outsourcing of the work force has made unionization very difficult, resulting in weak trade unions. This has led to poor working conditions with alarming reports of gross under-payment (less than US\$3/day) particularly of workers in harvesting operations where no provision of protective clothing and excessively long working hours are common. The establishment of company promoted “woodlots” in local people’s lands has further divided

local communities, and also leads to the migration of people to urban areas.

A general comment is that the plantation model in South Africa has many things in common with the Chilean model. Both are portrayed in their region as “successful” and therefore something to be imitated by other countries. The expansion of both took place under very repressive regimes, making resistance from local communities impossible at the time. Democratic changes in government have not resulted in changes in plantation policies and governments continue to support this model. In both cases, communities are now (in a less repressive situation) claiming their lands back. Finally, although the social and environmental impacts of plantations and pulp mills have been well documented, those findings are still insufficient for moving the balance of power in the opposite direction.

Both Timberwatch and GeaSphere have established strong links with a number of international organizations (WRM, GFC, FoE, SSNC) and have participated actively at a number of international events, raising awareness of the issue of plantations and pulp mills in southern Africa. These international links have been important in building alliances for strengthening the struggles at the national and regional level.

### **Swaziland**

The Timberwatch Coalition was instrumental in raising the issue and in establishing contacts within the country. A symposium on timber plantations organized in South Africa in 2003 and the research carried out by Wally Menne during the year 2004 were the first

important steps for the involvement of Swazi people in the issue. The establishment of GeaSphere in Swaziland further consolidated work in the country. Later visits by representatives from WRM, SSNC, Timberwatch, GeaSphere and Friends of the Earth provided more evidence on and support against industrial tree plantations.

If plantation companies are strong in South Africa, it must be said that they are even stronger in Swaziland, which is ruled by an absolute monarchy where most rights are dependent on the King's authority and where unionization is frowned upon. Most of what has been said on evictions and outsourcing in South Africa is also applicable to Swaziland.

The fact that the main environmental NGO in the country, Yonge Nawe, has been only marginally involved in the plantations issue – linked to pollution from a pulp mill- has also been a factor in the lack of organized opposition to plantations.

Large areas of plantations have also received FSC certification, thus providing them with a “green” label that they certainly don't deserve.

## **Mozambique**

The fact that the new plantations are still at project level provides a very good opportunity for preventing them from being implemented. However, very few people are aware of the impacts of plantations and the South African model is being promoted as a positive development for employment generation and “development”. It would therefore be very useful to carry out research on the social

and environmental impacts of existing plantations in Mozambique and on those being implemented by the abovementioned Global Solidarity Forest Fund.

To the best of our knowledge, GeaSphere-Mozambique is the only organization working on this and the task it is confronted with is enormous. Language is also an important barrier to the establishment of links with South Africa and Swaziland. Although all WRM bulletin articles and some of its books and briefings are translated into Portuguese, their circulation within the country is limited because of the absence of organizations working on plantations. One possible move would be to facilitate direct contacts between Brazilian and Mozambican organizations, where the former could share their knowledge on the impacts of plantations with the latter country's organizations. For this process to begin it would be necessary to facilitate exchanges of people going from one country to the other.

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