
South Africa: just poetry and emotion?

The expansion of the tree plantation model in South Africa has given place to a heated debate. Philip Owen, from SAWAC (South African Water Crisis), as well as several other concerned people, have repeatedly argued that the plantations scheme is detrimental to grassland and water conservation, thus negative with regard to rural communities. Last month Philip received a letter as a response to some comments he had made on an article entitled "Timber Farmers Praise Paper Giant", related to a tree plantation project by SAPPI -called Project Grow- in Kwa-Zulu Natal, which was published in The Citizen on November 18th 1999. Among other things, the reply stated that plantations do not make the land useless for growing vegetables, and that cattle grazing is to be seen in the project area. According to the author of the letter, only incomes from sugar farming can exceed those obtained from tree planting in the region. "What is needed are science-based practical solutions for practical problems, not poetry and emotion!" concluded the letter.

This is the core of Philip's answer, which counters such arguments:

"I will go visit the area concerned. I would like to speak to the tribal authorities. Finances allowing, I will visit them again ten years down the line, I will visit them again twenty years down the line, I will visit them again thirty years down the line, and I will see if my fears are justified. If Mpumalanga is anything to judge by, well, You can not argue, that animals find little nourishment under plantations. I saw the wild horses at Kaapsehoop the other day, the way their grazing areas have been affected by plantations in the area they are forced to graze next to the road. I would like people to realize that the "derelict land" referred to in the article has value, and properly looked after and cared for, can provide abundantly. When you talk about plantations and sugar being the industries of "highest financial returns", for whom do you mean?

I believe the plantation model is wrong for South Africa. I will try to enforce a moratorium on new plantations, and in the face of reasonable serious 'opposition', will use any means at my disposal. For myself, I don't need studies and books to be convinced as to the negative effects of tree farming. I just need to take a walk up the mountain."

Source: Philip Owen, 15/12/99,