China: The usual quiz about eucalyptus plantations and water

Eucalyptus were first introduced into China in about 1890 and were originally planted as ornamentals and roadside shade trees. The primary high tide of Eucalyptus plantations mainly for timber production in China came after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. It was not until the 1950s that extensive areas of plantations were established by state forest farms for the purposes of supplying mining timbers (pitwood), poles for construction and fuel wood. Government-sponsored planting programs during the 1970s and 1980s increased the plantation estate to about 600,000 ha. In 1954, a large area of eucalyptus plantations was set up in Leizhou Peninsula, Guangdong Province. The introduction of eucalyptus began in southern, south eastern harbour and coastal cities, convenient for international traffic.

Current emphasis lies on establishing short term plantations --mainly Eucalyptus-- under intensive management methods, encouraging Departments at each level to manage them, to stimulate export trade, to set up eucalyptus chip production factories and to establish eucalyptus pulp factories. As a result, China has an area of almost 1.5 million hectares of trees planted to date (figure of 2004).

The southern province of Guangdong has an area of more than 677,300 hectares planted with eucalyptus trees. Coincidentally, the province has experienced a worsening drought in recent years. Local deputies to the Guangdong provincial people's congress and members of Guangdong provincial people's political consultative conference put forward their observations about the damage caused by eucalyptus trees to the province's ecological environment.

Even voices from the Academia have sounded an alert. Li Sidong, a professor from Guangdong Ocean University --and also a member of Guangdong provincial people's political consultative conference--, urged the forestry department to further strengthen the management of the planting of eucalyptus trees. Li said he was worried that large-scale eucalyptus planting would reduce soil quality, suck up moisture and create "a green desert."

According to the China Daily newspaper, the city government of Yunfu enforced a ban on planting eucalyptus in March of this year, and Zengcheng, a suburban city of Guangzhou, has decided to follow this move.

But, typically, many forestry experts have refused to believe that eucalyptus have absorbed underground water and contributed to the drought. Forestry expert Xu Daping, for example, rejected the possibility that eucalyptus had damaged local ecological environments and that the trees were harmful to the fauna on the grounds that "In Australia, the eucalyptuses are home to many small kangaroos and possums". The argument of this forestry expert is based on a fully wrong conception: ¡that large scale tree plantations can be equated to forests!

Quite apart from any academic approach, this misconception --replicated all the way round by large-scale monoculture tree plantation promoters, by the way-- do away with any basic consideration of ecosystems and biodiversity. Eucalyptus --originated between 35 and 50 million years ago-- dominates the tree flora of Australian forests. Many eucalyptus trees grow over an understory of

banksias (native wildflowers) and grevilleas (small shrubs with beautiful blossoms) and there are almost 600 species that can be found in almost every part of the continent, adapted to all of Australia's climatic conditions. How can this picture be compared to large high-yielding, intensively managed, short rotation plantations of 4 or 5 eucalyptus species?

While Chinese forestry experts launch an investigation to determine whether eucalyptus trees have done damage to the environment on the grounds that there is not enough evidence to prove that eucalyptus trees suck up large amounts of water, the people who suffer the effects on the field have a clear idea about that. They have already experienced and denounced that the increasing number of eucalyptus trees has partly contributed to the worsening drought in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong.

Direct experience has taught people what usually forestry experts are reluctant to accept --that large scale eucalyptus plantations have dire impacts on water. There are already plenty of cases all over the world that prove this. What else do they need?

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