
[The FSC Plantations Policy Working Group's field trip in South Africa](#)

As part of a two-year process to review FSC policy on the certification of timber plantations, members of the policy review working-group (PWG) recently visited South Africa for their final meeting. What follows are some quotes from the report on the field trip to visit plantation areas, produced by Wally Menne (member of the local Timberwatch Coalition).

In keeping with FSC policies, local environmental organisations, as represented in the Timberwatch Coalition, were invited to participate during the field trip, and even to make suggestions for items to be included in the field trip programme. Before very long it became clear to Timberwatch that there were some problems with this situation, the most important one being that the organisation of the field-trip programme was in the hands of a member of the PWG who also happened to be employed by the timber industry association 'Forestry South Africa'.

This issue was not easily resolved, and it soon became apparent that the request by Timberwatch for an equal allocation of time (one day for Industry and one day for NGOs) would not be agreed to. The PWG FSA representative seemed to be pushing for a programme that was strongly biased in favour of industry interests, and it would be up to the NGO participants to find ways to level the playing-field.

The first opportunity came on the day the PWG members arrived in Durban, and there was some time available before they would need to leave by bus for the meeting venue. Timberwatch arranged for those that were interested to meet with members of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, that operates in an area where local communities are negatively affected by industrial pollution, including that from a large pulp mill situated in the midst of a residential area. The object of this exercise was to demonstrate to PWG members that industrial timber plantations have far wider impacts on people and the environment than just in the areas where they are grown.

The field trip included a Eucalyptus plantation where an industry-funded organisation 'The Institute for Commercial Forestry Research' (ICFR) was conducting research to demonstrate 'sustainability' in timber production. It soon became obvious that the outcomes of this project, which is run as part of an international programme together with CIFOR, had been pretty much pre-determined using a very narrow set of criteria that hardly considered any issues other than crude wood production. The presenter from ICFR made the amazing claim that natural grassland would recover fully within ten years (with appropriate management) if the Eucalyptus plantations were to be removed. He also claimed that the plantations would enhance soil quality and fertility!

The next item on the programme was a demonstration of herbicide application within a young pine plantation. There seemed to be no need for weed-control here as the trees had already grown past a height where competition from weeds might have presented a problem, and very little fresh weed growth was evident. It also became obvious that there were some issues around how the spraying could affect the workers involved who were mainly women employed indirectly through a contractor. One of the concerns that there was no health monitoring after people stopped working for the contractor. If they leave due to health problems or allergies, and later fall ill or die, there is no system in place to monitor their situation. One interesting aspect of the use of pesticides is that this provides

a way to see how plantations and forests are different. The very thought of using chemical poisons in a biodiverse forest, where all creatures exist in harmony should be rejected outright. Though, in a plantation situation, the unnatural monoculture of usually alien tree species is in conflict with the natural environment, and that is why it is necessary to use chemicals to control Nature.

The trip continued onwards through certified pine plantations that clearly failed to comply with the timber industry's own guidelines in terms of distances from forest margins, riparian zones and wetlands. In some instances plantation trees could be seen growing right in wetland zones, and evidence of adequate attention to invasive alien plants was very hard to see.

After passing through the sterile and depressingly monotonous pine plantation area, the road led the group to an elevated vantagepoint within an area of grassland that had mercifully escaped destruction by plantation. The tour stopped at this point for lunch. The view from this spot took in a varied landscape in which the dark green timber plantations stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, but from which something also appeared to be missing. Naturally it was that signs of human habitation were almost completely absent. It appeared for a moment that the grasslands, farmlands and plantations before us were miraculously able to exist without people. Not so of course, but where were all the people hidden away?

Those who continued with the tour and were able to visit the tribal area known as Ozwatini were able to see where some of the people now live. In isolation and poverty, communities displaced under apartheid remain displaced and are very unlikely to ever recover their social status or self-respect. Not even FSC certified woodlots purporting to give formerly disadvantaged people a share of the timber industry cake could ever change that. There is more than enough evidence that industrial timber plantations, large or small, do little if anything to uplift rural communities and if anything undermine their livelihoods and traditional culture.

Back at the hotel, John (Blessing) Karumbidza treated the group to a stirring slide-show and presentation on a recently completed research project. Blessing had truly ventured where none had dared go before in documenting the way industrial timber plantations in South Africa have impacted and still continue to impact on rural communities in timber growing areas. Copies of his research report were distributed to all the PWG members, who mostly responded appreciatively. Blessing's presentation was able to explain where some of those missing communities had gone. It also showed how timber plantations continue to exploit, terrorise and displace rural people even in the present time. During his talk he had emphasised the point "Plantations are not Forests", and hopefully those listening were able to internalise this fundamental truth!

Excerpts from: "Did the FSC Plantations Policy Working Group get it right?" By Wally Menne, Timberwatch Coalition, e-mail: plantnet@iafrica.com

The full report is available at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SouthAfrica/filedtrip.pdf>