
[South Africa: A South African view of the FSC seal on industrial tree plantations](#)

Although miles and miles of pine monoculture can be visually appealing to those of us with a more northern hemisphere way of looking at things, they can also be seriously bad news environmentally. Exotic tree plantations have earned the name 'green death' from eco-activists, who point out that they displace native species, very few of which can live in plantations.

Plantations in the eastern parts of South Africa are particularly notorious for consuming grassland, now considered our most threatened biome due to 60% (ACTUALLY 80%) of its area being lost.

Industrial plantations also consume vast amounts of water, and have been blamed for drying up wetlands and contributing significantly to many of the once perennial rivers in the Kruger National Park becoming seasonal streams, dry for much of the year. In many places pines have jumped plantation fences and have become increasingly invasive, smothering the countryside in a dark green suffocating blanket.

And we haven't even got to the pulp mills yet. Sappi got a rude PR shock in 1989 when an effluent spill from the giant Ngodwana Mill killed virtually all aquatic life in the Elands River for miles downstream. They've since spent a lot of time trumpeting their green credentials, and are especially proud of their role in the development of an industry-standard oxygen pulp bleaching process, which eliminates the use of toxic chlorine in that part of the paper making process.

What they don't bleat about quite so loudly is that, until a few months ago, they used an old-style chlorine bleaching unit on their Stanger mill, just upstream from the Mvoti River estuary, famous migratory bird stopover. The estuary was closed to fishing and swimming this year owing to a Sappi survey which found levels of chlorinated organic pollutants 'above acceptable levels' in the estuary.

It thus came as a pleasant surprise to see the logo of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) on a box of Sappi's Typek A4. The presence of the logo persuaded us to buy the paper, even though it was more expensive than another brand also made by Sappi that didn't carry the FSC mark. The FSC (based in Bonn, Germany) is a body that certifies products like timber and paper, via local agents, as coming from well managed forests. It is a laudable initiative to keep products from illegal clearcutting out of the market, and make sure that the forests are managed to minimize their environmental and social costs. The idea is that eco-friendly types (like you, dear reader) should only buy wood and paper with the FSC logo on it, to force producers to clean up their acts.

We find it hard to consider industrial monocultures of alien trees to be 'forests', but a quick web trip to www.fsc.org reveals that they do in fact certify plantation products as well as those that come from (real) forests. The organization has a set of 10 'principles and criteria of forest stewardship' that form the basis of their management standards. Principles 1 to 9 deal with things like the environmental and social impacts of forests product extraction. Principle 10 allows plantations to be FSC certified, and lays out in general terms how they need to be planted and managed to qualify.

The nine criteria under Principle 10 go into more detail on how this should be done, and, ecologically

speaking, there are a lot of good words in there, including stuff on the conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological functionality. Criteria 10.6, for example, says the choice of tree used in a plantation “shall not result in long term soil degradation or adverse impacts on water quality (or) quantity”.

We wondered how on earth any local pine plantation got OK'd by the FSC. The devil is, as usual, in the fine print, and how it is read.

It turns out that the FSC is so forest-centric, that despite its fine words about conserving biodiversity, they will only disallow FSC certification to plantations whose construction has resulted in the destruction of natural forests since 1994. (Plantations that destroyed natural forests before that date can be certified.) However, plantations that destroy other habitat types, like grassland, savannah, etc. are OK as far as the FSC is concerned.

Also, it is up to the local certifying agent to interpret the FSC's principles and criteria for local conditions. SGS Qualifor, the leading certification agent in South Africa, provides a 71 page outline on the internet of their Forest Management Standard, against which applicants for FSC certification are assessed. SGS Qualifor provides for each criterion a list of 'indicators' or norms to achieve, and 'verifiers', which are examples of the specific things that inspectors need to look for or confirm in order to ensure compliance with FSC standards.

Under the above mentioned FSC criterion 10.6 which forbids long term impacts on water quantity, we found no indicators or verifiers against which one would be able to determine reductions on runoff or stream flow. Elsewhere in the Qualifor Standard there is brief mention of the fact that plantations should have a permit from the department of Water Affairs and Forestry an implicit admission that plantations generally do reduce stream flow.

Even if all companies' plantations are FSC certified, their pulp mills often get pulp from outside sources. The logo on the box is no indication of who grew the trees. This means that, today, you can buy a box of paper with a FSC “green” label that is probably made of 30% water-sucking, grassland destroying, rare species threatening local plantation stock and 70% Lord-knows-where-from wood.

Some local eco-activists formally asked the FSC to stop certifying plantations distinct from natural forests until a review of principle 10, already under way, is complete. The FSC have told them (very politely) that it will carry on certifying plantations. Why? Money. Or, as the FSC euphemistically puts it, because it feels that a moratorium on plantation certification won't be supported by the majority of its membership. Many of the members, surprise surprise, are from the timber industry.

The timber industry needs to be involved in the FSC for it to succeed. What it doesn't need is for the timber industry to run it. It is one of the few organizations that can turn the market away from dodgy forest products, but its reputation is going down the Elands river, along with the slow-flowing effluent from the Ngodwana mill.

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