
South Africa: FSC Certification of Industrial Timber Plantations

The environment pressure network Geosphere has charged the international Forest Stewardship Council with acting irresponsibly in certifying the massive spread of Industrial Timber Plantations (ITPs) in South Africa.

ITPs come at a massive cost to the natural and social environment, and these costs have not been quantified, says Philip Owen of Geosphere, in an open letter to the chair of the Forest Stewardship Council, David Nahwegabouw.

"Certifying South African Industrial Timber Plantations with a 'green label' is irresponsible and undermines your credibility," Owen charged, in an earlier letter to FSC board members.

He asks the FSC chair why FSC board members, after visiting South Africa and seeing the ITPs for themselves, did not even respond to Geosphere's letter in April, which proposed a series of steps the FSC could take. "...Please tell us if you don't agree that we have legitimate cause for concern; and if FSC could be the vehicle to instigate the drastic changes needed to move towards sustainably managed plantations."

The open letter outlines the way timber plantations have damaged the environment in general, and in specific cases. It points out that timber plantations are established in the rare high rainfall areas, primarily grassland. These are some of the most floristically diverse areas of this country. In South Africa, millions of hectares of primary grassland, savannah grassland and pockets of indigenous forests have disappeared beneath this sea of alien monoculture.

South Africa's most threatened bird species, Rudd's Lark, has been most severely affected by destruction of its high rainfall grassland habitat while South Africa's most threatened antelope species, the Oribi, can also trace its demise to loss of the same grassland habitat.

Industrial Timber Plantations are of fast growing, high yielding, evergreen species, and consume vast quantities of the scarce water resources. Many springs have become bone dry since whole catchments were planted over with high impact ITPs. There are reports that with ready access to water, a mature eucalyptus tree can use upwards of 500 litres of water daily. There are also reports that in some areas where ITPs have been established, the water table has dropped as much as 36 metres.

Philip Owen adds: "It is sad to see how we people lose touch with the reality of our relationship with mother earth. We substitute her bounty with row upon row of monotony, smothering the life-force in the soils. As we steal from this soil, we must remember that in truth, money does not make the world go round."

He concludes: "On April 23, 2004 I wrote to the FSC board of directors and others who attended a FSC stakeholders meeting in Sabie, South Africa. Unfortunately, there has been no attempt from any of the FSC representatives to respond to our concerns. I copy this (slightly revised) letter below. I ask

that you consider the statements and tell us if you don't agree that we have legitimate cause for concern; and if FSC could be the vehicle to instigate the drastic changes needed to move towards sustainably managed plantations."

This was the text of the earlier letter, to the members of the FSC Board and others: "After your recent visit to South Africa, and having seen the industrial timber plantations, you must be wondering how a million hectares of these alien plantations can possibly carry the FSC label, and how 80 per cent of South Africa's high impact timber industry could have been certified within such a short period of time.

We are greatly concerned that, by certifying industrial timber plantations, the FSC is in effect misleading consumers who choose to buy products which has been produced in an environmentally sound manner.

I have no doubt that FSC contributes to better forest management and the protection of forest systems world wide, but we feel strongly that certifying South African Industrial Timber Plantations with a 'green label' is irresponsible and undermines your credibility. It is not responsible to promote the protection of one biome (indigenous forests) even when this sometimes occurs at the expense of others, especially grassland. Is one more important than the other?

The true costs associated with industrial timber plantations, including loss of biodiversity resources and services provided by grassland (such as flood prevention and carbon sequestration) have never been quantified, so we are unable to make informed decisions about the extent to which the industry itself can be called responsible.

I support Wally Menne of the TimberWatch Coalition when he writes: "there is a need to establish the legitimacy of existing certifications in South Africa, and to urgently undertake an immediate and complete review and reassessment of such certified plantations".

The FSC should:

- * Suspend certification issued to industrial plantations until such time as a national FSC initiative has developed criteria and standards applicable to local conditions which promote the protection of grassland and other natural / semi-natural areas.
- * Incorporate certification standards applicable to Industrial Timber Plantations, designed to facilitate a change towards organic, diversity-based, agro-forestry practices in an effort to maximize soil micro-life.
- * Not consider certifying any monoculture plantations established post 1994 in any natural area, so as to ensure the FSC does not contribute to the destruction of other more threatened biomes, such as grassland.
- * Follow through on your promise to review principle 10.

It is clear that FSC Principle 10 does not contribute much to the principle of 'sustainability' -- as surely it should. For example, diversity of species is encouraged, but it would only contribute to increased biological activity if the diversity is encouraged within plantation compartments. Principle 10 in fact, endorses the destructive and unsustainable industrial timber plantation model, and needs to be revised urgently. The proposed notion of stretching FSC certification even further, beyond

industrial timber plantations to certify savanna game reserves is to say the least, ludicrous. It begs the question whether the FSC label has become first and foremost, a commodity to be sold to anyone willing to pay for it?

Certification can contribute towards better plantation management, most notably aiding the local regulating authorities in executing their mandate. However, it would appear from viewing the unsatisfactory impacts that still exist on the ground in many or most of the plantations that bear the FSC label, that the standard is not rigorous enough and that there are significant shortcomings with it.

Invasive alien plant control is a critical issue within the 'forestry' sector. How has the invasive alien plant situation in FSC certified timber plantations changed since certification? Is weed control measures functional, (are there more weeds? or less weeds?) and do you have statistical data to provide proof? Please supply me with relevant data, if available to yourselves."

The letter to board members concluded: "By certifying Industrial Timber Plantations as responsible forests, the FSC is undermining the work done by concerned individuals, communities and environmental organisations such as the World Rainforest Movement, FASE, TimberWatch Coalition, GEASPHERE and others."

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