
South Africa: Nearing one million hectares of FSC certified plantations

South African activists have for years been campaigning against the spread of industrial alien tree plantations. Wally Menne, from the Timberwatch Coalition says that "certification of monoculture timber plantations as 'sustainably managed forests' by the Forest Stewardship Council makes an absolute mockery of the concept of sustainable environment and ecosystem management."

The above statement becomes a dramatic call for action when learning that some 900,000 hectares of monoculture tree plantations --mostly composed of alien species of eucalyptus and pines-- have already been given the FSC stamp of approval and that many more will be certified unless something is done to stop it. How can this be possible?

To begin with, it needs to be stressed that the natural vegetation in the areas where these plantations have been established was originally highly bio-diverse grassland or woodland. After conversion to plantations, these areas stand little chance, if any, of being able to revert to the natural climax vegetation type.

But that is only the starting point. As a result of this activity, both people and the environment are subjected to a terrifying range of harmful impacts, among which the following:

- * As a first step, the natural vegetation is either bulldozed or killed with herbicides to prevent competition with plantation trees for water, light and nutrients.
- * Tree saplings are artificially fertilised to speed up their rate of establishment and other chemicals that absorb moisture are added to the soil to prevent the young plants from drying out.
- * Alien invasive plants --including plantation species such as eucalyptus, pines and acacias-- become established in neighbouring ecosystems.
- * Animals and birds that are disturbed by the plantation establishment activities either flee the area or are hunted and snared as food for the plantation contract workers.
- * Surface water in the vicinity of new plantations is soon depleted and people have to turn to the use of boreholes and wells that often are saline or polluted.
- * The establishment of timber plantations upsets the natural balance of species. These plantations create barriers that disrupt the normal migration and breeding patterns of birds, animals and insects.
- * Local people who would have had access to the area if plantations had not been established, could have used the area to graze their cattle and sheep, harvest thatch grass for roofing their homes, and collect food and medicinal plants for their own limited use. They are now deprived of this resource and are forced to move into previously undisturbed areas in search of these commodities. This often leads to conflict with the management of protected natural areas.

* Contract workers are poorly paid and have little choice but to build makeshift homes within areas of natural forest near the plantation sites where they work, causing substantial ecological damage in the process.

* Community food security is one of the first victims of timber plantations. Areas used traditionally for growing fruit and vegetables become too dry or are shaded out when plantations are established too close to the fertile areas along streams and rivers. The remaining residents are left in a position where they have to use their limited financial resources to buy processed food from trading stores.

* Transport systems, especially roads, are subjected to high levels of usage for which they were not designed. The cost of upgrading or maintaining rural roads is usually borne by the state, which means that the timber industry benefits from an indirect subsidy.

Large-scale timber plantations destroy entire ecosystems and rural economies. For some strange reason this calamity is virtually ignored by governments and research institutions. The onus should be on an organisation like FSC to insist that thorough, impartial research is conducted before certification can be considered.

There is no doubt that a consumer commodity like paper, or pressboard, has great value in modern society. What is not acceptable is that the rate of consumption of paper products is increasing whilst the living standards of poor communities where the timber is produced do not. The growth of the throwaway culture of so-called developed countries has a direct correlation to the eroding natural environment, and standards of living in the countries that have been colonised by the tree plantations of the multinational corporations concerned. In the case of South Africa, the FSC must take a large share of the responsibility for this social and environmental injustice.

Article based on information from: - South Africa: Quo vadis FSC? by Wally Menne, member of the TIMBERWATCH Coalition.