
South Africa: Industrial timber plantations - asset and liability

Industrial timber plantations go under the name of forestry. This is deceiving, as it carries the image of beautiful indigenous forests. South Africa needs timber for pulp and paper manufacture, building material, furniture and many other uses, but we must not lose sight of its cost to our country. These plantations are monocultures of highly invasive, alien plants that cover vast areas of some of the most fertile land in our country.

We all know how wattles have spread across South Africa until they are one of the most destructive weeds we have. They can only be eradicated by carefully following a special programme. Pine, too, are seriously invasive, particularly in colder climates like our Drakensberg. As we drive around our country, many of the trees we see are eucalyptus that are also progressively invading the land.

At present, there are about 1.5 million hectares of industrial plantations. What is of greater concern, is that there are an estimated additional 1.6 million hectares of "jungle" invasion. Using CSIR modelling, it is estimated that the formal plantations use 1.4 trillion litres of water a year. The jungle tracts are mainly older trees and often grow in streams, so they probably use an additional two or more billion cubic metres of water a year.

The situation begs answers to at least two critical questions. Should the timber industry carry on demanding more land for plantations while our country suffers with this vast jungle invasion? Who should take responsibility for preventing the further invasion of these alien trees resulting from industrial plantations?

By Bob de Laborde (Timberwatch), 22/8/99