

Caution over Timber Plantations

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A predicted expansion of timber plantations in the Eastern Cape could have economic benefits and help meet growing national and international demand for such things as paper. However, there are concerns over the social and environmental costs.

Research by the Timberwatch Coalition (www.timberwatch.org.za) suggests some South African communities have not benefited meaningfully from plantation forestry and argues plantations are not forests in the usual biological sense. There is also the broader question as to whether enough is being done globally to reduce demand for pulp and paper products. Meeting need by boosting supply rather than being more efficient with existing resources (such as paperless offices and recycling) may benefit the pulp and paper industry but arguably has a disproportionately high cost to society and the natural environment.

In mid-February WESSA hosted a workshop run by the Timberwatch Coalition. While plantations can be well run, Timberwatch wanted to raise awareness about the possible pitfalls. Facilitated by Timberwatch's Wally Menne and Blessing Karumbidza, the workshop looked at existing or potential problems such as:

- Replacing small-scale and labour-intensive forestry with larger scale, mechanized forestry, leading to an overall shedding of labour.
- People being displaced from land for forestry.
- Land that could be used for such things as agriculture being locked up for 20-30 years, with uncertainty over what the return on investment would be after this time.
- With increasing plantation forestry there will be demand for more processing plants. These create work, but experience elsewhere shows those employed may not necessarily be local, and working conditions can be physically and chemically hazardous. There can be increasing rates of such things as asthma for those living near a processing plant due to air pollution.
- Problems associated with transient labour, such as prostitution and HIV-AIDS.

Other issues relate to degraded water quality and reduced supply. Plantation forests, in some situations, increase erosion and/or decrease in-stream flow through increased water uptake by trees. They can deplete soil nutrient levels when managed poorly, and depending on existing or potential land use, can reduce biodiversity. There are also discharges from mills into waterways. Timber preservatives can also contaminate soils and, consequently, groundwater.

Blessing has done several years research on social and ecological impacts, summarized in a Timberwatch publication, *Life as Commerce: Certification in South Africa*.

Part of Timberwatch's research raises questions over Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. Internationally FSC certification is seen as giving consumers assurance that the wood products they buy follow reliable sustainability guidelines. Timberwatch questions whether the FSC process is rigorous enough to provide such an assurance in all situations.

Another issue is the extent of illegal forestry in SA, where landowners plant up exotics and ignore various environmental criteria such as not planting down to waterways, avoiding overly steep land, and not planting in areas suffering from water shortages. Many also plant in inaccessible areas and fail to account for the need to build roads which have high environmental impacts in their own right.

Much of the discussion in the workshop focused on the poor policing of both legal and illegal plantations by authorities. For example, as a priority, authorities should come down hard on illegal forestry plantations, and equally on those not complying to licence conditions. The problem of political interference was raised, with the observation that there are cases where politicians ignore advice from government agency staff, awarding licences when this should not be done.

The workshop attracted about 35-40 people, with strong representation from central and local government agencies. One of the characteristics of the group was the number of young people representing various agencies, and how outspoken many of them were regarding the need to improve the effectiveness of their organisations. Timberwatch intends holding a follow-up workshop. For more background information, please visit www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SouthAfrica, www.timberwatch.org.za or www.globalforestcoalition.org.