

Mondi Plantations meet a World Heritage Site



Overview

Rhinos and elephants now roam alongside commercial plantations, after Mondi and SiyaQhubeka Forests (SQF) helped to protect and restore one of South Africa's most important wetland areas. The project transformed a long history of dispute between forestry operations and environmentalists into a successful partnership.

Background

iSimangaliso Wetland Park is the last remaining coastal wilderness in South Africa, vital for conservation and a popular tourist destination. In 1999 it was designated a World Heritage Site for its rich biodiversity, unique ecosystems and natural beauty. At its heart is Lake St. Lucia, a long, narrow estuary separated from the Indian Ocean by towering sand dunes. The lake is rich in wildlife, and hundreds of hippos and crocodiles can be seen basking in the shallow waters.

On the western shores of the lake are extensive commercial pine plantations. Mondi took these over in 2004, when South Africa privatized its state forests. To manage them, it formed SQF, in partnership with black economic empowerment organizations, the government and local communities.

But SQF had inherited a problem. Over the years, there had been bitter disputes between the forestry industry, environmentalists and local people. Some poorly sited plantations were having a negative impact on the lake and its wildlife by reducing freshwater flows. Water levels were too low and salinity levels too high, especially in the dry season. The future of the lake and the company's licence to operate were under scrutiny.

The project

Mondi-SQF worked with the government, environmental NGOs and the park authority to determine which areas were suitable for commercial plantations, and which should be returned to their natural state. They mapped out a 120-km long "eco-boundary" dividing mostly wetland areas and other important ecosystem components, to be set aside for conservation, from the dry mineral soils best suited to plantations, where impacts on the natural ecosystems would be minimal.

As a result, 9,000 hectares of plantations with significant potential conservation value, half of them belonging to Mondi, were transferred to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

The trees were removed, and the land restored to wetlands and savannah. Following a short period of healthy cooperation between SQF and the iSimangaliso park authority, a further 14,200 hectares of SQF's land – including plantations as well as areas of natural forest and wetlands – was officially incorporated into the park.



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Benefits

The project has restored trust and restored ecosystems. Today, both SQF and the park are thriving enterprises. Regular freshwater flows into the sensitive Lake St. Lucia estuary have been secured, and wetlands and grasslands have been successfully rehabilitated, already supporting a wide range of biodiversity.

As well as benefiting Lake St. Lucia's many birds and freshwater species, the project has extended the habitat of the park's large animals. Tourists come to spot elephants, rhinos, giraffes and cheetahs in areas which, just a few years ago, were dense pine forest. Herds of buffalo, zebras and antelopes graze in the fire breaks and corridors between the plantations, and it's not unusual to see them roaming through the eucalyptus trees.

SQF's plantations form an important buffer between the park, local communities and commercial farming areas, protecting the wilderness area from encroaching development. The company maintains its share of the park's boundary fence, and helps guard against poachers. In cooperation with the iSimangaliso park authority, SQF has promoted tourism in a portion of the Lake St. Lucia system not previously accessible to the public.

Next steps

SQF continues to strive for sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships between the forestry sector, the community and the environment.

Involving local communities and small growers in the plantation model has raised the levels of skills, education and viable small businesses in the area. Communities are also given support to set up businesses within the commercial tree production and forest products value chain, and the company prioritizes local contractors. On neighbouring tribal areas, around 3,000 local people grow eucalyptus in woodlots of a couple of hectares on land unsuitable for other crops, with Mondi-SQF paying a premium for the wood they supply.

SQF has also promoted other small business initiatives such as honey production and firewood collection.

It also funds bursaries for students from neighbouring villages. All this has improved local livelihoods and relationships with the community, helping to secure SQF's long-term viability.



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Giraffes and elephants are among the wildlife frequently spotted among the eucalyptus plantations.

BENEFITS OF SQF'S PLANTATION MODEL

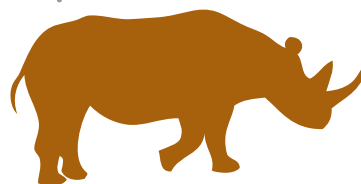
RESTORING WETLANDS

BY IMPROVING SOIL AND WATER CONDITIONS AND ENCOURAGING BIODIVERSITY



INCREASING HABITATS

FOR A WIDE RANGE OF SPECIES



IMPROVING LIVELIHOODS

BY PROMOTING SMALL BUSINESS INITIATIVES

