NEW GENERATION PLANTATIONS project

SOUTH AFRICA STUDY TOUR DIARY

By Barney Jeffries
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Monday 13 May

“We’re involved in bringing exotic species, at scale, into a water-scarce environment, and planting monocultures in an environment with serious biodiversity challenges.”

That’s the reality according to Viv McMenamin, Director of Land & Forestry at Mondi. It’s a refreshingly honest admission. So are we really the bad guys? Or can New Generation Plantations offer something more positive?

Plantations in Africa are set to expand at an unprecedented rate over the coming decades. NGP’s first study tour to Africa is a chance to explore some of the issues this raises, to share experiences, and to see what lessons we can learn from South Africa’s well-established plantation forest industry. Around 40 people are taking part in the tour, including NGP participants, observer companies with plantation interests in Africa, representatives from several of WWF’s African offices, and other NGOs. Our hosts are WWF-South Africa and Mondi, a founding NGP participant.

In the plush surroundings of the Protea uMhlanga Ridge Hotel, in Durban’s chichi uMhlanga Rocks suburb, the poverty and problems of rural South Africa seem a world away. But they’re very much on the agenda in our first event, an open session attended by around 80 stakeholders from the South African forestry sector.

Dr Morné du Plessis (CEO of WWF-SA) sets the scene by talking about the challenges posed in WWF’s Living Planet Report – a 30% decline in biodiversity, and a rise in humanity’s ecological footprint. Given the scale of these challenges, WWF can no longer afford to “play in the sandpit”. He points out, though, that a challenge is both a threat and an opportunity.

Dr du Plessis points to the success of WWF’s marine work in South Africa, and how it has successfully brought together the fishing industry to form the Responsible Fisheries Alliance. This has helped the industry become more responsible and ensure its licence to operate. NGP offers an even broader opportunity, he says.

Viv McMenamin from Mondi speaks next. She says NGP offers a platform for looking at plantations in context – and the South African context is very challenging. There are very serious social challenges – corruption and governance issues, a widening inequality gap, severe rural challenges, high levels of social protest and discontent. Land redistribution will change the face of the industry,
from a few big operators to many very small ones. Big operators set aside 30% of their operations as open areas, but that’s a big ask of community owners operating on a few hectares.

Against this complex backdrop are other tricky questions. How do companies fit together? Where does government fit in? How can we reach outside forestry and into agriculture? Can the NGP concept be made applicable to small growers? NGP needs to offer a clear and simple message, and make this message visible, she says.

Rod Taylor, Director of Forests at WWF International, presents the global picture of the future of forests, as outlined in the Living Forests Report. With the world’s population set to rise to more than 9 billion by 2050, we will need forestry and farming that produce more with less land, water and pollution, and new consumption patterns that meet the needs of the poor while eliminating waste and over-consumption among the affluent.

He points out that, as a renewable natural material, wood has many advantages. Global wood supply is set to triple by 2050, with bioenergy the big driver of this increase. An extra 250 million hectares of plantations could be needed by 2050, he says. They produce more on less land, and if sustainable forest management principles are applied, they can have positive environmental and social benefits. But there are places where plantations are still threatening people’s rights and livelihoods, or replacing valuable ecosystems. Plantations remain controversial, and communicating their benefits is a challenge. NGP can help.

Denise Soesilo, Programme Manager from The Forests Dialogue, introduces the concept of investing in locally controlled forestry, which was the subject of an extensive consultation project involving 400 stakeholders from 60 countries. A quarter of the world’s forests are locally controlled, and 1.6 billion depend on forests for their livelihoods. “Many have been stewards of forests for hundreds of years,” she says. “To secure raw materials, companies need to get better at sourcing from them.”

This will require a paradigm shift towards a rights-based model. Instead of the traditional model where investors seek natural resources and need labour, we would move to a situation where rights holders manage natural resources and seek investment and partnership. There are successful models – most strikingly in Sweden, where families own around 50% of the country’s forests, with 330,000 families owning around 50ha each, and supply around 60% of commercial timber.

“Investing in locally controlled forestry produces vigorous returns, benefits to communities and economies,” she says. “Every dollar invested returned $10-20 in benefits to communities and incentives to protect and restore forests – it’s shown to be more effective than government protection in some areas. It can help companies secure raw materials, reduce supply chain risks and reduce capital costs.”

Social issues are perhaps the biggest challenge to developing plantations in Africa, and this is the theme of the presentation by Pasco Dyani, chair of the Forest Sector Charter Council. The council brings together representatives from government, industry, labour and communities to monitor and encourage transformation within the forest industry. In particular, it aims to promote the social benefits of forests for the people.

“You cannot separate the economy, society and the environment,” Pasco tells us. “Participation in the forest economy leads to improved standards of living, equity and transformed society.
Responsible forest plantations can contribute meaningfully to poverty alleviation, job creation and rural development.”

All sorts of challenges remain within the sector, including weak enforcement of laws, illegal and short-term employment, low salaries and lack of economic benefit to communities. However, having labour and communities represented within the Forest Sector Charter Council means that the sector hasn’t seen the same problems as industries such as mining, he says. Mutual respect and inclusiveness mean different parties can have robust debate and grapple with big challenges. The voices of small growers, communities and the labour force need to be part of the debate within NGP.

An open discussion followed, touching on many of the themes to be explored later in the study tour. How relevant is South Africa – with a well-developed forestry industry, high levels of certification, and a number of other economic, social and climatic differences – to the rest of Africa? How can we use the NGP platform to share relevant experiences, without attempting to offer one-size-fits-all solutions? What role can plantation forestry play in promoting the shift to a green economy, and creating inclusive, sustainable development? And how can we reach beyond the forest fence to other sectors, such as agriculture, in order to create positive changes on a landscape scale?

Dr du Plessis brings the session to a close by quoting an African proverb that serves as both a warning and an inspiration to NGP: “If you want to travel fast, travel alone; if you want to travel far, travel together.”

**Tuesday 14 May**

*Small-scale plantations, Ozwathini*

Leaving the spotless malls, air-conditioned hotels and wide, traffic-choked highways of Durban behind us, we head north toward the KwaZulu Natal Midlands. It’s a green, fertile area, dominated by vast sugarcane monocultures. There’s been a lot of talk already about how NGP needs to engage with agriculture – which tends to lag behind forestry on many environmental and social issues – and
the sugar sector in particular. This is something that WWF and the Mondi Wetlands Programme are starting to do, but progress is slow.

You can still see the legacy of Apartheid in the landscape. With the broad plains and plateaus given over to commercial agriculture, the black population was herded into less productive areas: these remain densely populated, and the signs of poverty and unemployment remain all too apparent. Our first stop is Ozwathini, to see how small plantations are providing an income for the local people.

On the steep slopes of the valley, smallholders grow wattle or eucalyptus on a hectare or two of land allocated to them by the tribal chief. Plantations are well established in the area, having been started by the government back in the 1930s to take pressure off native forests, though production has declined in recent years. Woven among the plantations are patches of critically endangered native grassland habitat and remnants of indigenous forest. The area is also an important watershed.

The growers here sell their timber for pulp through Natal Cooperative Timbers (NCT). We’re show round by forest technology manager Craig Norris and the appropriately named Gilbert Plant, a forester of 50 years’ experience. NCT, established in 1949, is a cooperative with around 2,000 shareholders and a further 1,000 suppliers. Collectively, they manage around 300,000 hectares – a fifth of South Africa’s afforested land. Members can access markets and benefit from services like NCT’s chipping mills, which add value to their product.

As its many of its European and, increasingly, Japanese and Chinese buyers demand FSC certification, NCT pays a premium for wood from FSC-certified members – who provide about a third of the timber it sells. But it’s only the larger growers who can afford to go through the FSC process – so in effect the uncertified small growers subsidize this.

On top of this, existing FSC standards aren’t well suited to the sort of landscape mosaic seen at Ozwathini; ironically, it’s far easier to certify industrial-scale plantations than small community operations. While local landowners manage their individual woodlots, little support exists to help maintain the infrastructure, look after the rivers, or protect the high conservation value grassland and native forest areas.

The project NCT is running in the area aims to help small growers become more productive through training, mentoring and demonstration plots, while also introducing sustainable forest management practices – including, crucially, fire protection. “Issues like fire protection and health and safety are seen as ‘nice to have’, but peripheral,” Craig explains. “What we want to do is to show that these aspects are integral to production – that you need to look after the social, environmental and economic aspects as a unit.”

At the same time, they’re looking to help smaller growers like those at Ozwathini achieve FSC certification by developing indicators that are more relevant to their operations. These need to be based on outputs rather than inputs, Craig says. In terms of health and safety, for example, most work here is done manually, and fairly slowly – so rather than looking at what protective clothing and equipment has been provided, isn’t it better to look at how many (or few) people get hurt?

Even with the prospect of FSC certification and a route to market through NCT, plantations aren’t going to bring huge profits into African communities, Craig suggests – the margins simply aren’t there. But when they generate local jobs in operations like growing and harvesting – and potentially
in managing nature reserves or replanting native vegetation – those overheads stay in the community. Timber with little market value can be valuable locally – the thinnings from wattle, in particular, provide a useful source of fuel wood and building material.

Plantations meet wetlands, Mount Gilboa

Our destination for the afternoon is the Umvoti area on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, and the first site we’ll be visiting managed by Mondi, our hosts for this study tour. Here, we’re once again looking at plantations on a landscape level, though this time the scale is different: Mondi’s holdings in this area cover almost 50,000 hectares and produce more than half a million tonnes of timber annually. Around 60 per cent of the land is leased, either from private owners or local communities.

Our makeshift lecture theatre under the pines has tree trunks for seating, with a river running through open grassland giving a picturesque backdrop. Some 31 per cent of Mondi’s land here is left unplanted, including nature reserves like this: the area is important for biodiversity, with 537 species of animals and around 300 types of plant, including more than 100 of special conservation concern.

In fact, the area sits within the global biodiversity hotspot of Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany that runs down the east coast of South Africa – a hotspot being an area that features both exceptional biodiversity and significantly transformed ecosystems. Kevin McCann from the Wildlands Conservation Trust gives us a presentation on their work in the region, which focuses on conservation within productive landscapes.

Along with corporations like Mondi, landowners in the surrounding landscape include the state, local communities, private land owners and conservation NGOs. Wildlands brings them together to map and protect areas that are important for biodiversity, as well as important ecosystem functions like watercourses, while allowing forestry, grazing and other economically profitable activities to continue alongside. It’s an example of two key NGP principles – maintaining ecosystem integrity, and protecting and enhancing high conservation values – being applied on a landscape scale.

“We’re seeing government, corporations and conservationists working together to expand protected areas and biodiversity, and at a far lower cost than traditional government-run protected areas,” Kevin says. And it seems to be bearing fruit: three vulnerable species of crane, for example, are
making a comeback, with this particular plantation now home to one of only 80 pairs of wattled cranes in the country.

Among the biggest ecological impacts plantations can have in South Africa, and in Africa generally, is on water resources: as Viv McMenamin reminded us yesterday, we’re involved in bringing exotic species into a water-scarce environment. Colin Everson from the University of KwaZulu Natal tells us about the research he’s been doing into the long-term effects of Mondi’s acacia plantations on the water balance.

It’s a complex issue, and a controversial one. In South Africa forestry – unlike certain other land uses – pays a water tax for reducing stream flow. Colin’s findings suggest this may not actually be the case, but the long-term effects on groundwater levels aren’t yet clear. Hopefully a clearer picture will emerge once findings have been recorded for a whole rotation.

While in most countries it’s good forestry practice to leave trees standing in riparian zones, in water-stressed South Africa wetlands have suffered from trees being planted too close. This has serious implications for water supplies as well as for wildlife. Over the last decade, Mondi has led the way in removing trees from wetland zones (we’ll be seeing a spectacular example of this on Thursday) and rehabilitating wetlands.

It sponsors the Mondi Wetland Partnership, a joint project between WWF-South Africa and the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, along with Mondi and the Mazda Wildlife Fund. Programme manager David Lindley explains how industry and conservationists worked together over seven years to develop a science-based methodology for delineating wetlands. Forestry companies now need to leave a 20 metre buffer zone around wetland areas. Leaving these areas unplanted carries a huge financial cost – 800 million rand (US$80 million) a year, according to Mondi’s Peter Gardiner. In the long-term, though, maintaining healthy water supplies is crucial both to the plantation industry’s operations and its social licence to operate.

Finally, it’s time to get our hands dirty – literally. In the middle of a recently rehabilitated reed bed, David shows us the method for determining where a wetland begins. Because of their seasonality and alterations to the natural vegetation, this isn’t always obvious, but the evidence is there if you dig down into the soil. Using augurs – basically giant corkscrews – we collect a series of soil samples. By the stream’s edge, the soil is a deep, peaty black. But it’s a surprisingly long way back before it takes on a reddish hue – the tell-tale traces of iron signalling that we’re finally at the edge of the wetland zone.

From there, we pace out the buffer zone – with some comical disagreement between the forestry companies and the conservationists among us about exactly how far 20 metres is. This used to be the subject of bitter conflict. To be able to joke about it is a sign of how far things have come.
Wednesday 15 May

Today’s focus is on the social side of plantations. NGP participants want to provide jobs and social benefits and contribute to rural development. But how much can they realistically be expected to do? And how best to do it?

Our first visit is to Bracken Timbers, a privately owned forestry and agriculture business with around 7,500 hectares. The land is mainly planted with pine to provide high-quality roundwood for sawmilling, but there’s also wattle – which provides useful firebreaks – and crops including maize and sugarcane.

It’s no secret that white South African farmers don’t enjoy the best reputation. But Bracken’s owner Martin Hill, who took over the family farm near Greytown more than 50 years ago, is an exception. Bracken Timbers employs 1,500 people (around two-thirds of them women) on the farm and at its sawmill, 90 per cent of whom come from the surrounding Zulu tribal lands.

Unemployment levels in the area are well over 50 per cent, and Bracken see it as a duty to generate employment. They make a virtue of labour-intensive processes like harvesting wattle and seed maize. All the jobs are permanent and full-time – diversifying into agriculture helps to maintain year-round employment. This has instilled a strong sense of ownership and loyalty among employees – some families have been working on the farm for three generations.

“Community” is a key concept here, and forestry director Murray Mason identifies three distinct senses. Community in the African sense means understanding local people’s needs and culture – simply making a point of addressing workers by their honorific Zulu name can make a world of difference, he says.

Community in the business sense is about cooperating and sharing knowledge with other businesses and landowners (also important in the context of landscape-scale planning). Bracken has “adopted” a neighbouring community forestry project, providing training and mentoring as well as lending equipment.
Finally, Murray identifies community in the wider sense – being a good neighbour and getting involved in local projects. Local people will approach Bracken with ideas that they want support for, such as wanting to set up a workers’ crèche. While Bracken are happy to do what they can to support such projects, Murray says they prove more successful as joint ventures. “If people get something for free, they’re less likely to look after it,” he says. “We encourage some community input, as this gives more sense of ownership.”

This strikes a chord with the group, particularly the African-based companies. In many rural areas, forestry companies can be the most well-resourced and well-organized institutions around. Understandably, community expectations are high, and it’s important to keep a dialogue open to help manage this. Bracken’s employees elect around 25-30 representatives to a workers council, who meet with senior management once a month. This creates a strong line of communication that runs both ways – workers are able to raise any issues with management, and are kept informed about the state of the business and future plans.

It’s agreed that getting community buy-in is essential. “Creating shared value” is a phrase that crops up often in our discussions. Roselyne from Green Resources in Tanzania describes how her company is doing this by helping local people develop their own woodlots alongside the company’s plantations: as well as the future income from the timber, getting a recognized title deed for the land allows them to access bank loans.

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Our next stop is Mondi’s Kranskop plantation, on the edge of a spectacular escarpment with stunning views over the plains of KZN. We’re given lunch by Food 4 Forests, a programme Mondi set up around five years ago after discovering that many of their workers weren’t consuming enough calories during the working day – resulting in poor health, fatigue, accidents and reduced productivity. Food 4 Forests now serves a nutritious, high-energy hot meal to nearly 10,000 workers every day. According to Mondi’s surveys, workers and their families are happier and healthier as a result. The programme has also created 145 new jobs and business opportunities in catering and food production.
I can report that the food – beef stew (or veggie curry) and a mountain of pap, a traditional South African maize porridge – is both tasty and very filling. I feel ready to wield chainsaw, but we’re here to learn about Mondi’s approach to land reform – the subject of an NGP social case study.

*The view from Kranskop*

It’s a century since the South African government began forced removals of indigenous people from their land – and it’s only now that restitution is finally taking place. As a large landowner, Mondi has found itself the subject of 82 land claims. Around a quarter have been settled so far, and the company wants the rest finalized by the end of next year (the delay comes from the government’s side).

Mondi’s first land settlement was achieved in this area, with the AmaHlongwa and AmaBomvu Communities. The land has been transferred to community trusts (called Siyathokoza and Eyethu), but Mondi has a 20-year lease. The company pays the trusts an annual rent and a stumpage fee for the timber it harvests – the stumpage fee effectively means the community is getting a share of the profits, which gives them a stake in the success of the business. This money is supporting community development and economic empowerment. Although Mondi is still in charge of forestry operations, it’s gradually transferring these to local contracting businesses formed by the Siyathokoza and Eyethu trusts.

Chief Ngubane, speaking in Zulu (with a few English words – “stumpage”, “chainsaws” – for which there’s apparently no translation), says there’s been a big improvement in employment rates and that the money coming into his community is improving lives.

Starting a businesses without capital is a challenge, he says, so working in partnership with an established company like Mondi is very important. Running a huge forestry contract with limited expertise and skills is another challenge but, he says, Mondi was able to provide technical skills and capacity building, as well as capital to buy equipment. The relationship with Mondi is very good, and he’s confident that when Mondi’s lease expires, the community will have the skills and capacity to take over all forestry operations.
And that’s Mondi’s aim too. First and foremost, Mondi is a paper company – it’s not concerned with owning land, but it does need a reliable supply of pulpwood. If local communities, running productive plantations on their own land, can supply that, then everybody’s happy.

This links back with the idea of investing in locally controlled forestry, which Denise from The Forests Dialogue introduced during Monday’s workshop. Rather than owning resources and seeking labour, companies like Mondi will increasingly be working in partnership with local rights-holders. It’s a model that has the potential to benefit both sides – but it does require long-term investment and commitment.

From Kranskop, we travel north along the coast to Lake St Lucia. Along the way, we drive past mile upon mile of eucalyptus plantations. Every kilometre or so, they’re broken by dense patches of native vegetation. David from the Mondi Wetlands Partnership explains that these are the wetland areas we heard about yesterday, where planted trees have been removed. By contrast, he points out the distinctive herring-bone pattern of a dried-out drainage system in the middle of a neighbouring sugar field.

The shrubs and trees have grown more than they naturally would, as the management regime for the plantations means there are fewer fires in the area. The long-term implications of this are uncertain. While NGP participants like Mondi have clearly come a long way towards the principle of maintaining ecosystem integrity, it’s an issue that needs to be continually re-examined.

Our destination is Elephant Lake Hotel in St Lucia. With warthog on the menu and hippos paying nightly visits to the swimming pool, we’re clearly in an area rich in wildlife. A World Heritage Site, in fact: the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

Senior manager Bronwyn James gives us a talk on how the park came into being. Back in 1996, a mining company put in a bid to mine heavy minerals on the eastern shores of Lake St Lucia – threatening the unique ecosystem and the 25,000-year-old sand dunes, the tallest in the world after Australia’s Fraser Island. There was a public outcry and – in a victory for South Africa’s nascent democracy – the mining bid was stopped.
Instead, a government commission recommended the area become a World Heritage Site. To become a WHS, a site has to be of “outstanding universal value” and satisfy one of 10 criteria. UNESCO decided iSimangalisa met three: superlative natural beauty, unique ecological and biological process, and exceptional biodiversity.

The mining operation would have provided 350 jobs for a limited period. The park has created ongoing employment for many more, including among the impoverished rural communities in the area. As well as ecotourism opportunities, from tour concessions to running lodges and selling crafts, local people build and maintain the park’s infrastructure, clear invasive plants, and collect natural resources like rushes.

It’s a great example of a green economy in action – of how preserving and investing in natural capital can bring far greater returns than exploiting resources for short-term gain. And how do plantations fit in? More of that tomorrow...

Thursday 16 May

Meeting hippos, Lake St Lucia

So, today we’re on safari... At 7am sharp we’re on boats, chugging along the glassy calm waters of Lake St Lucia in the hazy morning sunlight. We mangroves, kingfishers, and dozens of hippos. Lolling in the shallows in small groups, they look docile and not unfriendly (though I’m told hippos are quick to get angry and actually kill more people than any other animal, mainly by capsizing boats. Our skipper takes us close, but not too close). The lake is also home to 1,200 crocodiles, but they’re not up yet – we see just two solitary crocs, gliding slowly (and a little menacingly) across the water, unfazed by our presence.

From the boats, we move to open-topped jeeps for a game drive through the park. We’re soon rewarded with the sight of zebras, antelopes, a giraffe and, most memorably, a close-up encounter with an elephant. It’s a memorable moment, particularly for the many of us who’ve never seen an elephant in the wild before. But what’s surprising is that until a few years ago, all this was a pine plantation. I’ve written about this in case studies for NGP and WWF’s Market Transformation Initiative, and the reality surpasses my expectations.
SiyaQhubeka Forests (SQF) – set up by Mondi and its black empowerment partners (about which more later) – took over the plantations in this area in 2004, when South Africa’s state-owned forests were privatized. The pine plantations on the lake shore were sucking up water around the lake, resulting in reduced water flows and high salinity levels. Using the auguring method we learnt on Tuesday, Mondi and partners set about marking out a boundary between wetland conservation zones and areas suitable for commercial forestry. Some 9,000 hectares of plantations, half of them allocated to SQF, were transferred to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

Looking around now, the only signs of this are some tree stumps in the grass. The way the native vegetation has been rehabilitated in less than a decade is remarkable. And it’s remarkable, too, that just a few hundred metres away are SQF’s commercial eucalyptus plantations.

Some 14,200 hectares of SQF’s land has been formally included within the park. The plantations provide an important buffer between iSimangaliso and the commercial farming land outside its boundaries. SQF helps to maintain the border fences (fences are there to keep animals in, rather than to keep people out), and their presence also helps guard against poachers – sadly, a massive and increasing threat, particularly to rhinos. While gum trees obviously aren’t natural habitat, the wildlife corridors and firebreaks have extended the area in which animals can graze and roam. We spot several zebras among the trees, almost camouflaged against the straight white trunks of the eucs, and apparently it’s not unusual to see elephants and rhinos here too.

Zebras grazing among SQF’s eucalyptus plantations

A series of talks fills us in on the background to all this. James Pryke and Michael Samways from the University of Stellenbosch talk about biological monitoring and ecological networks – key concepts for maintaining ecosystem integrity and conserving biodiversity in the park.
We hear more about SQF’s mission – as in the Kranskop area yesterday, Mondi is committed to gradually transferring the management of the plantations here to local communities. SQF prioritizes local contractors, funds bursaries for students from the community and supports business development, as well as investing in more traditional CSR projects like building school rooms.

As well as this, we hear from Jason Smith of Mondi Zimele, a Mondi subsidiary that supports new and emerging businesses within the forestry value chain and from neighbouring communities. They provide funding in the form of equity, loans, asset finance and start-up capital, as well as business development support and market linkages.

We also hear from Sizwe Mtengu, who represents one of the businesses Mondi Zimele has supported. Khulanathi (which means “grow with us”) is a small-scale timber growing company. Around 3,000 local people grow eucalyptus in woodlots of a couple of hectares on land unsuitable for other crops. Mondi pays a premium for wood from small growers because of the social benefits.

At this point, it’s worth asking why a company like Mondi should do all this. After all, though all the Mondi staff we’ve met on this trip have been lovely people, they’re not running a charity.

Part of it is down to Mondi’s ongoing need for a reliable supply of fibre. As Jason says, “Healthy, thriving communities are essential for long-term fibre security.” This is particularly true with land claims: “If those forests fall into a state of disrepair, that’s very detrimental for us.” By contrast, if skilled, motivated local people are running successful forestry businesses and maintaining productive plantations on their land, everybody benefits.

Those benefits aren’t just measured in income and jobs created, but in a much deeper sense of empowerment and connection to the land. As Maurice Makathini, who heads Mondi’s land unit, puts it: “The emotional atonement of an aggrieved people is a huge benefit, not just to the community but to the community partners.”

A few phrases have been cropping up over the course of the study tour. One is “licence to operate” – not in a regulatory sense, but a social one. A plantation company needs to be accepted by its neighbours. We’ve also heard several times that “You can’t protect forestry with a fence.” Because, after all, “A box of matches is very cheap.”

Our final speaker, Andrew Venter from the Wildlands Conservation Trust, puts this starkly: “We’re living in a pipedream if we think we can have thriving plantations without addressing the issue of poverty. Poverty will tear it down.” Wildlands’ Trees for Life programme works with “treepreneurs”, drawn from “the poorest of the poor”, to grow native trees in their own backyards, which are then used to restore ecosystems (including iSimangaliso) and to “green” urban areas. It’s another impressive example of how growing trees can benefit.

We return to our vehicles to drive to the eastern shores of the lake. En route, we tick off two more of the “big five” – buffalos and, most excitingly, a black rhino, who lumbers along the road just in front of us, oblivious to the many cameras focused upon him. As the sun sets over Lake St Lucia, we raise a few cold beers to an inspiring day. Nobody here is under any illusions about the social, environmental and economic challenges plantations bring. Today has been a reminder that, when we get things right, plantations can genuinely be a force for good.
Friday 17th May

For our final morning, we convene in the conference room at Elephant Lake Hotel to consolidate what we’ve learnt this week, and how to take the NGP platform forward in Africa. There’s discussion of the general context and reality of doing business in Africa, the social and community issues we’ve encountered, and the role of plantations within the landscape.

Among the participants on the tour who we hear from this morning are companies and WWF/NGO representatives from southern (Mozambique), East (Tanzania), Central (DRC) and West Africa (Ghana). South Africa aside, commercial plantations are an emerging industry on the continent, and most of the companies operating here are start-ups or medium-sized. That limits their opportunities for social investment. As Adrian from APSD in Ghana says, “We’re the only employer in the area where people think we have cash to spare – we don’t. We want to do the right thing, and given the means we’ll do what we can. But we need some help getting there.”

NGP perhaps has a role to play in linking plantation companies with NGOs and government to unlock sources of funding. It’s agreed that plantation companies need to be smarter about sharing the benefits with communities – it’s not about charity or hand-outs, but giving people a stake in the project’s success and creating a sense of shared ownership.

One big issue for Africa that we haven’t really explored on this study tour is the role of plantations for bioenergy. Charcoal and fuelwood use is the biggest driver of forest degradation on the continent. Plantations for fuel could help take pressure off natural forests. Biomass also has potential to generate electricity for the millions of people who lack access to a reliable energy supply, while limiting the use of fossil fuels.

Hicham from WWF-DRC gives a presentation on a promising project WWF is running beside the Virunga National Park. Virunga is the oldest national park in Africa and a haven for wildlife including mountain gorillas. But the human population in the area has grown considerably, including many refugees from the wars in the region, and the demand for fuelwood is threatening the forest. WWF is paying local people to plant fast-growing trees in small woodlots to provide an alternative fuel
source. Interestingly, a lot of people not involved in the project have started planting their own trees.

There’s a long way to go though. At the moment, charcoal from woodlots isn’t competitive with charcoal from natural forests, where the raw materials don’t cost anything (financially, at least). As Adrian points out, Ghana’s charcoal industry employs 300,000-400,000 people and produces energy equivalent to six nuclear power stations. And there are cultural barriers to overcome, too: as some of the African representatives in the group attest, you can’t beat the taste of meat barbecued over traditional hardwood charcoal.

Discussions continue over lunch and in the minibus that takes us back to the airport. It’s been a fascinating study tour. Plantations are going to have a big role to play in Africa in the years and decades ahead. Through NGP, we have a real opportunity to make sure it’s a positive one.

Sunset at Lake St Lucia

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