
South Africa: The killing of Baboon in FSC-certified timber plantations

GeaSphere is an environmental pressure group working towards a more sustainable model of living based on lower impact agriculture practices that are environmentally sustainable, socially just and which ensures food security and promotes locally based economies and poverty alleviation in the southern African region. A major threat to the local integrated environment is the large scale industrial timber plantation industry, responsible for the transformation of millions of hectares of bio diverse grasslands, the primary vegetation type in most of Southern Africa's timber growing regions.

One of the most destructive impacts of industrial timber plantations is on biodiversity. Non native timber species utilized outcompete the indigenous vegetation by utilizing vast quantities of scarce water and by 'shading out' the life-giving sun which grassland species depend upon. By managing for timber, the industry protects the plantations from fire. Excluding this vital element delivers the final nail in the coffin of grassland biodiversity. (Grassland plants are dependent on fire).

'Fast Wood' plantations are harvested frequently and the resulting 'clear cuts', combined with the practise of 'burning slash (branches not utilized)' negatively impacts on the soil resource, causing hydrophobic conditions and exasperating soil erosion. The monoculture model destroys soil biodiversity, resulting in soil being 'mined' of its vitality. Long term soil nutrient impoverishment is inevitable.

FSC Principle 6 states that:

"Forest management shall conserve biodiversity and its associated values, water resources, soils, and unique and fragile ecosystems and landscapes, and, by so doing, maintains the ecological functions and the integrity of the forest."

According to Dr. John Scotcher, FSC S.A. Contact Person:

"The focus of this principle in the South African context is on conserving representative portions of biodiversity within the forestry landscape and ensuring that ecological functions of these ecosystems are maintained. Conservation of biodiversity within planted compartments is not a primary objective, with these areas being managed to maximise economic returns".

GeaSphere is of the opinion that these critically important principles MUST be made applicable WITHIN the FSC certified production compartments. Bio diversity is an essential element of sustainability, and there should be urgent efforts by industry to establish diversity and promote holistic eco system functioning.

Biodiversity impoverishment in timber plantations has recently come under the spotlight, epitomized by the drastic measures employed by industry to control 'pest animals'.

On the 11th of January 2011, GeaSphere lodged a formal complaint to FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) International under the heading "the killing of Baboons in FSC-certified timber plantations in South Africa". According to unofficial numbers, 14 permits, allowing for almost 2000 Baboons to be

'captured and culled' were issued by the authority to the timber industry over the past two years only.

The timber industry does not have any other validation for this practice than the economical damage that Baboons allegedly cause to the industry by stripping off the bark of some of the timber trees and causing them to die. Yet, what gives the profit-hungry managers and directors of the timber industry the right to decide upon the lives of hundreds of Baboons which are being forced into plantations due to the lack of natural habitat?

It is concerning that most of the plantations in which Baboons are being shot are certified under the FSC certification system. John Scotcher, main FSC contact person in South Africa and at the same time main environmental consultant for Forestry South Africa, states that FSC, as a supposedly independent supervisory body for the plantation industry, was aware of the culling prior to GeaSphere's complaint. It is obvious that FSC failed to react on its own to save the lives of innocent Baboons. This is despite the fact that, in addition to the widely spread ethical and emotional concerns that are being raised, even the professional scientific community regards the current practice of extirpation as not viable, unsustainable and seemingly ineffective with regards to the actual decrease in Baboon damage.

During the process of investigating the case further, GeaSphere came across a research document from 2006, which has been hidden away by the industry for more than two years from the general public and interested and affected parties. Professor Leslie Brown, chair of the research unit that conducted the research, says that "the timber industry was not happy at all when the research team presented the actual result of the study to the foresters". Although the study has been uploaded to the official Baboon Damage Working Group website in 2008, the industry left out crucial parts of the study – obviously on purpose as those parts are the most significant on the issue and the most devastating with regards to the industry's 'trap and shoot' practice.

The dissertation for instance results that the researcher's "professional, scientific opinion is that, at present, it is simply not possible to say that control procedures [trap and shoot] work, or that they represent a cost-effective use of GFP/KLF resources." Furthermore, the final paper gives a number of recommendations to the industry, including "the introduction of buffer zones of natural vegetation" and "presenting baboons with better quality foods that require less energetic effort to access". The study has found that in areas where cages have been set and Baboons have been baited by feeding with maize, the damage to trees increases enormously. It is clear from the study that the current lethal 'capture and cull' method used by the industry to control the Baboon damage is not working and is not sustainable as "the large take-off has conservation implications not only locally but also for surrounding areas."

In light of the scientific evidence revealed by GeaSphere, FSC cannot but act immediately. It is unclear however at this stage if FSC knew about the scientific study mentioned above since 2006 or if the timber industry also decisively kept the Stewardship in the dark. It can yet be expected that John Scotcher, being the main environmental consultant for Forestry South Africa, was aware of the document. "This is just one example where the conflict of interest between Forestry South Africa and FSC becomes clear." GeaSphere immediately acted upon the appearance of the scientific study and demanded Andre de Freitas, Executive Director of FSC International, to make use of his position and to place an immediate moratorium on the killing. They are awaiting reply.

GeaSphere has reason to expect the independent complaints panel, which is formed by FSC at present, to investigate in all directions and to take appropriate action against the parties involved.

According to official FSC guidelines the complaints panel will come to a final and binding decision latest in May this year. The FSC will then be responsible to implement any follow-up actions.

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