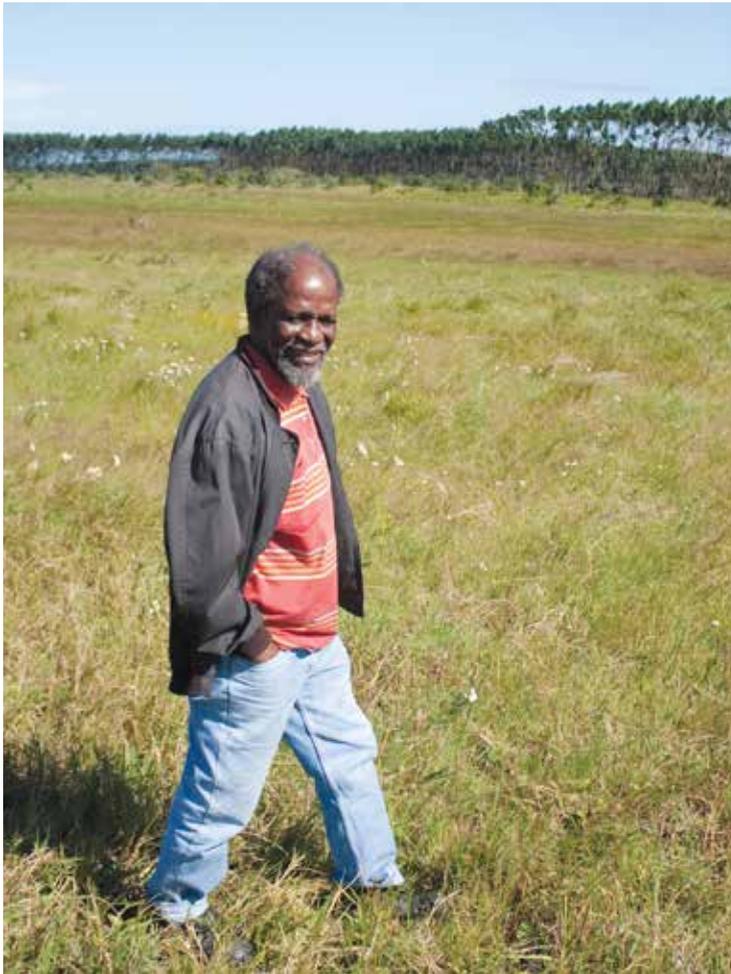


PLANTATIONS AND WETLANDS

Smart land-use planning has restored a vital wetland, and laid the foundation for successful partnerships



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“Forestry is a big part of our livelihood and it is important we have a good relationship with SQF. The community graze their cattle in the plantations, collect firewood and honey, and many are forestry workers and contractors.”

Induna Alson Mpangela, smallholder, Mankwathini, KwaZulu Natal

Water is one of South Africa’s scarcest natural resources, and the country’s wetlands are hugely important for people and nature. The wetlands purify and store water, control erosion, reduce the severity of droughts and floods by regulating stream flow, and recharge aquifers. They are vital for biodiversity, tourism, agriculture and grazing, and as a source of food and plant materials for rural communities. Some 6 million people without regular access to safe drinking water draw what they need directly from streams, rivers, lake and marshes.

More than half of South Africa’s wetlands have been significantly damaged by poorly managed agriculture and other development. Two-thirds of wetland types are threatened, and almost half are critically endangered (WWF-South Africa, 2013). In the past, the commercial forestry sector has been part of the problem, with plantations being established in wetland areas, and non-native species consuming large amounts of water. However, the sector is also a vital part of the South African economy, contributing 1.8 per cent of GDP and employing 110,000 people (Nyoka, 2003).

To strike a better balance between production and conservation, pulp and packaging company Mondi has taken a lead in mapping, protecting and rehabilitating wetlands.

Box 8: New Generation Plantations

Set up by WWF in 2007, the New Generation Plantation (NGP) platform brings together companies and government forest agencies from around the world to explore, share and promote better ways of planning and managing plantations. Around 250 million hectares of new plantations could be needed between now and 2050 to meet a projected tripling in wood consumption while conserving natural forests (WWF, 2011b).

NGP promotes plantations that:

- Maintain ecosystem integrity;
- Protect and enhance high conservation values;
- Are developed through effective stakeholder involvement processes;
- Contribute to economic growth and employment.

The Mondi Group participates in the NGP platform, which advocates new models of plantation forestry that contribute to the welfare of local communities and work in harmony with natural ecosystems.

www.newgenerationplantations.org

The impressive results can be seen in iSimangaliso Wetland Park, the country's last remaining coastal wilderness and a popular tourist destination. In 1999 iSimangaliso 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 SiyaQhubeka Forests (SQF), in partnership with local economic empowerment organizations, communities and the government.

But SQF had inherited a problem. Over the years, there had been bitter disputes involving 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.

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 wetland areas and other important ecosystem components from the dry mineral soils best suited to plantations, where negative impacts would be minimal.

As a result, 9,000 hectares of plantations with significant potential conservation value were transferred to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. The plantation trees were removed, and the land restored to wetlands and savannah. A further 14,200 hectares of SQF's land – including plantations as well as areas of natural forest and wetlands – was later officially incorporated into the park.

The project has restored trust and restored ecosystems. Today, both SQF and the park are thriving enterprises. Regular freshwater flows into Lake St. Lucia have been secured and rehabilitated wetlands and grasslands already support 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 see 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 trees. The plantations also provide an important buffer, protecting the wilderness area from encroaching development and reducing the threat of poaching.

Involving local people in the plantation model has raised the levels of skills, education and viable small businesses in the area. Mondi-SQF supports local forestry-related businesses, and awards most contracts to community-based enterprises. On neighbouring tribal areas, around 3,000 residents grow eucalyptus woodlots of a couple of hectares on land unsuitable for other crops, with Mondi-SQF paying a premium for the wood they supply.

Nationally, Mondi's wetland rehabilitation work has involved the loss of around 5 per cent of its productive forestry land, while its community investments also carry a significant cost. Ultimately, however, Mondi considers it a worthwhile investment to secure its social licence to operate – and long-term ecological, social and economic viability.



Preserve natural capital: Rehabilitating wetlands around Lake St. Lucia has restored ecosystem services and attracted tourism revenue.



Produce better: By keeping plantations away from wetland areas, forestry companies are reducing the impact of timber production on freshwater resources.



Consume more wisely: By choosing Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified wood and paper products, consumers can encourage responsible forest management, including protecting and enhancing areas of high conservation value. In South Africa, the FSC standard now includes conditions for keeping plantations out of wetlands and buffer zones around them.



Redirect financial flows: Rehabilitating wetlands brings environmental, social and long-term economic value that far outweighs the loss of plantation area and the short-term costs.



Equitable resource governance: Communities are shareholders in SQF, and areas of land are being returned to community ownership.