

Forests In South Africa

Forests are integral to the quality of human life and the environment. They provide food, fuel, shelter, clean water, medicine and employment for people. Forests are home to 70% of the world's terrestrial animals and plants. Forests clean the air we breathe, reduce concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, keep sediments from entering rivers, lakes and protect against flooding, mudslides and erosion. When managed in a sustainable way they can continue to supply current and future generations with a wide range of essential ecological, social and economic goods and services. Forests can either be described as man-made or indigenous forests and woodlands.

Man-made forests

The vast areas of plantations in South Africa are all man-made forests. In most cases all of these trees were individually planted by hand, example, the pine plantations around Sabie. Most towns and cities also have trees that were planted by the people living there. One could possibly describe these as urban forests.



Indigenous forests and Woodlands

Natural high forests (indigenous forests) cover a very small part of the surface area of South Africa. They are mainly found in the southern and eastern parts of our country and are composed of naturally growing indigenous trees that were not planted by man. These are dense forests that contain trees of different sizes and many other plants. They normally occur in areas of high rainfall, high humidity and on sheltered mountain sides. An example would be the Knysna forest.

Because of its importance many of these forests are conserved either as State Forests or they are protected in formal conservation areas. Many do occur on private land.

Indigenous woodlands cover almost one third of the surface area of South Africa. This would include dense woodlands of tall growing trees. The indigenous woodlands are also comprised of naturally growing indigenous trees. This type of forest is not so dense and therefore one usually finds grass growing between the trees. An example would be the savanna in the Kruger National Park.

Social importance of forests

Most forests occur around the rural areas of South Africa. Due to low job opportunities and underdevelopment in rural areas, most people living in these areas are poor. Because of this, the rural people rely on the forest resources for their daily survival.

They depend on forests for the following:

1. **Basic needs of survival** - many rural people depend on forests for their daily living:
 - Medicinal plants - traditional herbal medicines harvested from the forests for primary health care.
 - Poles - timber poles are used for building, fencing etc.
 - Wild fruits and animals - they form an important source of nutrients and contribute to the food security of the rural households
 - Firewood - for cooking purposes
2. **Money saving** - the following options are created by forests:
 - Using medicinal plants instead of buying medicines from a pharmacy
 - Firewood instead of paying for electricity for cooking and heaters
 - Harvesting wild fruits instead of buying from supermarkets
3. **During times of adversity** - rural communities often sell forest products to earn a daily living.



Economic importance of forests

Forest resources provide ample business opportunities, such as:

Medicinal plants trade-

Medicinal plants are used by many people in South Africa. Medicinal plants are also processed to produce herbal medicines which could be bought at herbal shops. If medicinal plants are harvested sustainably they can provide a generous income to harvesters and traders.

Manufactured timber products-

Trees are used to make furniture, coffins etc. All these are needed by humans, as many people buy these products and traders generate money from selling these products.

The timber pole market-

The poles are used to build houses, fencing, fixed telephone lines etc. Traders can sell different poles, for example Telkom for telephone lines, builders for building of mainly wooden houses etc

Charcoal production-

Charcoal is made from wood. Charcoal is used for barbeques and can be sold in South Africa or overseas



Trade in wild fruits-

Wild fruits can also be harvested from the forests and sold to local markets or can be taken for processing to generate money

Employment -

The formal forestry sectors employ more than 152 000 people, mostly in the rural areas. The forestry companies provide housing serviced with electricity, water and sanitation, pre-and primary schools and clinics. Other key benefits associated with formal employment are access to vocational, technical or academic training.

Others-

There are many more forest products that could be sold for the generation of income e.g. honey production, sawmilling, trade of forest ferns and forest mushrooms.

Environmental importance of forests

Forests reduce erosion, maintain soil fertility, maintain water quality and harbor biological diversity.

What is an invasive species?

Normally the term invasive species is used to describe exotic trees, plants and animals that multiply easily and spread into natural areas on their own where they do not belong. Not all exotic species are invasive. Examples of invasive trees are Port Jackson trees (mostly found in the Western Cape) and Red sesbania. There are many species of invasive plants, of which some are trees or shrubs. One also finds invasive species among other types of creatures, such as insects, birds, fish and mammals. Invasive species are undesirable because they compete with or threaten indigenous species and they can increase the cost of agriculture or cause fire risk. Sometimes they also consume too much water.



What is a protected tree?

A protected tree can either be an individual tree or a tree species that is protected by law. Trees can either be protected through Provincial legislation or the National Forests Act (No 84 of 1998). In 2005, 47 tree species have been declared Protected Trees under the National Forests Act. Examples of protected trees are the Boabab, Camel Thorn, Stinkwood and Wild Teak trees. Some indigenous trees have been declared as protected tree species because there are few of them left in South Africa. In some cases trees are protected because they are heavily utilized. In some provinces all trees are protected through conservation legislation of the Province.

TOTAL South Africa

Since TOTAL South Africa's establishment in December 1958, a management philosophy has been adopted to conserve the environment.

TOTAL South Africa's Corporate Social Investment focuses on issues of environmental conservation, the preservation of trees, promoting the greening of the environment and the planting of trees. To this effect TOTAL South Africa became involved in our country's national Arbor Week awareness campaign since 1989. Today, TOTAL South Africa is still involved and has supported the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry as a major sponsor of this awareness week.

TOTAL South Africa also promotes and recognises the importance that people play in conserving the environment and are sponsors of events such as 'my dream park' school's competition, the female farmer of the year competition and the Arbor city awards. Furthermore, in cooperation with community based organisations, TOTAL South Africa has established a number of tree nurseries and vegetable gardens in various communities

To exist as a nation, to prosper as a state and to live as a people, we must have trees - Theodore Roosevelt.

For more information on TOTAL South Africa's involvement in the environment visit their website on www.total.co.za.

