

# Report Swaziland Trip

19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010

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**Gea Sphere**  
earth matters

## **Introduction**

Swaziland, an independent kingdom lying within South Africa and Mozambique, faces serious problems with industrial and invasive timber plantations. About 120 000 hectares, being more than nine percent of the whole of Swaziland, are covered by industrial timber plantations. Important to note here is that another unknown, but great area is covered by invasive timber. The ones who suffer the most from the impacts of the thirsty trees are, as often, poor rural communities who rely on small-scale farming to secure their livelihood.

All the land, including the timber plantations, belongs to the king, which has made it very difficult for GeaSphere Swaziland Coordinator Sandile to oppose timber plantations without offending the king in the past. Looking for support, Sandile proposed a short trip of us, two GeaSphere South Africa volunteers, to Swaziland. The purpose of the trip should be to get a good understanding of the circumstances in which the GeaSphere volunteers have to work in Swaziland, to meet both small-scale and industrial farmers and to have a look at a few examples of diverse and sustainable land-use.

## **Timber industry in Swaziland**

In Swaziland, Sappi Usutu, Mondi's Peak Timber and Shiselweni Timber are the main operating timber companies. Sappi Usutu, owning more than half of the plantations in Swaziland (70 000 hectares), closed down the Usutu Mill, the only Pulp Mill in Swaziland, in January. The mill used to employ about 350 people, most of whom being doomed to Unemployment now. Through a local GeaSphere-volunteer we had the opportunity to visit the abandoned worker's village in



*Sappi's Usutu Mill*

Bhanyu close to the mine. We even had the opportunity to shortly interview the local chief. He told us that most of the workers still live in the village, waiting for proper payment for the work they did in the mill. However, Sappi does not seem to be interested in the worker's complaints and leaves many of the workers and their families in bad conditions – most of them are found to have a poor financial situation and a big part is victim to diseases caused by the pollution of the mill. That is why the Swazi government started a court case against Sappi in which they try to claim a compensation for the work and the damage left behind by Sappi. According to the chief there are rumours that a new investor will reopen and operate the mill. But there have been many such rumours in the past and one should not take such things for granted. As the court case is still going and the status of the mill is unclear, the chief was not able and willing to give us more detailed information.

As we drove through a wide area of Sappi Usutu plantations on our way to Manzini, Sandile showed us a specific area where trees have visibly been planted right next to a stream. The photograph below shows that stems of trees recently cut are only a few centimetres next to the small stream. It also seems as if the stream used to be rather a flowing river carrying much water than a tiny stream. There is no doubt that the inappropriate planting of trees led to the stream being almost completely dry. Yet, all these plantations were and are FSC-certified.



*Timber trees which were planted right next to a stream*

Especially in Swaziland, as there is no law enforcement of plantation management (e.g. planting only 30 m away on each side of a stream), there are many plantations in completely unsuitable areas where they cause rare and extremely valuable water sources to dry out and where they destroy valuable habitat for animals and humans.

Unfortunately, certification systems such as FSC which should be responsible in monitoring and checking on plantations before certifying them, fail completely.

We can say that either independent organisations such as FSC or the government have to take action against inappropriate planting of alien species and neglected alien species control. Many mountains are already invaded by timber trees and it will not stop unless something is done about that particular problem. Education and the provision of the required poison to communities can be a long-term solution that however can only be realised with government and industry support.

## Water, small-scale farming and plantations

### Impacts of industrial and invasive timber on communities and local farmers

One of the most remarkable and visible differences between South Africa and Swaziland to us is that small-scale farming is commonly practiced by rural communities in Swaziland. All along the road one can see small fields used to grow maize, vegetables and to hold cattle. The houses are not built right next to each other but a distance is kept to enable this model of self-supplying farming. On the way to Manzini we passed several rural communities and saw many women working in the fields. In order to get a picture and a short interview with one of the women from the Magubheleni



*Interviewing a woman on her maize field*

community we had to help out by working on the field for a few minutes. It showed us that the women, some of whom being very old, have to work very hard to supply themselves and their families with food. After helping out on the field and paying R20 to the elderly woman we got the opportunity to have a short but very valuable interview. It revealed that they nowadays completely rely on the rain. Although the rainfall is high and most of the time enough water is there to supply the fields, periods of drought are existence-threatening to the communities. Because of invasive timber trees which spread into the villages, into the fields and dry up close-by streams, there is no water for daily use and for farming. They suffer from the impacts of badly-managed plantations and neglected control of invasive trees by the industry. The suffering often reaches to a point, where



*Working on a field*

many communities want to “kill” the trees. However, a lack of access to information and the right means makes it almost impossible for the communities to get rid of invasive gum, wattle or pine trees without any outside help.

Khuludlamini, member of a rural community, used to supply his community and the neighbouring one with water from a stream coming from a nearby mountain, storing it in a tank and directing it to the houses through pipes. Since the timber industries started planting industrial timber

plantations on a large scale the trees invaded almost the complete mountain from which the stream originates. As the trees became more and more, the water in the stream reduced dramatically and the mountain became a victim to terrible soil erosion. Facing all these problems, the community is

very determined to get rid of the trees. Unfortunately, none of the members of the community has access to sufficient knowledge and means to stop the invasion of the timber trees onto their land. Sandile has been visiting the community before and it was indicated that the community should join up with neighbouring ones and set up a committee that deals with this particular issue and approaches industry and government. Led by desperation the community already tried to cut the trees and burn them. This however did not help as the trees multiplied further and soil erosion even worsened. We promised the community to do research on how to get rid of the invasive aliens in a cost-effective way. At the moment it seems as if the only solution would be to cut the trees and treat the stems with adequate poison. This method would guarantee the trees to die off and stop the further spreading. However, this will require sufficient financial means, which the community does not have at the moment. Further research will have to be done by us and the community should approach government and industry to try to get funds or any other support for their cause.

### **Saligna Development Company – supplying the local market with diverse products**

Sandile organised a visit to a farm of Saligna Development Company for us. The farm we visited is located in the southern region of Swaziland. The 300 hectares are used mostly to hold cattle and to farm with nuts and maize and employ about 40 workers. Most of the products are sold on the local



*Cattle, nut trees and timber trees*

market, for example the dairy products from the cows. The maize is used mainly to feed the cows. During a short walk on the farm we noticed a high activity of bird and wildlife, especially at the small dam situated within the farm. To us this farm is a good example of diverse and sustainable farming, seeing that the own products are used to feed the cattle and that the products are sold on the direct local market. The only product that gets exported to a certain extent to South Africa is the

timber, of which the Saligna Development Company has about 500 hectares on different farms. According to the farming manager, all of their plantations are planted 30m distanced from streams and FSC certification ensures a proper management.

### **Peter George and Sappi**

Peter George inhabits a farm of 80 hectares set in the cool Highveld of western Swaziland. On the last day of our trip we had the opportunity to visit the Elangeni farm and speak to him about his big problems with the timber industry. After Peter George bought the farm in 1975 from the Government he started developing the land and the infrastructure around it. There was plenty of water from seven different streams running through his land. He started planting vegetables, especially cabbage, and had a few sheep and cows. Furthermore, the existing stands of gum and wattle trees provided a small income and fire-wood for the farm house. Because of the masses of water in the streams Peter decided to start farming with fish having a ready market in local restaurant and hotels.

In the mid 1980's, Sappi started to plant the mountains, including wetlands, around the Elangeni farm. By 1989 Sappi had finished planting up all Elangeni wetlands. At that time it was said by the industry that conditions might actually get wetter by planting industrial timber plantations! The actual impact of the timber plantations became very clear shortly after planting – since 1990 the streams started to dry out and by 1994 most of them did not carry water at all. Sappi however put the blame on climate change and a lack of rain in the region. When the mature trees were clear cut in 2002, most of the streams suddenly started to flow again. It became obvious that the timber trees are to blame.

Besides that, Elangeni farm has been victim to terrible fires jumping over from Sappi land in the past. Compensation has never been paid by Sappi and communication is very difficult.

That is why Peter George started a court case against Sappi Usutu claiming compensation for the massive losses that his farm had after Sappi planted timber all around him. As the court case is still in process, he could not give us any information on that.

On a short trip around the farm the huge impacts of the invasive trees became very clear to us. Soil erosion is terribly endangering the mountains, which are not covered by soil and grass any more. The timber trees spread onto Peter's farm, invading natural Grasland. That is why Peter George puts a lot of effort and money in invasive alien control. Despite all his effort, he says, the trees still multiply and it is almost impossible to stop them to do so.

Since the trees came, the Elangeni farm stopped being a real farm. It is impossible to farm with vegetables and cattle without water. The only income at the moment comes from the few timber trees that are still on the Elangeni farm.

### **Outcome/result of the trip**

We got to know Swaziland as a beautiful country with utmost friendly people and stunning natural vegetation. The fact that it visibly differs a lot to South Africa surprised us, especially regarding small-scale and self-sufficient farming methods. Although statistics figure out that the Swaziland is one of the poorest nations in the world, it seemed to us as if it is one of the richest in respect of traditions and culture. The small country could easily provide enough land for the 1.2 million inhabitants. It is therefore extremely distressing to see that already 9% of the country is covered by industrial timber plantations and a further unknown but certainly big area has been occupied by invasive trees. We hardly passed areas on our way from the very North to the very South of Swaziland where there are no invasive Eucalyptus, Pine or Wattle trees. The interviews and conversations with local affected farmers and community members revealed that the inappropriate planting of trees and the spreading of invasive species onto community-land and private farms leaves many Swazi people behind with massive problems. Water is becoming a scarce resource; small-scale farming is endangered and natural vegetation is being threatened. That is why anger and desperation is



*Peter George showing the consequences of soil erosion*

building up in many communities, which are ready and prepared to “kill” the trees. Steps against the further invasion of the alien trees will have to be taken soon and the communities will definitely need some kind of support, either by government, industry or NGOs.

The visit to the Saligna farm gave us a good idea of sustainable and diverse farming as it should ideally be practiced more farms in Southern Africa as well. Cattle, maize and small catchments planted to timber combined with natural vegetation providing habitat for many birds was all found on the farm.

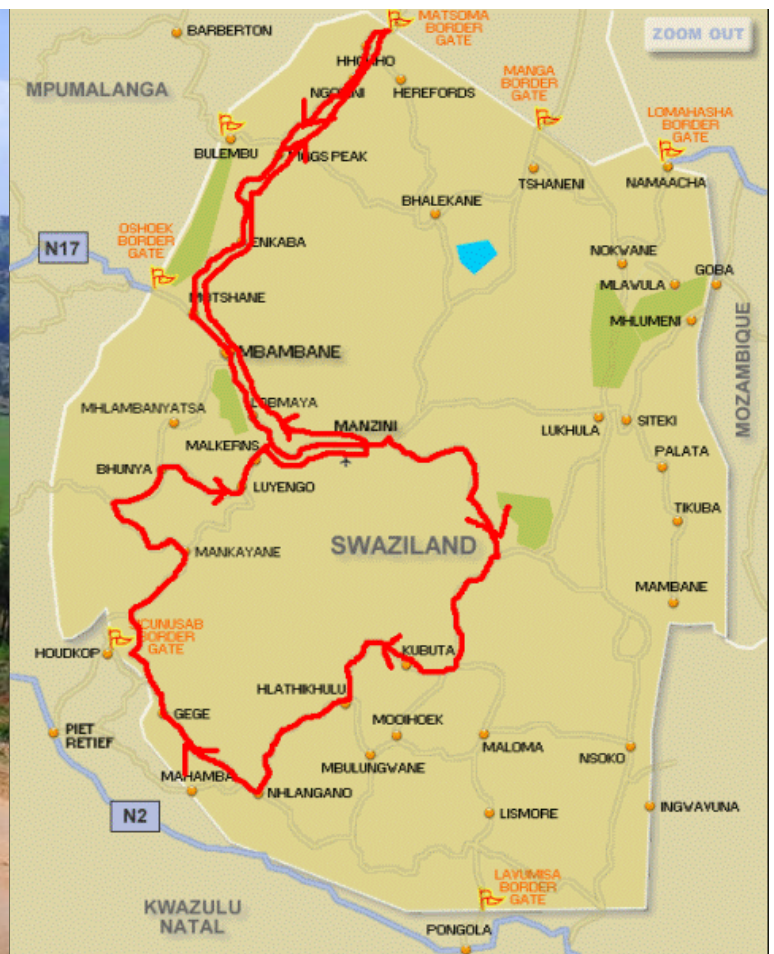
Peter George and his long and ongoing struggle with Sappi’s plantations is a devastating example of how timber plantations can destroy private farming and actually cease all farming operations. We are convinced that many farmers around southern Africa struggle with the same thing, however, being a single person it is very difficult to stand up against a big company such as Sappi. A collective board of farmers affected would definitely increase the pressure on big companies and would be much more effective.

Sandile does very good work and is very vigorous in his work, although facing many challenges and difficulties, especially with the Swazi government and the royalty.

On the whole the trip was very useful and educating to us. It was a great experience to get the opportunity to talk to local affected people from different social and cultural backgrounds and to have Sandile as a guide.



*Boy with Cattle*



*Our route through Swaziland*