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A reflection on achievements and opportunities for Southern Foresters in 2011, the International Year of Forests

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Guest Editorial

A reflection on achievements and opportunities for Southern Foresters in 2011, the International Year of Forests

'Southern Foresters' have a lot to be proud of in 2011, the International Year of Forests, but also have a few serious challenges to face in future. The International Year of Forests is being celebrated worldwide in 2011. This provides the opportunity to reflect on the natural beauty, the environmental services and the sustainable supply of resources (both timber and non-timber forest products) we enjoy from our forests and woodlands. In South Africa, where the 'Southern Foresters' journal *Southern Forests: A Journal of Forest Science* is based, natural forests are comparatively scarce. However, they are incredibly varied, ranging from small pockets of mangrove forests in the north-east, through various types of coastal, escarpment and mist-belt forests through to the savanna- and tropical dry forests (bushveld) of the northern provinces. Although the southern and coastal afrotemperate forests have a special place in many people's hearts, special mention also needs to be made of our planted forests. It is the planted forest (also quite varied in terms of regimes, working circles and planted taxa) that supplies the lion's share of the commercial timber and fibre for downstream processing.

A celebration of the International Year of Forests compels us to rethink achievements of the past and to strategise in order to remain productive and sustainable in the future. 'Southern Foresters', a rare breed of skilled people working in tropical and warm climate forests, have a lot to be proud of. In southern Africa, they have developed a plantation forest resource from a very modest start into many highly productive plantation units in the space of half a century. During the last two decades, in South Africa specifically, expansion of the forested estates became difficult due to pressure from other land uses and from environmental legislation, in particular. Despite minor reductions in afforested land over this period, productivity increased by almost 50%. This is mainly due to improved silvicultural practices and genetics. This result has been achieved while pest, disease, climate and fire-driven impacts are on the increase. Other countries of the Southern Hemisphere share the achievement of remarkable improvements in plantation forest productivity with South Africa. There are impressive success stories from many countries in South America, Australasia, as well as many other southern African countries.

However, some very real challenges remain. On the environmental side, there are increasing biotic, fire and climate-related risks. These threats call for proactive management strategies. Tree health, and especially genetic tree improvement research, is critical in keeping our planted forests healthy. Silvicultural research on the matching of species and hybrids to site types, as well as improved cultural techniques and proactive fire and fuel-load management are also of paramount importance for sustained productivity and risk reduction.

Cost-effective management, including efficient harvesting, transport and processing systems are essential in a country that is challenged by difficult terrain and the widely dispersed resource locations. It can be said that 'Southern Foresters' remain competitive despite not having the ideal situation with afforested estates in close proximity of one another, typically a southern African phenomenon. We also are moving away from growing trees for a single product, e.g. pulpwood alone. Multiple products will increasingly come from one and the same forest area, presenting increased complexities for harvesting and transport. Research and implementation of advanced technologies are needed in the above-mentioned fields, especially where environmental factors are less than optimal and profit margins for roundwood tend to be small.

The third challenge is around capacity building – there is a need for foresters with tertiary qualifications and an even greater need for forestry personnel with postgraduate degrees to do research. Technological and biological advances and breakthroughs are required for the industry to remain competitive and sustainable. The answer will be to work across boundaries between institutions and countries in postgraduate research. Again, this is particularly necessary in southern Africa, given the history of the subcontinent.

By far the biggest challenge currently in South Africa is the inability of the government forestry sector to actively guide, promote and support forestry. These are hard words, but they need to be said. Discriminatory legislation and administrative indecision on critical issues are starting to take a massive toll on the local industry. One case in point is the revision of the exit strategy in the Western Cape province, where replanting of approximately 30 000 ha could not take place, despite a cabinet decision that approved the process and a willing and able, commercial black economic empowerment (BEE) partnership to reforest the area. While this process dragged on, a nine-year gap of unplanted compartments developed. The stumbling blocks in this case were (and still are) mainly due to administrative incompetence and indecision. How this can be allowed to happen in a country where unemployment is rife and the carbon footprint is growing is hard to believe. A second case in point

is the much-touted afforestation of more than 100 000 ha in the Eastern Cape, which has not yet come to fruition. Again, the government forestry sector should play a much more active role here to develop sustainable forests for the benefit of the local people and southern Africa at large. 'Southern Foresters' have faced up to challenges such as pests, diseases and fire. In specific cases, some productive potential was lost. However, if administrative inability prevents reforestation, all productive potential on that land is lost. If we continue on this road, narrow political agendas and administrative inabilities will become a bigger threat to sustained forest production in southern Africa than biotic risks and climate change put together.

Almost a century ago, the southern afrotemperate forests in South Africa were rescued from serious over-exploitation. This was a major achievement despite enormous socio-political challenges at that time, a feat that can be looked on with pride by both 'Southern Foresters' and enabling politicians. This fact, coupled to the scarcity of natural high forests, may have led to a 'hands off' policy in the large majority of natural forests where minimal harvesting and utilisation is allowed. I am of the opinion that greater portions of our indigenous forests could be managed for more intensive utilisation than is currently the case. This would contribute to job creation in subsectors such as the furniture industry. Simply assigning the management of these state-owned forests to a nature conservation institution where minimal, if any, utilisation is allowed is not always the answer. More forest scientists need to be deployed to actively and sustainably manage our indigenous forests for the benefit of communities dependent on them.

In closure I need to give 'Southern Foresters' one more pat on the back. They can be very proud of the fact that they have chosen to subscribe (and in some cases also to contribute) to the high-quality forest science journal that you are reading now!

May the International Year of Forests be remembered as one where we started to make significant improvements in the way we administrate and manage our indigenous and plantation forests for the current and future benefit of the communities depending on them.

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