

# Sparks fly over forestry plan

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**Sappi forest planned  
in Mozambique's southern  
coastal zone is causing  
uproar, reports  
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**P**LANS by giant South African timber company Sappi to plant a 30 000-hectare eucalyptus forest in a sensitive ecological area on Mozambique's southern coastal zone have opened a massive debate about how to combine economic development and environmental protection in that country. The furor — which has become heated that President Joaquim Chissano is said to have telephoned President Nelson Mandela to discuss the matter — revolves around a stretch of land situated between an old coastal resort of Ponta do Ouro and the Maputo Elephant Reserve. The area is rich in wetlands and rare plant species that will be damaged by the plantation. A flamboyant American billionaire led James Blanchard has fuelled controversy by offering to create a 200-million wildlife theme park and a complex of five-star tourism centres in the area. But, he says, this development plan cannot go ahead unless Sappi plants its water-guzzling trees somewhere else. The squabble, destined to become Mozambique's version of the St Lucia estate that rages in southern Africa, has its origins in an agreement Sappi signed with the Frelimo government during the civil war in the 1980s. Sappi then set up a company called Mosaflorestal in partnership with two Mozambican firms and the Frelimo government to develop the area for commercial forestry. Frelimo leaders were keen to attract big South African business to the country to help repair its shattered economy and to ensure Pretoria stopped providing overt support to right-wing Renamo guerrilla campaign. At the time, the fate of wild animals and rare plants was not a priority.

But environmental issues are being taken seriously by the Mozambican government now that the war is over and tourism has emerged as a powerful alternative to commercial forestry.

Eugene Gouws, a South African landscape architect contracted by Blanchard to revitalise the Maputo Elephant Reserve as part of the tourism scheme, says Sappi's plantation will prevent Mozambique from using the world's fastest growing industry to reconstruct its economy.

"In essence, the tourism product is a destination which will provide pristine Indian Ocean beaches and vegetation within a game park which contains all the big five animals. At an envisaged 200 000 hectares, this area has the potential to be the third-biggest conservation area in southern Africa," says Gouws.

"However, the area which has been earmarked for forestry is part of an area which has more endemic species of vegetation than any other in Mozambique. It also consists mainly of grassland, an important vegetation type for viewing large herds of herbivores like buffalo and wildebeest."

The Mozambican government, assisted by consultants working for the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility, have identified the area as a potential site for an ambitious transfrontier conservation area that will link the Maputo Reserve to the Ndumo and Tembe Elephant Reserves in KwaZulu-Natal.

Gouws is backed by Braam van Wyk, a botany professor at the University of Pretoria, who says the commercial forest will obliterate an area of plant and animal endemism — species that occur only in the Maputaland area and nowhere else in the world — if it goes ahead.

"From a plant diversity point of view, the Maputaland Centre (of endemism) is the most remarkable area in Mozambique," says Van Wyk. But Sappi insists its plan will not have major impacts on the ecology of the area and believes both tourism and commercial forestry can contribute to economic development in the area. It points out that the Maputaland centre of endemism covers a total of 2.4-million hectares and that the plantation will take up a tiny fraction of the area.

The company has appointed the Institute for Natural Resources in KwaZulu-Natal to conduct an independent environmental impact study for its proposed plantation to be completed by the end of the year.

The study has found that some areas of the proposed site will have a negative impact on coastal lakes south of the elephant reserve and that a small community of people who rely on tapping lala palms to make a form of wine for local markets will have their livelihoods destroyed.

John Scotcher, environmental manager for Sappi, says the environmental study is the first to be conducted by a commercial venture in Mozambique and indicates his company's willingness to adopt sound ecological principles to manage these problems.

"A participative approach has been adopted in which considerable attention has been given to involve-



Area of grassland proposed for a eucalyptus forest

ment of the local community and other interest groups at local, provincial and national levels."

He says Sappi is willing to withdraw from sensitive ecozones, especially around the coastal lakes, and will set up community-based forestry programmes to provide alternative forms of employment to the palm tappers.

Mosaflorestal sits on a working group that is planning development for southern Maputo province along with representatives from various government departments and community organisations. Some officials in Maputo are worried that Blanchard may not be able to raise the millions he has promised for ecotourism and believe the forest plan — which can start immediately — could be a more tangible "engine" for longer-term growth.

Wildlife protection also has a controversial history in the area. Elephants regularly raid the crops of peasant farmers living in villages near the reserve and there is a groundswell of hostility because the old warden used heavy-handed methods to deal with poachers.

"We have seen Blanchard's tourism plan and it shows there has been no consultation with local people about the impact that the introduction of the big five will have on their village. There is also no mention of an environmental impact assessment," says Scotcher.

But the tourism company is now planning an environmental study and social impact of its own and has appointed prominent Mozambican academics to explain its plan and the benefits it will bring to the people living in the Maputaland region of Mozambique.

Meanwhile the Institute for Natural Resources will present the final draft of its environmental report at two community workshops in rural settlements around the forest site later this month. This caps a 15-month programme of interviews and meetings designed to take the views of ordinary men and women into account when it drafts a final version of the report.

The Mozambique cabinet then has the unenviable job of making a decision about a complex environmental and development debate early in the New Year.