A MAN OF THE FORESTS

When SAFCOL’s acting Chief Operating Officer, Klaas Mokobane, was a child growing up near the Ulitséek plantation in Mpumalanga, he would run away from foresters. He was terrified of these stern men in uniforms, literally from another world.

“There was great distance between forestry companies and communities,” he recalls. “In my mind, it was inconceivable that I could be a forester. And you never saw black foresters then.”

But he had a deep connection with forests. “My dad worked in that plantation for 40 years. I visited him often... I was fascinated by the trees of all sizes and ages.”

As he became a teenager, he started to dream: perhaps it was possible to make a life in forestry. And then it happened. Klaas was “one of the lucky ones” who benefitted from the shift towards people that FSC certification brought: with a bursary from KLF, he studied forestry. “Many can tell similar stories of how KLF has transformed their lives,” he says.

He started as a field forester at KLF in 2001. He recalls being nervous about his first FSC audit. But when the second came, “I could not wait to show the auditors what we had done, for example, how we had converted areas infested with weeds back to grasslands.”

Klaas is deeply satisfied when he walks through the forests today. “Where there was once a jungle of overgrowth in riparian zones, there is now natural vegetation supporting all kinds of life – one way that plantation forestry co-exists with natural areas. The few patches of indigenous forestry would have been destroyed by now if plantations had not provided an alternate source of timber.”

And where there were once padlocks to keep communities out, there are now strong relationships with neighbours.

Now he knows about the great economic value of the forests he fell in love with as a child. “And you start to appreciate the role of the forester, impacting lives around plantations of mostly poor, rural people.”

KOMATILAND FORESTS SENIOR MANAGER: TRANSFORMATION HAZEL BANDA SHARES A MOMENT WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADER AND WARD COUNCILLOR PHILLIP NKHOMA

Photo Janette Bennett

KLAAS MOKOBANE, ACTING COO SAFCOL

An FSC story from South Africa
OUR PEOPLE, OUR PARTNERS

Typically, rural areas around plantations in South Africa and Africa are marked by high unemployment and low income levels, usually from subsistence farming and social grants like pensions. KLF is no exception, and it supports around 20,000 people, including through direct jobs and use of contractors, small business support interventions, and building schools and clinics.

KLF has signed 13 social compacts with neighbours so far, setting up joint community forums. Three communities participate in the Berlin plantation forum cluster. And ward councillor Phillip Nhoma, a former teacher who serves on the forum, says the community meets regularly with KLF via the forum. “Komatiland is looking after its people, its communities,” he says.

“If you empower people, they become job creators, not job seekers,” he adds, referring to KLF’s learnership programme, which trains local people in skills like carpentry and garden services, and has started co-ops for young entrepreneurs.

SAFCOL’s Senior Manager: Transformation, Hazel Banda, explains that communities and staff decide together what can be done to meet identified needs. “It’s not about donations. It’s about sustainable projects that will improve the livelihoods of communities,” she says.
WOMAN AT WORK

KLF’s Berlin Plantation Manager, Nondumiso Kheswa, crouches to check labels on a pile of freshly harvested pine – every log has been tagged for tracing and monitoring.

Then she chats with the team, who are halfway through the harvest in Berlin’s K13 compartment. According to the plan that Harvesting Supervisor Meshack Mathebula puts from a folder, it will take 27 days to harvest this 22.6ha area.

Satisfied that all is flowing well, she stops to chat near the “parliament”, a demarcated area that includes a water supply and first-aid provisions. Forestry, it is clear, has earned her passion, although she is quick to tell you that she entered it “by default”.

“I came from a not-so-privileged family in KwaZulu-Natal, and they could not afford to pay for me to study,” she says. “My grades were good, and I was going to settle for studying in whatever field I could. Fortunately, I landed up with a learnership at Komatiland in 2004 and was able to study forestry.”

In 2008, Nondumiso started working as a forester for KLF in the Sabie area. She rose steadily through the ranks, working as a senior forester and then as plantation manager for the 6,000ha Ngome plantation in KwaZulu-Natal in 2014. In January 2017, she took over the helm at the 13,500ha Berlin plantation.

She uses FSC systems every day: “Every time I make a decision, it is holistic; about the environment, the people and the income. We do have a national legal framework, but FSC gives it much more focus.”

Nondumiso feels that being a woman in this traditionally man’s job “drives me to do better and better … I want there to be more women in this field. And I want to be part of empowering them to do it.” She advocates for advancement of women in SAFCOL, but dreams of “doing it on a bigger scale”. As a first step, she intends organizing a national conference for women to share experiences.