A PIONEER OF FSC CERTIFICATION

Twenty years ago, the South African Forestry Company (SAFCOL) plunged into the dark: it obtained one of the earliest FSC certificates in the world for its Komatiland Forests (KLF) operations.

The seed came from Pieter Odendal, former SAFCOL Divisional Director of Forestry, although he quickly points to a team effort. The motivation was environmental, with a touch of desperation.

"We were under huge pressure about plantation forestry, and simply did not have much credibility when trying to put the record straight," Pieter recalls. "I had heard about FSC – I can’t remember where. Here was an independent source to look at what we were doing and make a judgement on our environmental performance."

FSC was barely a year old when SAFCOL approached it in 1994. "An FSC representative visited us and asked some questions that were very uncomfortable at that time," Pieter says.

FRAYED NERVES

It’s human nature to fear the unknown. And nerves were frayed. Those involved tell you of necks going into spasm at their meeting with auditors, of not being able to eat. "We didn’t have a clue," SAFCOL’s then Environmental Manager, Gerrit Marais, says, only half-joking.

FSC certification for the first KLF plantations, in Mpumalanga, South Africa, came in 1997. All 16 KLF business units, covering more than 187,000ha, have maintained certification over 20 years. And FSC principles are incorporated into KLF’s day-to-day operations. "It’s the way we do business," SAFCOL’s acting Chief Operating Officer, Klaas Mokobane, says.

With FSC certification, we can either say that we are not having negative impacts and we can prove it, or here is a negative impact and this is how we are changing it.

Paul Wainwright (Senior Manager SHEQ)

KLF HAS A CLEAR FUTURE

Photo: Jarrett Wernhet
MINDSETS

A big challenge was changing mindsets. "We had to accept that social and stakeholder issues are important," Pieter explains. "We were now assessed not only on our operational performance, but also on social aspects, which did not feature that high on our agenda at the time."

Then there was doubt from some industry peers. "Many rejected the concept of FSC certification – nobody liked the idea of an outsider expressing opinions on how you do your work," Pieter says. "It took a long time for some companies to make that shift; we were pioneers to a large extent."

MAJOR CHANGES

Naturally, environmental effects were significant. "Forestry’s approach to conservation had been to conserve protected areas, and do whatever it wanted elsewhere," Gerrit explains. "FSC brought a paradigm shift: that the environment is everywhere, not just in protected areas."

Examples of major changes abound. Once, machines would compact soil so roots battled to penetrate. Often, topsoil would be lost. Waste from harvests would be tossed into streams, perhaps with leftover chemicals. If the soil was sodden, harvest went on regardless.

Every aspect is now tightly monitored. "These are things we don’t even think about today," Gerrit says. "And FSC brought all those changes into the system."

Today, a third of KLF landholdings are classified as protected areas, including indigenous forests, grasslands, riparian zones and "areas of special interest", like caves and rock art.

A SAFCOL Environmental Practitioner, Chris Foster, was a plantation manager in 1997. "I don’t think people cared much about the environment then," he says. "We even had methods like ridging to make it easier to plant in wetlands. With FSC’s guidance on wetland delineation, that has been corrected."

Acting General Manager Operations Henry Seteria, then a young forester, says: “Harvesting was ‘easy’; there was no such thing as a harvesting plan.” It was a matter of grow, cut and sell, without regard for impacts. “Now, FSC has told us that we have one of the best harvesting plans in the world.”

PEOPLE MATTER

Outside the forest, communities have become partners (see: OUR PEOPLE, OUR PARTNERS). Neighbouring communities are benefitting from certification as involvement with local communities is an important facet of certification,” Pieter says. “It’s where many companies have had to adjust conventional thinking that they operate in isolation from society.

THE MISTY HIGH GROUND OF MpUMALANGA OFFERS PERFECT GROWING CONDITIONS FOR KomATILAND FORESTS’ PINE PLANTATIONS

Photo: Jaraboe Herritt.
GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Regional Manager Thabo Moloi points out that this state-owned company, financially self-sufficient, does not depend on government grants. “We are managing our forests sustainably for future generations,” he adds. “That makes marketing of our logs much easier. Without FSC, we won’t be able to sell our logs and that would drastically affect our bottom line.”

Senior Manager SHEQ Paul Wainwright agrees: “We can show that we comply with the highest environmental and social standards. Our customers demand that. With FSC certification, we can either say that we are not having negative impacts and we can prove it, or here is a negative impact and this is how we are changing it.”

A WORLD VIEW

Pieter and Gerrit are now independent FSC-accredited auditors. They work all over the world.

“Many don’t know that forestry was done very differently 20 years ago. The difference FSC has made is mind-boggling, especially in the developing part of the world,” Gerrit says. “It’s made significant impacts on wellbeing of people and the environment, and that would never have happened if FSC had not stepped in.”

Further, in countries where law enforcement is poor, FSC certification fills that gap through voluntary compliance with the highest global standards.

“I am totally convinced of the merits of certification,” Pieter says. “Certified companies are almost without exception the leaders in their areas of operation.”

INTO THE FUTURE

FSC certification will remain a strong base. As Klaas says: “SAFCOL, through KLF, intends to maintain our status of being the oldest FSC-certified company in Africa and one of the oldest in the world. We also intend to continue playing a leading role in the industry.”

His team is eyeing expansion into Africa, promoting a wood culture. Product diversification into, for example, timber-framed buildings, is also on the cards.

“KLF intends to maintain its long-standing relationship with FSC and our passion for our people – our employees and communities – our forests and the environment we operate in,” Klaas says.

FSC brought a paradigm shift: that the environment is everywhere, not just in protected areas.

Gerrit Marais (former SAFCOL Environmental Manager)

SAFCOL’S BERLIN PLANTATION MANAGER, NONDUMISO KHEWA, WITH HARVESTING SUPERVISOR MESHEK MATHEBULA AND HARVESTING FORESTER LUCKY SHABALALA

You start to appreciate the role of the forester, impacting lives around plantations of mostly poor, rural people.

Klaas Mokobane (Acting COO SAFCOL)

Photo: Janette Bennett

An FSC story from South Africa