

Mozambique's new forests may not be as green as they seem

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A warthog stands among trees in 2010 in the Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique. Foreign companies are spending billions of dollars to plant forests in Mozambique, but conservationists fear the investments aren't as good for the environment as they might initially seem.

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Mozambique has about 400,000 square kilometres (155,000 square miles) of largely untouched forests, an area larger than Germany that covers half of the country, making it a prime target in the African land rush that has seen foreign firms staking large claims for agri-business across the continent.

Three of Mozambique's biggest forestry investors tout their "green" credentials, with schemes to plant trees to filter carbon from the atmosphere and help slow [global warming](#).

But the projects have drawn the ire of local communities who sometimes claim they were never consulted, and of activists who fear the consequences of replacing natural forests with commercial plantations of pine and eucalyptus.

Norwegian forestry group Green Resources and Portuguese paper producer Portucel have started on eucalyptus plantations, investments each worth more than \$2.2 billion covering a total of 250,000 hectares (600,000 acres).

Both companies say their programmes comply with international schemes that aim to remove carbon from the atmosphere while creating [economic benefits](#) for Mozambique by processing wood for paper and building materials.

"The [forestry plantations](#) are planted in areas degraded by (human activity), therefore no felling of valuable indigenous trees will be required," Portucel spokeswoman Ana Nery told AFP.

But [environmentalists](#) argue the plantations will threaten Mozambique's biodiversity, saying degraded forests should be allowed to regenerate naturally.

"It is easy to say it is degraded zones. There is still so much [biodiversity](#) left and it recovers quickly," said Philip Owen, president of South African environmental NGO Geosphere.

When companies create new plantations, "especially with eucalyptus and pine, it has a terrible impact on resources", he said.

The Global Solidarity Forest Fund, run by churches in Norway and Sweden, holds around 23,000 hectares for pine and eucalyptus in a similar programme.

But Geosphere has accused the Fund of chopping down trees "at an alarming rate to give space to monoculture tree plantations."

The group criticised "the extremely high water consumption of the alien plants," with a single eucalyptus able to suck up 50 litres (13 gallons) of water a day, and the occupation of fertile land "vital to the food security" of small farmers.

The Swedish Cooperative Centre, a charity that supports small farmers, accused the Fund of bribing local leaders known as regulos to win approval for the plantations, resulting in conflicts with nearby communities.

"The community consultation was not done properly and the community does not feel involved," said Kajsa Johansson, the charity's chief in Mozambique.

Over the past three years small farmers have set fires to plantations out of frustration, she said.

"They uprooted plants. They also burnt the storage room of the company," she added.

The Fund has since replaced its management team.

"We are aware that afforestation has to be done very carefully," Fund spokeswoman Kinna Brundin told AFP.

"We are taking measures in identifying possible problems and will

strengthen the consultation."

Globally, programmes to encourage poor countries to preserve large forests are a key part of the UN climate talks underway in the South African city of Durban, after the last round of talks in Mexico agreed to standards on the protection of forests.

South African agronomist Coert Geldenhuys said the trick is to find a balance between natural and planted forests.

"The question is, the new trees need to be integrated in the landscape," he said.

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