



FSC® CERTIFICATION: Fearing the unknown but still taking the plunge



Forest Stewardship Certification® in Africa

Where it all began



Twenty years ago the South African Forestry Company SOC Limited, (SAFCOL), did something ground breaking and incredibly brave. They approached the then newly formed Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) and asked to be audited.

"[At the time] we were under huge pressure about [the environmental implications of] plantation forestry. We simply did not have much credibility and were trying to put the record straight. I had heard about FSC, that they were an independent source able to look at what we were doing and make a judgement on our environmental performance." - Pieter Odendaal, SAFCOL's then Divisional Director of Forestry.

The first meeting for the SAFCOL representatives was not a particularly comfortable one, with FSC who were barely a year old asking *"some questions that were very uncomfortable at that time."*- Pieter. One of the biggest challenges 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."*

One of the major changes brought by the FSC evaluation was the paradigm shift, *“that the environment was everywhere and not just in protected areas”*, Gerrit Marais SAFCOL’s then Environmental Manager explains. Prior to this, *“forestry’s approach to conservation had been to conserve protected areas and do whatever it wanted elsewhere.”* As a result of FSC compliance, every aspect of forestry is now tightly monitored. This was a huge mental shift back then but now *“these are things we don’t even think about today”* - Gerrit.

This new way of being evaluated left many in the industry initially feeling uncomfortable, making SAFCOL one of the early FSC pioneers. 3 years later SAFCOL obtained one of the earliest FSC certificates in the world for its Komatiland Forests (KLF) operations.

Fast forward 20 years and all 16 KLF business units, covering a huge 187,000ha, have maintained certification and FSC principles are incorporated into KLF’s day-to-day forestry operations. *“It’s the way we do business”*, explains Klaas Mokobane, SAFCOL’s acting Chief Operating Officer. As a result a third of KLF’s landholdings are classified as protected areas, including indigenous forests, grasslands, riparian zones and *“areas of special interest”* like caves and rock art.



THE BENEFITS OF CERTIFICATION

It's not just the environment that gains!

COMMUNITIES MATTER

Certification goes beyond the forests and into the neighbouring communities. The importance of good relations with your neighbours cannot be understated and in many ways FSC certification helps improve this. *"Companies have had to adjust conventional thinking, that they operate in isolation from society. Involvement with local communities is an important facet of certification"*, Pieter explains. As a result almost all companies now have extensive outreach programmes benefiting and uplifting the communities forestry touches in a variety of ways.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

As a child growing up near the Uitsoek plantation in Mpumalanga, Klaas Mokobane would run away from foresters terrified of these stern men in uniforms who to him felt like someone from another world. *"There was great distance between forestry companies and communities"*, back then recalls Klaas, *"in my mind, it was inconceivable that I could be a forester. You never saw black foresters then."*

Thankfully his deep connection with forests and *"fascinated by the trees of all sizes and ages"*, ensured he realised his teenager dream, *"to make a life in forestry"*. Now SAFCOL's acting Chief Operating Officer, Klaas was *"one of the lucky ones"* who benefited from the shift towards people that FSC certification brought. He was selected for a bursary from KLF, enabling him to study forestry. He was not the only one, according to Klaas *"many can tell similar stories of how KLF has transformed their lives."*

Klaas' career started as field forester at KLF in 2001. He recalls being nervous about his first FSC audit, but *"could not wait to show the auditors what we had done, for example, how we had converted areas infested with weeds back to grasslands"* when the second audit came round.



Fast forward almost two decades and Klaas is deeply satisfied when he walks through the forests - *"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."*

Perhaps most important of all, where there were once padlocks to keep communities out, there are now strong relationships with neighbours. Ensuring future generations of community kids are inspired by the forests and see forestry as an achievable dream.

BUSINESS BENEFITS

SAFCOL may be a state-owned company, but it is financially self sufficient and doesn't rely on government grants. FSC certification has a role to play in this. *"With FSC certification we can show that we comply with the highest environmental and social standards, our customers demand that",* states Paul Wainwright, SAFCOL's Senior Manager SHEQ. This is a view shared by Thabo Moloji, SAFCOL's Regional Manager North, *"we are managing our forests sustainably for future generations. That makes marketing our logs much easier. Without FSC we would not be able to sell our logs and that would drastically affect our bottom line."*

PROMOTING A GLOBAL VISION

In just twenty years FSC has made a huge impact on the way the forestry industry operates, *"the difference the FSC has made is mind-boggling, especially in the developing part of the world"* says Gerrit who is now an independent FSC-accredited auditor.



The future's bright

KLF and SAFCOL see FSC certification as a strong base upon which day-to-day forestry practices are put into place and take great pride in their status of being the oldest FSC-certified company in Africa, as well as being one of the oldest in the world.

"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. "We also intend to continue playing a leading role in the industry", as Klaas' team is eyeing expansion into Africa, promoting wood as culture along and following FSC philosophies.

"FSC Africa is proud of the achievement reached by SAFCOL. They led the Forestry Industry in South Africa and globally, in being one of the very first FSC certificates awarded in Plantation Forestry. They have maintained their FSC certification for 20 years demonstrating that FSC adds value to their responsible forestry practices and their products. FSC Africa looks forward to the next 20 years with SAFCOL, as a certificate holder and a member." - Manushka Moodley FSC Sub-regional Coordinator – Southern Africa.