

How no-man's land is now everyone's problem

The renowned Cape flora is everywhere in retreat as runaway pine invasions transform the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma mountains

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Wildfires in invaded catchments are of extreme intensity and pose a huge threat to plantation forestry, agriculture and human settlements. *Photo: B. van Wilgen.*

Successful land management depends in part on good planning. Planners often use brief descriptions of possible futures (termed scenarios) to help people to visualize the longer-term consequences of the actions they take (or fail to take) today. Our tale is of a rather sobering scenario that we feel should be urgently and seriously considered by those planning for the Garden Route's future. It envisages a future in which residents and tourists alike are subject to severe and chronic water rationing as a result of a failure of mountain catchments to deliver ample, clean water as they do today. In this possible future, fires would rage with abnormal intensity, seriously threatening homes, crops, plantations and people. The high-intensity fires would damage the soil, resulting in erosion and silting up of dams, further exacerbating water problems. Tourist numbers would dwindle, both because of the dire water situation and because the unique and attractive fynbos that characterizes the region's many hiking trails would have largely disappeared under invasive alien pines. Economic activity would flounder and poverty would increase. Such a scenario now seems a strong possibility rather than an unlikely and distant outcome, simply because society has failed to plan for, and to deal with, the threat of invasive alien plants. How could such a situation have arisen? Let us explain.

When the PW Botha government restructured the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) in the mid 1980s, it probably didn't anticipate the dire consequences for the future of the Garden Route. The restructuring aimed at separating plantation forestry (a commercial undertaking, earmarked for privatization), catchment and indigenous forest management (conservation undertakings), and research (an undertaking that generates understanding and scenarios). The restructuring divided the land into plantations (which went first to SAFCOL and later Mountain To Ocean Forestry), nature reserves (where certain areas that had not been afforested with pines were devolved to the provincial nature conservation agencies), indigenous forests (which remained under the jurisdiction of DWAF), and research (which went to the CSIR, with a focus on different challenges). In the process though, large tracts of unafforested fynbos

in the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma mountains of the Garden Route areas were left without a custodian – the so-called 'no-man's land'.

Prior to the restructuring, DWAF had done a great job in achieving the cardinal principles of catchment management: protect nature and maintain sustainable water delivery by applying appropriate fire and alien plant control regimes. Following restructuring, large tracts of fynbos-clad mountain catchment was transferred to Cape Nature Conservation (now CapeNature). However, the plantation arm of DWAF retained responsibility for almost all of the proclaimed catchment areas in the eastern Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma mountains, but precious little was done to manage these areas. When SAFCOL was established in 1993 with its strict focus on growing trees for profit, they inherited these areas. The neglect continued; the costly burden of catchment management, which yields no immediate return on investment, was not its primary mandate.

As a result of these changes, the management of the eastern Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma mountain catchments languished for almost 20 years. Only recently has the management of this 'no-man's land' been assumed by conservation authorities. At the time of writing, new-generation conservation areas are being planned for the region. South African National Parks has been given the challenge of forming the Garden Route National Park, a 120 000 ha tract of land that includes over 50 000 ha of neglected 'no-man's land'. In addition, the Eastern Cape Parks Board adopted a large tract in the east (to form the Formosa Nature Reserve). The neglected areas have become infested with alien plants, mainly hakea and pine, the latter almost exclusively sourced from the adjacent pine plantations, some of which were located deep in the catchments on marginal, fire-exposed sites. Many of these marginal plantations have proved unprofitable, and will be handed over for rehabilitation, without provision of adequate funding for effective management, to cash-strapped conservation authorities.

How bad is the alien plant situation in these mountains? In November 2008, we undertook an aerial reconnaissance of the region and were horrified to witness the extent of the problem. Large areas of mountain landscape have been transformed to closed-canopy pine forests, while