

National Report to the Fifth Session

of the

United Nations Forum on Forests

for

The Republic of Mauritius

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I. Key Contacts

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Report on the implementation of the IPF and IFF proposals from Mauritius

Combating deforestation and forest degradation

Brief History and Background

The republic of Mauritius comprises of the islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues, St. Brandon and Agalega. It has a population of about 1.2 million inhabitants. The total land area of Mauritius is about 2000 sq. km and the forest area is approximately 54,000 ha or 25% of the land area.

It was first inhabited from the middle of the 16th century and has since been colonized by the Dutch, French and British successively. The three periods of colonization have been marked by severe deforestation to make way for agricultural development (mostly sugar cane plantation), infrastructural development, housing estates, roads, dams etc. By the end of the 19th century, most of the native forests had disappeared with the exception of a few scattered pockets of native vegetation which have been spared due to their inaccessibility.

Mauritius is a heavily populated island with around 600 inhabitants per sq. km. Apart from the climatic hazards (cyclones, droughts...etc.) there are many threats to the forest resources. Due to acute land scarcity, the forests come under heavy pressure from the other land based sectors. Being an island there is also a high level of endemism in the flora and fauna of Mauritius. This unique biodiversity is severely threatened as a result of loss of forest areas. Another major threat to the indigenous and endemic biodiversity is the rampant proliferation of alien species in the native forests.

The battle against deforestation in Mauritius started during the 70's. Most of the degraded state owned native forests have been re-afforested. These now constitute the main timber reserves of Mauritius. By virtue of their strategic location in the uplands these plantations form the major catchment areas of the

main river systems of Mauritius and they play a vital role in soil and water conservation. Our forests also provide natural sites for much needed recreation and leisure to both the local population and the 700,000 foreign tourists. Eco-tourism activities are also developing very fast. Consequently emphasis of management is to enhance the environmental protection and social functions of the forests rather than the economic functions like timber exploitation.

The UNCED conference has given additional impetus to the re-afforestation initiatives and it has created more awareness to environmental conservation in general.

Progress and Issues related to Implementation of IPF/IFF proposals for Action

General

Mauritius had voluntarily submitted national reports on the IPF/IFF proposals for all the previous UNFF sessions. Mauritius had undertaken many initiatives in the field of conservation of biodiversity and forest protection since the early seventies. The UNCED conference has given a greater impetus to these activities. Since 1997 a lot of actions have been taken to promote sustainable forest management.

The National Forest Policy is being revised with the collaboration of the Forest Policy and Planning Unit of the FAO. The principles of sustainable forest management will be enshrined in the new policy.

During the period under review, many of the IPF and IFF proposals which are of direct relevance to our context have been implemented.

The Mauritian Government has backed its political commitment by providing financial resources to the various institutions to ensure the sustainable management of our forest resources. Mauritius has benefited from funds from the Global Environment Facility for the implementation of medium sized project for capacity building for sustainable land management.

Implementation of the IPF/IFF proposals for action related to the thematic issues of UNFF 2

Combating deforestation and Forest degradation

Activities undertaken since 1997

1. Creation of new forest nurseries and expansion of existing ones to support an annual re-afforestation programme of 150 ha.
2. 10,000 ha of state lands have been re-afforested mostly in the uplands for soil and water conservation and limited timber production.
3. The Government has launched a tree planting campaign and under this initiative tree seedlings and technical guidance are provided free of charge to private owners, socio-cultural organizations, local authorities to undertake re-afforestation and other tree planting projects example avenue plantations. During the period under review more than half a million seedlings have been supplied free of charge to various organizations.
4. Forest officers have followed a certificate course in Forestry at the University of Mauritius. This course objective was to make forest officers more efficient in the discharge of their duties. There has also been overseas training that has been granted to various officers in specialized fields through the South African Developing Countries regional co-operation.
5. A Tree Seed Center equipped with a green house and nursery has been established. The main activities are collection, storage and dissemination of seed of good genetic quality to support our re-afforestation programme and to propagate critically endangered endemic plants.
6. In 2003, a major decision was taken to set aside 50% of the planted forests found on catchment areas as protection forests, for soil and water conservation. These areas will not be logged except for hygienic fellings and for salvaging timber after cyclones.

7. In the context of the UNCCD, a lot of emphasis has been laid on the rehabilitation of degraded lands especially in the dry regions, on mountain slopes. An area of 60 ha has been identified in the Port Louis Hills. A pilot project of 20 ha has already been completed at a cost of 200,000 USD. The pilot project has been successful and it is being used as a model to enlist financial support for similar projects.

Review of the National Policy

The National Forest Policy of Mauritius is outdated and does not address some issues which have recently emerged in the forestry Sector. The Forest Policy and Planning Division of the FAO is funding the review of the National Forest Policy. A TCDC project of 123,000 USD has been approved. The project has already started in September 2004.

Creation of new protected areas

An area of 500 ha of forests (Bras D'Eau Forests) has been created as reserve under the Wildlife & National Park Act 1993. This area is the habitat for the Mauritius Paradise Flycatcher – an extremely rare endemic bird. The reserve also contains a wetland (Mare Sarcelles) which is home to migratory birds from the Northern Hemisphere. A network of nature trails and recreational infrastructure has been set up at a cost of 300,000 USD.

Partnership with Private Sector

Owners of privately owned native forests are being encouraged to practise ecotourism. Ecotourism indirectly contributes to the conservation of biodiversity. Technical guidance and free seedlings are provided to owners of private forests to rehabilitate the degraded native vegetation.

Priority in National Forest Policy for rehabilitation of degraded forests

The new forest policy will address the question of incentives to private forest owners for practicing Sustainable Forest Management and compensation for forgone benefits following restriction on certain forest activities e.g. logging and other types of exploitation on ecologically sensitive areas.

Islet National Park

In 2004, the Government has created an Islet National Park comprising nine islets. A set of management plans has been written for the long-term management of the islets. The objective is to rehabilitate the degraded vegetation of the islets and to improve the habitat of the rare species of birds and reptiles. Limited recreational facilities will be provided for visitors.

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Economic aspects of Forests, including trade

Mauritius, as an island, has limited forest areas. All native state-owned forests have been converted into a National Park and several nature reserves, where timber exploitation is banned. The production from plantations from the privately-owned and state-owned forests is about 15,000M³. The local consumption of utility timber exceeds by far the local production Hence Mauritius will always be a net importer of timber (Annex I).

The valuation of forest goods and services

The pricing of forest products from state-owned forests has been rationalised over the years to bring it at par with those practiced by the private sector.

In view of the ever-increasing demand for recreation and eco-tourism activities by Mauritians and foreign tourists and the importance of forests as catchment areas for water conservation, the emphasis is gradually shifting to the exploitation of the non-wood potential of the forests rather than timber production.

Full cost internalization of wood and non-forest products and services

Prices of wood and non-wood forest products from state-owned forests are regularly revised to align them with those of the Private Sector. The last increase in the selling prices of wood was done in 2002 (Annex II).

The rent for shooting and fishing leases over state forest lands has been revised in 2000. Rental was increased by 100 % in 2000 and will culminate to a 500 % increase by 2007 (Annex III).

Development and Use of economical policy instruments to promote sustainable development

Mauritius is working on a new forest policy which will address, inter alia, the economic aspects of forests to promote sustainable forest management.

Due to very limited land resources, forest lands are permanently under pressure from other land based sectors. Private forest lands are gradually being lost to other land uses. A study is underway to identify sensitive private forests which have either rich biodiversity or which are located in strategic locations such as catchment areas. These forests will be either acquired compulsorily after compensating the owners or will be given legal

protection. Government is also considering incentives like grants, tax reliefs etc, for promoting re-afforestation or partial compensation to owners for restriction of certain types of development on sensitive areas.

Market and Trade on Forest Products

Mauritius is a net importer of timber. The import of forest products per capita is probably the highest in the region.

Government has removed completely or reduced considerably import duty on timber, reconstituted timber and wood-working machines to protect the furniture manufacturing sector from the imports of finished furniture.

Forest Health & productivity

Air pollution is not a problem in Mauritius. There are very few factories which emit toxic fumes or dust in the industrial sector and they are not located in the proximity of forests. There is limited damage to forests through air pollution. However, there is some very limited damage caused by pathogens e.g. fungus and insects. The main damage caused to our forests are through natural calamities– especially cyclones.

Maintaining forest cover to meet present and future needs

This concept is enshrined in our National Forest Policy. The first objective of our forest policy aims at

"effecting the preservation of a tree cover for the benefit of the present and future inhabitants of Mauritius, on areas of land as are required for the maintenance and improvement of the climatic and physical condition of the country "

We have always attempted to increase the areas under forests in Mauritius. But due to heavy pressure on lands, this has not been possible up to now. We are instead improving the quality of the degraded forests by removing

invading alien species and restocking with indigenous and endemic plants. Incentives are being offered to the private forest owners to reafforest and sustainably manage their forests, in terms of free seedlings and technical advice.

In Mauritius, the environmental and protective functions of the forests are vital. As a matter of fact, the water conservation function of the forests in the uplands guarantee the survival of all the other major economic sectors – agriculture, tourism and manufacture.

Timber production is being gradually phased out in favour of recreation and eco-tourism. With a population of 1.2 million and 700,000 tourists visiting Mauritius annually, the demand for leisure in natural settings will be on the increase.

All the major long-term strategies of the National Environmental Programme, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, the National Forest Policy and the Non-Sugar Sector Strategic Plan have the same long-term objective, i.e. the protection of the present resource base and its sustainable management to enhance its capability to produce goods and services for present and future generations.

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Social and cultural aspects of forests

In line with our obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity, a new draft legislation has been formulated to address the issue of intellectual property rights.

Several initiatives are being taken to give opportunities to women to play a more active role in the Forestry Sector. The Forestry Service has recently modified its scheme of service to recruit female forest staff also. Several women have already been recruited at the National Parks and Conservation Service.

Our forest ownership differs from that of other countries in the sense that there are only two types of ownership, private and public forests. There is no communal land in Mauritius and there are no communities living in or in the proximity of forests and who depend directly on the forests for their livelihood.

Traditional forest - related knowledge

5. Mauritius has an inhabited history of about 350 years only. Knowledge on medicinal plants has been obtained in this short span of time through trial and error. However, recent research and laboratory tests have confirmed the medicinal potentials of several indigenous and endemic plants of Mauritius which have been used traditionally.

The Forestry Service has carried out an inventory of all the medicinal plants of Mauritius. Some of them are highly endangered. The Government has provided one million rupees in the current budget for the propagation of those endangered plants with medicinal properties.

6. A draft legislation on intellectual property rights has been prepared and sent to the State Law Office for vetting. Farmers` rights as well as indigenous rights have been addressed.

Scientific forest - related knowledge

7. The Forestry Service is a very small department with only a few university-trained technicians. It does not carry out fundamental research. However, this Service collaborates with various countries of the Southern African Developing Community (SADC) and applies research findings which are of relevance to our local context. Some research on our flora and fauna is being carried out and co-ordinated by the University of Mauritius and the Mauritius Research Council respectively.

An exercise on capacity building is being undertaken in the context of the review of the National Forest Policy and the formulation of a National Forest Programme where research needs will be identified.

Monitoring, assessment and reporting concepts, terminology and definitions

8. The National Remote Sensing Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture is operational since a few years. This Unit in collaboration with the Forestry Service has prepared maps for all the different types of forest existing in Mauritius. It has also produced updated statistics on our forest resources. This forest inventory has revealed a loss of forests during the past 10 years, especially in the privately-owned forests.

Criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management

9. Mauritius is in the process of developing its own criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management in collaboration with the FAO.

III. Preparation of the Report

This report has been prepared by technicians of the Forestry Service with inputs from other Govt. Departments and some of the major stakeholders of the Forestry Sector.