

# The last stand?

Africa's forests are being lost at an alarming rate, partly because of the demand for tropical woods on world markets – but Ghana's experience offers some valuable lessons. **Stephen Williams** reports.

**A**frican timber is an important export commodity and forex earner. This fact has led to increasing pressure on the continent's remaining forests. It is estimated that Africa loses an area of forest equivalent to the size of Belgium each year.

The World Rainforest Movement says that 80% of the world's original forests have already been logged and around 13m ha of forest cut down each year in the last decade.

Since independence, Ghana has lost huge swathes of its natural forests, but the loss is now recognised – if belatedly – and serious attempts are underway to improve matters with reforestation projects.

In March of this year, Form Ghana Ltd, working closely with its partners including Ghana's Forestry Commission, held a major conference in Accra titled "Forest for the Future – New Forests for Africa" to draw together all stakeholders. *New African* was invited to the proceedings.

It was, in many ways, an affirmation of the commitment made at the Paris COP21 in December 2015 that spelled out a target in its AFR100 declaration by 13 African countries to restore 100m ha of deforested and degraded land in Africa by 2030.

The most common pressures causing deforestation and severe forest degradation are: the need for biofuels and unsustainable fuel-wood collection; large and small-scale agriculture; unsustainable logging; mining; infrastructure projects; and increased fire incidence and intensity.

New roads can also have a small direct impact but a large indirect



effect through opening up forests to settlers, hunters (of bush meat) and agriculture. Poor forest management, destructive logging practices that degrade forests and often instigate an increasing spiral of degradation that eventually leads to deforestation.

The objective of restoring degraded land has many benefits in boosting productivity, improving food and water security, protecting biodiversity, increasing climate change resilience, reducing disaster risk and combating desertification.

One statistic published by the International Tropical Timber Organisation claims that deforestation accounts for about 18% of global greenhouse gases, more than the share of total emissions from the transportation sector – hence its global importance to climate change.

The Accra conference's keynote speaker, the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, told a personal anecdote that illustrated just how much forest Ghana had lost over the years.

Before he married in 1984, he had promised to take his fiancée to see the wonderful forests of his home country. But when he returned to Ghana with his new wife, she was to ask him: "Where are all these forests you promised to show me?"

Annan admitted to being left utterly speechless at the extent of the deforestation that had occurred.

The Accra conference included a one-day site visit to Form Ghana's Asubima plantation site, north of Kumasi, where the company is leading a reforestry initiative – on one of three leases comprising a total area of more than 18,000ha the company manages in Ghana.

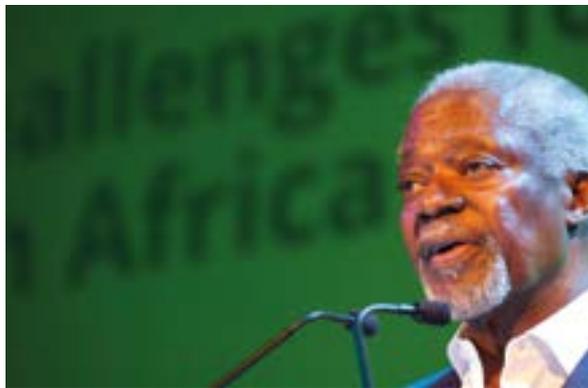
According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's 2015 assessment, Ghana has around 9.3m ha of forested land, around 41% of the total land area. Around nine million hectares are primary or otherwise naturally regenerated forest, and around 325,000ha are planted forest.

Form Ghana has a major Dutch investor, Sustainable Forestry Investments, (SFI), and has selected

teak as its primary timber crop at Asubima. It aims to utilise degraded land and the trees are established and managed on a rotation system with a continuous cycle of planting, growing and harvesting.

In general, commercial thinning takes place after eight years with a final harvest at 20 years. Teak is fast-growing and has a high value. Much of the timber is exported to Asia.

In January 2016, the company



Kofi Annan, a keynote speaker at the Forests for Africa Forum

completed a harvest of 3,000m<sup>3</sup> of quality teak from the Asubima Forest Reserve, the first in Ghana to be awarded an FSC certificate for Responsible Forest Management.

Within the forest reserves are planted indigenous tree species, accounting for a minimum of 10% of all the trees, and all the remaining natural forest is protected.

On the visit, we observed the special attention given to the rivers within the reserve. Thirty metres either side of the waterways is dedicated to indigenous trees, creating buffer zones that play an important role in protecting biodiversity and regulating evaporation and rainfall.

Another important policy that Form Ghana has adopted has been to encourage farmers living around the forest to intercrop among the young trees.

The ownership of the Ghanaian forest areas is divided among public land, stool land (i.e. traditional leaders' land), family land and private land. However, the management of all forest resources (including timber harvesting rights)

is administered by the Forestry Commission on behalf of the owners of the land.

Form Ghana leases land from the Ghanaian government that in turn manages the land on behalf of traditional leaders.

According to the International Tropical Timber Organisation's 2015 figures, in 2014 the Ghanaian industry exported more than \$367m of lumber to world markets (including overland to neighbouring African countries).

Samuel K. Nketiah of the Ghana branch of Tropenbos International, told this magazine that he believes that practically all the timber exported is legally logged, but for every three legal logs being felled and exported, two illegal logs were being felled, destined for local sawmills and producing wood products for the domestic market.

Government is clearly concerned at the extent of illegal logging, which includes the timber destined for use as firewood and charcoal. Countering the worrying statistics, Mahama Ayoriga, Ghana's Minister of Environment, Science and Technology, announced to the Accra conference a new policy that will see every school child in Ghana planting at least one tree each year.

Ghana may not be Africa's biggest timber exporter, nor possess the largest areas of forests – that privilege goes to the countries of the Congo Basin – but Ghana's timber industry employs up to a million people in some capacity, and timber and forestry is hugely important to Ghana's economy. With forests covering almost a third of the West African country's total area, timber was, at one point, the most valuable export after cocoa and gold – although it has now been overtaken by tourism and other services.

Yet, it continues to play a vital part in the country's overseas trade, and Ghana is recognised as one of the most advanced of tropical African countries in established forest policies, legislation, forest inventory, management and planning. Many African countries could learn from the experience of Ghana in how to exploit this valuable commodity.

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