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*On behalf of Sedgfield
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**Forestry trees vs
natural vegetation**
The peaceful rhythm of
Sedgfield has recently been
disturbed by the continuous
buzz of chainsaws against
Cloud 9 dune, much to the
displeasure of the townsfolk.

There has been a lot of speculation as to why the trees are being cleared, even that it is for informal housing. But the truth is, that it is private land and that directives have been issued to all landowners who are non-compliant, to remove listed invasive plant species to comply with the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act. This is also a prescribed fire risk management action to reduce the bio-fuel loads.

This was a joint enforcement operation by the National Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment, Knysna Municipality and SANParks that resulted in the issuing of notices. The dune will not be replanted with forestry species and the indigenous vegetation will return with subsequent follow up operations as per the directives issued. There was a fully informative article in the Edge on 21 May this year which gave all the legislative requirements for invasive alien plants.

We live in a region abundant in trees, home to a diverse range of native species thriving in natural forests—ecosystems that evolve with little to no human interference. Alongside these, there are planted or managed forests, carefully cultivated through human efforts.

What are natural forests?

Natural forests are ecosystems teeming with a rich variety of trees, shrubs, and plants that thrive without significant human intervention. Their defining features include:

- **Biodiversity:** These forests support a vast range of plant and animal life, including rare and endangered species.
- **Ecosystem Services:** They contribute essential environmental benefits, such as cleansing the air and water, capturing carbon, and supplying resources like food, fuel, and medicinal plants.
- **Natural Succession:** Through cycles of competition, disease, and natural disturbances, these forests continuously regenerate and evolve.
- **Soil Health:** By breaking down organic matter, they enrich the soil and promote healthy nutrient cycling.

What are planted forests?

Planted forests are intentionally developed to serve specific goals, such as timber production, ecological restoration using indigenous or endemic species, or broader environmental protection. Their key characteristics include:

- **Monoculture vs. Polyculture:** These forests often feature a single tree species (monoculture) to improve economic efficiency, unlike natural forests that support diverse species (polyculture).
- **Active Management:** Planted forests are carefully maintained to meet defined objectives—whether maximising timber yields, restoring ecosystems, or boosting biodiversity.
- **Economic Drivers:** The establishment of these forests is frequently guided by commercial interests, supplying timber and wood products, though sometimes at the cost of ecological balance.
- **Shorter Growth Cycles:** Unlike the slow, natural development of indigenous forests, planted forests follow shorter rotation cycles aligned with production schedules.

When comparing natural and planted forests, biodiversity stands out as a defining difference. Natural forests typically host greater species diversity and ecological complexity. Even when planted forests aim to support biodiversity, they often struggle to replicate the full depth of natural ecosystems—meaning it can take a long time for areas like dunes to regain their original, multifaceted ecological functions. Both natural and planted forests offer vital environmental benefits, though they differ in impact and scale. While young, planted forests absorb carbon rapidly during their growth, mature natural forests—with their expansive canopies and complex ecosystems—hold a far greater capacity for long-term carbon storage.

The impact of forests on local communities

Forests play a significant role in shaping the lives and well-being of nearby communities.

Local populations often have deep cultural, recreational, and spiritual connections to their surrounding natural forests.

Planted forests contribute economically by generating employment in industries such as timber and paper production. However, they can also cause land-use disputes—especially when local communities lose access to land or resources, or face displacement. Additionally, when forestry tree species spread beyond designated areas, they do become invasive, disrupting the balance of nearby natural ecosystems.

Conclusion

The discussion about natural and planted forests is complex, with both having benefits and drawbacks. Natural forests support biodiversity and cultural ties, while planted forests can help the economy and restoration projects. Finding a balance between protecting natural forests and using planted ones is important for sustainable development.

Understanding the differences helps in making better decisions for conservation, restoration, and economic growth. Considering both types of forests can help create a sustainable future for the planet and its people.