

SANParks employs Loggers for bio diversity social projects

South African National Parks (SANParks), a global leader in conservation has prioritised the control of invasive alien plant species due to their considerable impact on biodiversity and water security. The Biodiversity Social Project (BSP) Unit within SANParks undertakes this programme, published as the Alien and Invasive Species regulations in terms of section 97(1) of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, 2004 (Act No. 10 of 2004).

SANParks, in addition to its normal conservation mandates, has been appointed as the Implementing Agent for one of the Department of Environmental Affairs' Value-Added Industries projects; the Eco-Furniture Programme (EFP). The EFP offers a unique social investment project which has the positive spin-off of becoming a sustainable method for job-creation, turning a negative into a positive.

“The EFP is a collaboration between the Department of Environmental Affairs, the Jobs Fund, the National Department of Basic Education and SANParks,” says Benneli van der Walt, the Education and Awareness Officer for SANParks' BSP Unit. “This means that we, as the BSP, will work alongside personnel of the “Working for Water” programme in harvesting, extracting and beneficiating timber sourced from alien vegetation.”

According to Benneli, invasive alien plant species (IAPS) are found in most of the national parks under SANParks' management and on both municipal and private land, adjacent to SANParks. Blue Gum, Poplar and Pine trees are felled, extracted and transported to any one of seven factories that are situated near Heidelberg, Ga Rankuwa north of Pretoria, Graskop, Durban, George, Albasini and Ficksburg. These factories receive the invasive alien logs where they are processed in a wet mill into planks before being processed into usable products.

“Our first priority regarding products made from the alien timber is to fulfill the current orders of school desks for the Department of Basic Education,” Benneli adds. “In total the EFP has





Technical and Support Manager for the Eco Furniture Programme of the BSP, Morné Crous with Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Kobus van Niekerk.



Bell Logger operator, Siphon Chauke (seated) and Katlego Dichabe.

delivered approximately 200 000 double-combination desks in the Eastern Cape and North West provinces.

One of the BSP's Eco Furniture factories, is situated near Graskop in Mpumalanga, which along with neighbouring Sabie, is an important timber growing area. The EFP factory works in partnership with Bedrock MTO to extract 'escaped' alien timber on the edge of the plantations.

Timber extracting and handling is however not a simple task as wild timber does not grow uniformly and is, mostly, difficult to handle. Soon after the factories were founded in 2012 and timber was sourced, the BSP management team realised that proper timber handling equipment was necessary to ensure the smooth running of the production process.

"Accessing invasive timber requires proper timber handling equipment" says Morné Crous, the Technical and Support Manager for the Eco Furniture Programme of the BSP. "We did a need analysis of what equipment was needed by our harvesting and extraction teams as well as at the factories, and issued an open tender for the supply and delivery of timber handling equipment. Through the tender process, Bell was awarded the tender for the supply and delivery of 10 Bell Loggers."

The machine in question was the Bell 225A Crank Boom Logger and 10 of these machines were delivered to the BSP in 2014. They were distributed to the six factories and various harvesting teams.

"The Bell Loggers have certainly improved productivity wherever they are deployed for in-field extraction, loading at roadside depots and unloading trucks at our factories," Morné says. "We've been impressed by the tight turning circles and maneuverability that the three-wheeler design offers, their handling of heavy timber and their low fuel burn."

As part of the tender, the BSP has made use of Bell Equipment's specialist trainers to train their operators and are in the process of committing to a maintenance agreement with the company. Due to Bell Equipment's large footprint across South Africa, it is seen as a logical step as most areas where the Bell Loggers are deployed are within easy reach of a Bell Equipment Customer Service Centre or depot.

"The use of Loggers is ensuring that the feedstock of timber to our plants is kept constant and with that assurance we're now looking to expand the range of products we can manufacture to include furniture required by government, educational toys and coffins," Morné says.

SANParks' BSP undertakes these projects in order to ensure far wider positive consequences than merely eradicating alien vegetation. By adding value to the cleared biomass, more people will get much needed jobs, receive accredited training and acquire business skills through SMME development opportunities.