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Position on Harvesting Hardwood Timber in the north-eastern regions of Namibia

The Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE) is deeply concerned about the current commercial harvesting of slow-growing hardwood trees in the north east of Namibia (mainly Kavango East and West, northern Otjozondjupa and Zambezi). Because of our dry climate, these woodlands are marginal and therefore reproduce and grow too slowly for viable sustainable commercial use. These woodlands are nonetheless extremely important at local and landscape scales for the subsistence livelihoods of local communities, and for the wildlife and other biodiversity that use these areas. The on-going deforestation in Namibia led the World Economic Forum to downgrade Namibia in its Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017. Tourism is the second most important contributor to the national economy, currently the only growing sector and an important creator of jobs. The destruction of our remaining woodlands is therefore of national concern on many fronts.

Woodlands are important mitigators of climate change. Australia plans to plant a billion trees in the next 30 years to help mitigate the impact of climate change. Namibia is stripping its landscape of hardwood and other trees. Yet Namibia is seeking funds from the Green Climate Fund for climate adaptation and mitigation. If Namibia is serious about addressing climate change impacts, then it needs to start at home with commitments towards protecting its own climate mitigating ecosystems. It is cynical to expect the global community to support our climate adaptation and mitigation plans if we do not have the political will to do something as simple as protect our woodlands.

To add insult to injury, the true value of Namibia's timber is not being realised by Namibians. Namibian harvesters are either just squaring the logs or cutting them into planks, thereby cynically "adding value" – but this adds no value to the timber, so we are effectively selling it raw. Chinese nationals are purchasing this timber at ridiculously low prices and are making enormous profit after exporting it, for the Asian production and selling of expensive furniture, wood veneer and other goods. As this industry is inherently unsustainable in Namibia, this situation equates to us practically giving away precious timber in return for the long-term destruction of woodlands that provide important ecosystem and climate mitigation services.

The value of these woodlands to Namibia include the following:

- Providing ecosystem services to people, including wild food plants, medicinal plants, timber for household construction and plant products used for household implements;
- Providing habitat to a wide range of plant and animal species;
- Providing vital corridors and connectivity for wildlife across landscapes – the entire five-nation Kavango-Zambezi (KAZA) Trans-frontier programme is dependent on connectivity;
- Protecting soils from erosion;
- Enhancing water penetration;
- Moderating climate, which is particularly important at this time as we face the impacts of climate change;

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- Providing a landscape that is attractive to tourists, particularly in the KAZA Trans-frontier Conservation Area where Namibia has made an international commitment.

Much of the current timber exploitation is done under the guise of clearing land for agricultural purposes. The clearing of woodland for the Liselo Green Scheme created a cover for the company which had the contract to clear the woodland, to harvest trees beyond the boundary of this scheme. Forestry permits were used to launder other timber harvested from the State Forest and from other areas. It has subsequently emerged that a far greater number of slow-growing hardwood trees, as many as 60,000 according to an estimate by the Minister of Environment and Tourism, were illegally harvested in the area south of Rundu and west of the Khaudum National Park where small scale farms were established. In both instances, harvesting permits were issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry but without the proponents having obtained Environmental Clearance Certificates for this listed activity in terms of the Environmental Management Act of 2007. These timber harvesting companies were thus operating illegally. Despite claims by Minister Alpheus !Naruseb of Agriculture, Water and Forestry that his ministry has been working quietly to address the problem, we see no evidence of this. Indeed, the opposite seems to apply – he and his ministry do not appear to have the will, commitment, ideas or capacity to close these loopholes and enforce relevant legislation to protect woodlands and hardwood trees in Namibia. The Directorate of Forestry (DoF), which has the mandate to control timber harvesting, is severely under-funded and poorly supported by its Ministry. Harvest quotas have thus been granted without DoF field assessments. Transport and marketing permits for timber also seem to be routinely granted without any physical inspections by DoF due to a lack of staff and transport.

To remedy this situation and ensure that similar problems do not arise in future, the Namibian Chamber of Environment recommends the following:

1. **No commercial harvesting of timber should be permitted**, unless under exceptional circumstances and only after thorough resource assessment and determination of sustainable harvest, and only if the timber will be used for significant value addition in Namibia (i.e. as furniture or other goods). **Raw Namibian timber (round and squared logs and planks) should not be allowed to be exported.**
2. The woodlands in the north east should be managed and protected in accordance with their value at local and landscape levels. **Local communities should be permitted to use woodlands on a sustainable, small scale basis to support local livelihoods.** Any trade from local use (craft, furniture) should be for finished products, not raw timber.
3. **The Zambezi / Caprivi State Forest and other woodlands identified as critical wildlife corridors within the Kavango-Zambezi (KAZA) Trans-frontier Conservation Area must be strictly protected in law**, with no clearing allowed for any purposes.
4. Land allocated for farming in woodland ecosystems **must only be permitted for a maximum of 5-hectare plots at a time**, for specific agricultural projects. Farmers wishing to expand their plots must provide evidence of commercial viability of the plots they already farm. If farming is found to be unviable, no further plots should be granted. This will prevent agricultural “projects” being used as cover solely for the purpose of timber harvesting without any long-term agricultural investment, development and sustainability.

Namibia cannot afford to lose its valuable woodland habitat and should not allow foreign nationals to benefit disproportionately through the unsustainable use of its natural resources. The Namibian Chamber of Environment fully supports the leadership provided by Minister Pohamba Shifeta of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to protect and sustainably manage Namibia’s woodland ecosystems. The NCE hereby again extends an offer of support to the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry, to work with them, together the NCE members and other non-governmental stakeholders and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, to collectively protect Namibia’s woodland ecosystems.