

Eco-friendly charcoal production to boost SA's water security

The global outcry against the use of braai charcoal produced from rainforest trees, which leads to devastating forest degradation primarily in South American and African countries, is boosting the demand and production of eco-friendly charcoal certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).



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The eco-friendly charcoal is made from ideally suited hardwood invasive alien plant species in southern Africa.

According to the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), invasive alien plant (IAP) species cover at least 10 million hectares of land in South Africa and are responsible for taking an estimated 6% of the country's freshwater annually – about 3.3 million m³.

Removing invasive species has been a DEFF Working for Water programme since 1995 at a current cost of about R1.8bn per year, but the programme needs added impetus to deliver significant value to all stakeholders, from local communities to the country as a whole.

Boosting production

On the hills of the Eastern Cape, about 30km from Matatiele, a consortium of seven small businesses are building an eco-friendly charcoal production business, for the first time on tribal communal land in South Africa.

SMMEs include

- Emabhaceni Development & Nature Solutions and Sivuyise Trading Enterprise from Colana;
- Mosia Heso Trading Enterprise and Mtumtum Enterprise from Madlangala;
- Mandilam from Mvenyane;
- Morumotsho Charcoal Production from Nkasela;
- Eco-char from Hebron; and

- Mrhulashe Trading Enterprise from Mngquna in the KwaBhaca area.

The FSC-certified charcoal project has a contingent of organisations behind it, managing, developing, monitoring and supporting it every step of the way.

These include:

- Avocado Vision's Green Business Value Chain (CBVC) as project managers;
- The globally renowned FSC;
- CMO Group Scheme, which works with FSC in an auditing capacity;
- Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS);
- Conservation South Africa;
- Lima Rural Development Foundation; and the
- Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries.

In September, the first restaurant-quality eco-friendly charcoal was produced in two of a planned bank of 25 kilns that will be set up in the area by the partnership of SMMEs and organisations. The wood for the charcoal is invasive biomass from the vast swathes of black and silver wattle trees that are devastating the area's water table and ecosystem.

Jules Newton, GBVC programme director, says: "Reaching the charcoal-testing stage of the process was a proud and exhilarating experience for all the project partners, and probably most particularly for the entrepreneurs. Every process is eco-responsible, from the way the invasive biomass is removed and delivered to the production site by newly trained teams of workers, to the kilns and production process.

"The investment of time and energy, finances, and learning, and the commitment to succeed by every participant has been huge throughout this journey – and producing A-grade charcoal in our pilot phase has been the encouragement we need as we tackle the next phases."

Developing, supporting SMMEs

Newton believes that a key factor contributing to the success of the project is the intense training, development and support that the SMMEs are given by all the partners throughout the processes, and more particularly by Avocado Vision. "The SMMEs are all brought into a virtual incubator by Avocado Vision, which supports the businesses throughout their growth, making sure that foundational business basics are in place, and that they're empowered to succeed in a sustainable way.

"We know there is enough invasive biomass to ensure continued charcoal production for probably decades to come, but these small businesses are gaining skills that will enable them to branch out into other business ventures should the removal and value-adding of invasive biomass no longer be viable for them," adds Newton.

GBVC is working with a total of 121 entrepreneurs and with partners, under the auspices of the DEFF, in several locations

around the country, training the SMMEs in financial and business basics, ineffective removal of invasive biomass in their communities, and in identifying and starting businesses that add value to the IAP wood – charcoal, timber, furniture, artwork, pulp, paper, firewood, mining and construction poles.

The goal is to drive a strong invasive biomass economy by boosting demand for it right through the value chain.

The next steps for team Matatiele Charcoal are already being taken. The remaining kilns are in the process of being installed or manufactured, training is continuing, and markets – local and international – for top-grade charcoal that would satisfy the most discerning braai master's every demand are actively being sought.

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