



Eco-Coffins Project



The Eco-Coffins Project was established in 2005 to address a number of issues. The first is the issue of water scarcity – South Africa is the 30th driest country in the world. According to The Water Dialogues website, the proliferation of water-heavy alien plant species plays a large role in this. The second is the high level of unemployment in the country and the final issue is the exorbitant cost of funerals, which has a devastating impact on the poor.

The project was initiated by the Invasive Alien Species Programme (IASP), a branch of the KwaZulu Natal DACE. The aim was to use the wood from invasive alien trees to build coffins which could be sold to the indigent bereaved at much lower costs than regular coffins. This would not only create jobs for unemployed people in the area, but also lower the extremely high cost of funerals.

Production began in January 2007, and the project has already manufactured 1 500 coffins and created temporary work for 68 people, which includes skills training in carpentry and health and safety in the workplace. The workshop currently produces 70 coffins a day, and has cleared approximately 200 hectares of pine and gum trees in the Howick, Pietermaritzburg area.

One of the main successes of the project has been clearing invasive alien plants, which benefits water security, productive use of land, biodiversity and fire management. However, it does

not deal with environmental projects in isolation, and seeks to have tangible social benefits through the creation of employment opportunities in the manufacturing of coffins. Thus, the project is using a problem to create a solution. The eco-coffins are sold at roughly R300-R450, and R1 990 for a casket; compared to normal coffins, which cost R2 000-R3 000, and up to R10 000 for a casket.

The project was started with funding from the IASP and World Bank, and in partnership with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), a UK-based secular body that aims to encourage religious leaders to develop their own environmental programmes in their countries. ARC also advised the group on how to involve local faith-based organisations and persuade them to buy into this concept.

Currently the project is battling to break into the coffins market, which is extremely competitive. However, it projects that, when working at full capacity, it will be able to manufacture approximately 13 200 coffins per year, and be financially self-sustaining. Because it is still in the early stages, it is difficult to predict its future. However, as stated by the Impumelelo evaluator, "the goals of this project, ie. removing invasive species and providing low-cost coffins, are certainly significant in the South African context".



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