

Columbit spekboom

project grows



Carbon footprint has become the buzz phrase of late, even at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 17) held in Durban at the end of 2011, but this is nothing new to Columbit, which has over several years slowly, but steadily built a reputation of caring for the environment by taking ownership of the carbon they create.

The company launched its environmental carbon off-setting initiative in 2009, planting spekboom in Groenefontein Nature Reserve, near Calitzdorp in association with the then Department of Water Affairs (now the Department of Environmental Affairs)

and Cape Nature to off-set the carbon created by the corks they sell.

After establishing Columbit's carbon footprint for Scope 1 and 2 emissions in December 2009, the company implemented procedures to measure and reduce energy consumption and to improve recycling. With these new policies in place, they approached their suppliers to find out what they, in turn, were doing in terms of reducing their emissions and responsible environmental actions – an action which has spiralled into a flourishing project which reached across all suppliers and products.



The Governments' role

About 800 000 hectares of land have been seriously degraded by unsustainable farming practices in the Eastern Cape over the past century. This has resulted in a considerable loss of carbon from plants and soils.

During an interview with Dr Christo Marais; head of operations of the Department of Environment Affairs Natural Resource Management Programmes, we learned that the restoration of degraded thicket using the indigenous spekboom tree (*Portulacaria afra*) results in the rapid return of carbon to the ecosystem.

"An interesting and fascinating feature of the spekboom is that in wet conditions it uses the same photosynthetic system as rainforest vegetation and in dry conditions it switches to a system used by desert plants. Flexible photosynthesis enables it to grow and capture carbon much faster than other plants that occur naturally in semi-arid environments.

This 'captured' carbon can be sold on international markets which are growing rapidly. This concept emerged as a result of efforts to reduce concentrations of carbon-dioxide in the atmosphere to combat global warming and climate change. The opportunity therefore exists to restore thicket and generate a new source of income for rural communities.

There are hundreds of thousands of hectares of degraded subtropical thicket, and there is consequently no shortage of land. In addition to income stream generation, the opportunity exists to create tens of thousands of jobs because the restoration process is labour intensive. The restoration would also improve the conservation status of the land by improving soil quality, enhance infiltration, reduce sediments and erosion; resulting in the re-establishment of biodiversity and improved watershed services." says Dr Marais.

The Department of Environmental Affairs in partnership with the Development Bank of Southern Africa, South African National Parks, Eastern Cape Parks Tourism Authority with the support of private sector companies have registered a carbon sequestration project (to create sellable carbon credits) under the voluntary carbon standard mechanism; in order to unlock international funding for the sequestration of carbon.

To capitalise on the above opportunities, the Subtropical Thicket Restoration Project (STRP) was launched by the then Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) in January 2004. The project now runs under the Natural Resources Management programmes of the Department of Environmental Affairs and aims to:

- Promote rural development and job creation for resource poor communities
- determine the most effective way of maximising carbon return in degraded landscapes
- promote a return to biodiversity
- develop strategies for the sustainable use of restored thicket by rural communities
- facilitate the private sector's involvement in large scale restoration.

Dr Marais pointed out that over 2 600 hectares of the Eastern Cape had been planted under this programme, providing employment for hundreds of people by the end of August 2011 and this project has the potential to create a new rural economy in the Eastern Cape.

Joining hands

In May 2008; when Bridget Davidtsh, Columbit's marketing manager started to work on good business practices, the



Columbit and it's been going extremely well. Now we are looking for 10 000 small 'Columbit's across the wine industry to reduce their carbon footprint. There's a lot that people can do. I think companies often feel too small to make a meaningful contribution, but it's our job as Natural Resource Managers to make people aware of what we are doing and what they can do to assist in lowering the carbon overload in our atmosphere."

This is a wonderful "feel good" project for Columbit with benefits which include:

- doing the right thing for the environment
- helping to create jobs
- increasing Columbit's competitive edge

Columbit believes the future of successful business will weigh on more than selling the right products at the right prices; that business taking responsibility for its impact on the globe is essential. "Columbit is committed to enabling a greener future. Our message to customers, employees and communities is the same, Protecting the environment is the right thing to do. Our future depends on it, " ■

company joined the United Nations Global Compact Initiative. "In addition, we felt we should be doing more to reduce the company's carbon emissions and minimise our impact on the environment while giving something back to our customers.

I discussed these ideas with Tony Haughton, Columbit Group CEO, who told me of the spekboom. During my research, I was amazed to find out that the government had spent a fortune on researching the biodiversity restoring, carbon capturing abilities of the spekboom in degraded semi-arid areas and immediately understood what amazing remarkable plant the spekboom is and immediately saw opportunities for Columbit's involvement.

After this discussion, I found research scientist Mike Powell, who was busy with his Masters thesis and he put me in touch with Dr Marais. While Christo and I were negotiating the detail for Columbit to be involved in funding the planting of spekboom, we planted a small spekboom nursery with Liellenfontein Vine Growers in Wellington for the launch of our project in January 2009," says Bridget.

Dr Marais adds from his side, "When Bridget made contact with me explaining Columbit's desire to get involved in planting spekboom to reduce their own carbon footprint, I first wondered how they would benefit from such a project. And then it hit me. By getting involved in such a programme, you immediately create and increase your competitive edge, as well as lower your risk. And, by doing this, they would also create job opportunities. We've been doing this since 2009 with

Counting carbon 2011 / How many spekboom have been planted?

Columbit corks	Columbit filtration	Columbit barrels	Columbit screwcaps	Columbit capsules
Cork sales have contributed to the planting of 51 326 spekboom or 21 ha	Sales of Pall filtration media have contributed to the planting of 7 922 spekboom or 3 ha	Barrel sales – planting of 6 728 Spekboom or 2.7 ha	Screwcap sales – 35 235 Spekboom or 14 ha	Capsule sales have contributed to the planting of 20 000 Spekboom or 8 ha

Working days created through the partnership with The Department of Environmental Affairs:

Columbit corks	Columbit filtration	Columbit barrels	Columbit screwcaps	Columbit capsules
1006 days	155 days	132 days	691 days	196 days