

The John Maytham Show

Tuesday 30 August, 2016

On Tuesday, 30 August 2016, CapeTalk radio host **John Maytham** addressed the felling of trees in the Tokai Plantation. He spoke to **Gavin Bell**, Table Mountain National Park's Area Manager (South).

CapeTalk's website pulled three of Bell's quotes:

"MTO is a commercial plantation and they purchased those pines from the Department of Forestry, and they are harvesting those plantations in terms of the conditions or the lease."

"They have a schedule for clearing, and the fires accelerated clearing. They started in the upper Tokai areas...they are ahead of schedule and are now moving into the rest of Tokai and Cecelia forest to complete their harvesting schedule."

"Pines have always been coming down there for years, and years and years. For over one hundred years the pines have been sold...and it is public knowledge."

Gavin Bell, Area Manager SANParks

Rush transcript

Interviewer: John Maytham (JM)

Interviewee: Gavin Bell (GB)

Plus: Open line

JM: This is...the most recent one is from Gail and it came in a couple of seconds ago.

"I've just driven past my favourite walking spot and seen that the Tokai Lower Plantation is closed off and they're preparing to fell the beautiful pines that give us all so much enjoyment and much-needed shade."

Not all of us. I don't like those pines. I'm entirely comfortable seeing them going. I've been on record saying this before so let me not try and hide the fact that that is my view. But I'm just making the point that not everybody supports the pines. But I appreciate, Gail, that you do.

"This is so sad and it seems SANParks are not willing to engage with the public or give any clarity as to why they have ignored or altered the Tokai-Cecelia Management Framework."

I got a call yesterday saying that this was about to happen – that Table Mountain National Park was going to ignore the Framework and going to ignore a commitment made in a public meeting a couple of weeks ago. I said we would follow up today and that's what we do now with the Area Manager (South) for TMNP, Gavin Bell.

Gavin, good afternoon.

GB: Afternoon John.

JM: You have started felling or the contractor has started felling?

GB: Correct. MTO Forestry commenced their felling. That's confirmed.

JM: And is that an abridgement of the Tokai-Cecelia Forest Management Plan as committed to by Table Mountain National Park?

GB: No, the felling is taking place in terms of the lease that MTO Forestry has got. MTO Forestry is a commercial venture and they...it's a commercial plantation. They purchased those pines from the Department of Forestry and they are harvesting those plantations in terms of conditions of the lease.

JM: Entirely of their own volition, with absolutely no input from Table Mountain National Park?

GB: No, they need...you know, in terms of the lease, John, there's a lessee and a lessor. So SANParks have been assigned that lease and we need to work together with them in terms of any contract. So they have a schedule for clearing.

The fire has accelerated the clearing so they started in the burnt areas in Upper Tokai and the whole schedule's been accelerated because the whole mountain surface burnt and they had to remove that all.

So they're ahead of schedule and they now have moved...they're moving into the rest of Tokai and Cecelia to complete their harvesting schedule.

JM: Gavin, I've been copied in on some correspondence where I am told that TMO (sic) told the person who sent me the e-mails that they are taking the timing of this entirely from Table Mountain National Park – that they are felling according to your dictates, not according to theirs.

GB: Well, it's in terms of the lease, John. There's contracts and conditions and sections of the lease that refer to the scheduling and the clearing. Both parties need to work around that. So that's what we've been doing.

Yes, I've just actually listened to the clip where you interviewed me three months ago and you asked me if the felling in Lower Tokai was going to take place in 2024 and I said "No, it's been brought forward" and you said "Six to 12 months' time possibly?" and I said "Yes, that's exactly what is possible".

And they've had to bring their schedule forward and we've worked with them. We've worked with them – they're a lessee and we've worked together and that's what they've done.

JM: At the very least, what we've got here is a significant breakdown in trust, because I've had probably 35 e-mails from people who use that recreation area. There were letters in both the Independent newspapers today – the Times and the Argus – suggesting that this is something that Table Mountain National Park is driving and that it is a deliberate moving away from commitments

made to the local community and moving away without proper consultation and without following due procedures.

And I'm already getting e-mails and SMSs from people reaffirming that belief – that they simply don't believe what you're telling me.

GB: Well, the engagement and the commitment has always been there – that the pines are coming down, John. They've been coming down for years and years and years – in actual fact, for over 100 years they've been sold; it's a commercial plantation – so that's always been public knowledge.

Every year, they remove blocks and we put up the compartments...the schedule that they're doing for that year with the maps. We put out press releases. It's no different. We've done that this year, so the engagement that's being referred to has taken place when we develop our Park Management Plan through a full public process with the public of our country. In developing a Management Plan, that's done.

And the Management Framework for Tokai-Cecelia was also a full public process, so a full engagement was done. The good news is that we are resuming that Management Framework. It's up for review next year and we will do that through a public process and we will engage again as we've done with both of the other processes.

JM: From one of the e-mails:

"How can you reconcile a totally treeless Lower Tokai Park by the end of this year with the terms of the Tokai-Cecelia Management Plan which compels you to ensure that there are adequate shaded areas for community recreational use both in transitional zones and along the perimeter path?"

GB: Okay John, so obviously the fire brought that all...accelerated that and brought that ahead of schedule, so...

JM: But Gavin, can I come in there and say what happens further up the mountain needn't necessarily impact...the fact that those trees have been felled because of the fire surely doesn't imply automatically that the trees in the Lower Tokai area need to be felled now rather than in 2018 or 2020?

GB: Well, that's MTO Forestry – that came and discussed with us because they've got issues they need to deal with. For example, a sawmill's closing down, operational challenges, viability of plantations as well as timber volumes...shrinkages of timber volumes.

So they've taken that all into account, discussed it with us and, in terms of viability, they're wanting to remove and accelerate the clearing. And that's exactly what they're doing.

JM: Again I put to you what has been put to me. I have no insider knowledge of this at all. I haven't been part of the process.

"MTO's General Manager Irvine Kanyemba has confirmed in separate correspondence attached..." (and I read it) "...with me that the felling schedule in Lower Tokai is actually

driven by South African National Parks and that they're merely following through on SANParks' instruction to harvest all remaining pines in Lower Tokai by the end of this year."

Which is diametrically opposite to what you're telling me...is that they have taken a commercial decision...they need the revenue so they're bringing the trees down now.

GB: Ja, I'm not too sure about the revenue they require, but we have met with them...we've engaged with them and that's the result; accelerated clearing schedule is the result.

And your question previously is "What shade is there going to be for users?" And there are alternatives. We've identified alternatives along the Green Belt. Our picnic site in Tokai – the pines aren't being felled there. We're making the Arboretum safer so we want to get that open after the fires too. So there's going to be shaded walks there. And then there's a number of parks in the area with shade as well.

In actual fact, in Lower Tokai next to the Pony Club area, there's a shaded pine area there.

So there are a number of alternatives. We're also looking at shade structures...in the Lower Tokai – to put up shade structures, viewing platforms for security which will be elevated and there'll be shade under there. So we are looking at a whole lot of alternatives for providing shade.

JM: That's Gavin Bell, Area Manager (South) Table Mountain National Park. Gavin, thank you very much.

Open Line

JM: Okay, Clive in Tokai. Hullo.

Clive: Hi...ja, hi John. Umm...I'm actually on the wrong side of the fence. I started walking my dog at seven o'clock this morning and I'm pretty outraged by this military operation that started at eight o'clock, quite surreptitiously by Parks Board, and I've refused to leave. I'm on the wrong side of the fence.

Parks Board have tried to evict me. They even had the local police here and the police have said that I'm quite within my rights because I wasn't trespassing at the time. And I'm actually quite outraged that this has happened so deviously today. I mean, I'm talking to lots of neighbours here.

The neighbours weren't informed until late last night and there was a whole public-participation process at the start up three months ago and we...y'know, we just thought that we were busy negotiating in good faith with MTO and with SANParks and I just felt that it's outrageous that they've just sprung this on us so quickly – overnight.

JM: Ja, Clive...if they have sprung it on you overnight, then that is problematic. Things need to be done fairly. But I really do struggle to understand why so many people are so attached to pine trees when there are so many other areas, very close by, where you can walk in beautiful shade, amongst indigenous trees along safe and winding paths with babbling brooks next to them. I don't get it.

Clive: Well, you say that. I mean I've been walking here for ten years and I've been to your other areas that you're talking about and this is special and it's beautiful and.... The problem is that Parks Board keep changing their tune as to why they're chopping it down, and what's gonna happen

and...I've got a plan in front of me that comes from the Parks Board and it shows this area as having transitional planting. Now, what that means is that you plant the fynbos in amongst the pines and then you let it grow and then you slowly take the trees out. These trees were only scheduled to come out in 2025.

JM: But then there was a fire which changed things.

Clive: Umm, I don't think the fire's a valid argument. I think it's just an excuse that Parks Board are using. So...and I don't think that they're acting in good faith.

JM: Why would they be acting in bad faith? What is in it for Parks Board to annoy some of the good burghers of the Tokai area in the way that they seem to be doing?

Clive: Well, I'll tell you what is the main reason. I don't think they want the responsibility of maintaining the forest, because once they let it grow to fynbos...and I...the fynbos here, I'm scared to walk into – it's seven-foot tall, so y'know...it can harbour all sorts of things, but...

JM: Shouldn't your push then be to get them to make the tall fynbos short fynbos and safe to walk in?

Clive: But they don't do that. I mean...obviously, we don't want to talk about the terrible incident that happened here four months ago, but I have not seen one forestry person in that forest until today and where I've been harassed by about ten people that are trying to physically throw me out of the forest. So...

JM: But again, the issue of the towers...observation towers, where people will be up in those observation towers with binoculars, scanning the area looking for people who appear to be up to no good. It sounds to me as if they are taking safety issues...y'know, maybe that is the wrong approach, but it looks...it sounds to me as if they're acknowledging the safety issue and trying to do something about it.

Clive: Well, I think they're doing that up on...at the top end of the mountain where there's been sort of security issues with people coming over the mountain. I don't think that that's scheduled for the lower...my whole gripe is if they say there's a plan and they show me a plan that shows transitional planting and lovely shady walks and that, then they need to honour that.

And I mean I'm standing here looking at these trees that have been here for three, four years...they look like bonsais. They've been planted and they've never been watered...they've never been cared for and they just haven't grown – half of them are dead so, y'know, if SANParks are going to paint a picture then they should be beholden to that picture – but they're not.

JM: Pictures change and pictures should be allowed to change. Whether this one has changed according to due process...well, that is a debate.

Mark in the City Bowl, hullo.

Mark: Ja, hi John. Umm...ja, I feel...y'know, SANParks has lost a lot of faith. I mean, years ago there was a huge campaign. I mean, if you drive around Cape Town, you'll see the amount of shaded forest area is absolutely tiny. I know it's less than one...far less than one percent and the shaded areas...I

mean the natural indigenous forest – the carrying capacity like in Orangekloof...a small amount of people can go through there.

The natural indigenous forest is in ravines. It's tiny – it just can never handle the bulk of the people that would want to go walk through a forest. I mean pine forests...although there are a lot of people and I do understand....

JM: Mark, I run and walk through the Constantia Green Belt and there are kilometre upon kilometre upon kilometre of walks and I hardly ever see anybody. The Alphen walk – that is quite well populated but all of those other walks in the Constantia Green Belt...I often walk for 45 minutes without seeing another soul.

Mark: Ja, I know, I don't think you'd feel so good if the whole of Cape Town started heading off there. At the moment there's a sense of...a sense of serenity and peace there and I know the area well. It's absolutely magnificent. You can walk in there and you can literally hear your heart beat. It's wonderful. At the moment, the pine forests serve a huge purpose.

I mean, some years ago...I dunno if you remember the Shout for Shade Campaign and Urban Forest Protection Group. They appealed with SANParks to keep just a little bit of shaded area. I mean I would not want to see the whole of Cape Town trafficking through that Green Belt. At the moment, y'know, there's the Tokai forest, Cecelia, Newlands...they serve – John, they serve a very important function and I think that...

JM: People can still...Mark, people can still walk there. Once the trees have been felled, people can still walk there. I appreciate that, in summer – once it gets beyond nine o'clock, but...I drive past there regularly and there is a huge crush in the morning.

I mean, I go to my Pilates teacher is very close to there and I go to Pilates at a quarter past eight on a Friday morning and the road alongside there...there're a lot of cars and there're a lot of people walking, running...with their dogs and so on. I come out at half past nine from Pilates and that road is almost deserted. People have moved on. So, y'know, the notion that there're tens...hundreds of people walking there in the shade in the heat of summer – it's just not borne out by the facts. [Laughs] I think we need that relaxed John thing there.

Bruce in Somerset West, hello.

Bruce: Hi John. Umm...ja, I've come in a bit at the end but I think the...the problem is SANParks is damned if they do or damned if they don't. They're there to protect the local trees, so they want to take these trees out and then of course they're in trouble because they're taking the foreign trees out. So I think that they're in a very very precarious situation.

Y'know, the thing is we need to decide; do we want a water table or do we want a pretty tree? Pine trees go through obscene amounts of water. Okay, so that's the one thing. That's got to come out of somewhere and it's coming out of the ground. And then, of course, we have those kinds of issues. Umm, y'know, so I think that...ja, it is a bit of a prickly pear that they're dealing with.

And then, not this past caller but the one before there – he actually shot himself in the foot with his whole argument being invalid. He's saying the trees are not being cared for. They're dead. Well, if

they're dead, they're a fire risk. If they catch fire we've got bigger problems so, I mean, it just doesn't make sense – the stance that some of the people are taking.

JM: Bruce, appreciate your call. We'll take more on 02144605...