

Extended Abstracts

Vetiver: Responsible Application and Promotion

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Extended Abstract

Research has demonstrated the suitability of the use of vetiver grass to address many forms of environmental degradation, including agricultural contours, large-scale stabilisation and rehabilitation and mitigation of severe ground and water pollution.

Growing awareness of environmental degradation is resulting in more rigorous environmental regulations. This is the case in South Africa, where it is often required that the land be returned back as close as possible to its original natural state, the ideal state to which any disturbed land should return. Invasive alien species in South Africa threaten endangered indigenous vegetation biomes and threaten water resources. Campaigns highlighting this problem have resulted in increasing preference for the use of indigenous plant species, and there is understandable concern from many spheres regarding the utilisation of non-indigenous plant species.

The vigorous promotion of the use of vetiver grass for addressing a variety of environmental problems, particularly around the conservation of soil and water in South Africa, while having successful examples, has attracted attention from detractors, who have demonstrated situations where vetiver has not worked effectively and believe that that indigenous solutions are the better option. Investigations of these indicate that its perception as a miracle grass has resulted in poor use and application of the grass, where practitioners have believed that it can just be planted and left without prior planning or follow up. Correct advice and guidelines have assisted in eliminating such incidents.

SAVN's focus on social development utilising vetiver grass has yielded positive results. Income generation through the sale and (correctly guided) application of vetiver grass has significantly increased interest in its application, resulting in more rural areas being protected from soil erosion as well as contributing to the alleviation of rural poverty, an aspect which is often not considered by those who consider only indigenous solutions.

Responsible application and promotion, as well as a holistic and participative approach to the use of vetiver grass, in South Africa has been more effective than its promotion as cure-all/miracle grass, resulting in its endorsement by among others, the National Department of Agriculture. Responsible use includes considering alternatives such as indigenous options at one end of the scale, and hard engineered solutions, where the risk of loss of life exists, at the other end of the scale. Vetiver is a tool for addressing environmental degradation and is a vital component of any environmentalist's, extensionist, development practitioner or engineer's toolbox. Vetiver is a tool – people are the key.

Key words: Vetiver, indigenous plant, social issue, income generation, responsible utilisation sustainable agriculture

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