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African Jatropha Boom Raises Concerns

By *PETE BROWNE*

Proponents of jatropha, the plant once heralded as the future of biofuels, are running into some hurdles.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Once the darling of biofuel enthusiasts,
jatropha is raising concerns.

In a report leaked to The East African newspaper last week, Envirocare, an environmental and human rights organization, highlighted the impact of the jatropha trade in Tanzania — including concerns over the displacement of farmers, water consumption, and the substitution of food crops for biofuels.

The Envirocare report was commissioned by the European-funded African Biodiversity Network, a network of organizations working to protect biodiversity in Africa.

“Thousands of farmers in Tanzania could face eviction from their lands by multinational organizations promoting the cultivation of biofuels,” said Abdallah Mkindi, Envirocare’s environmental officer. He said water was a particularly pressing issue.

“Rivers and streams could potentially be diverted to grow biofuels,” Mr. Mkindi said. “This — especially in a country suffering a food crisis — could lead to increased conflicts over access to water.”

Indeed, of 13 potential bioenergy crops analyzed for their potential as electricity feedstocks in a study published in June in the American Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, rapeseed and jatropha were found to be the least water-efficient biofuels.

In terms of biodiesel production, jatropha had the least favorable “water footprint.”

Mr. Ruud Van Eck, the chief executive of Diligent Energy Systems, a Dutch jatropha developer working in Tanzania, is among business executives who have contested the findings on the water footprint of jatropha.

Mr. Van Eck also stated that for jatropha to be sustainable, it should not be grown in places with high rainfall, which can be used to grow food crops.

Several other European companies working to develop jatropha in Africa were identified in the Envirocare report, including the British biodiesel producer D1 Oils, Prokon of Germany, and BioShape, another Dutch company reportedly holding 81,000 hectares in Tanzania.

One Swedish organization operating on Tanzania's coast has recently pulled out of a jatropha venture, Mr. Mkindi noted, as has BP, which sold its 50 percent stake to D1 Oils for less than \$800,000.