
South Africa: Sustainability, Protected Areas, and Development

The term "sustainability", which also means "maintainability" is readily and loosely used nowadays and is often quoted as the "magic buzzword" whenever politicians and entrepreneurs alike wish to gain easy acceptance for a proposed development or programme. However, when one takes a closer look at the notion of sustainable development ("economic activity that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs") and at our track record in terms of natural resource use, the truth is that we are still very far off from achieving "sustainability".

A retrospective evaluation of conservation and sustainable development projects shows that most have not achieved successful conservation nor sustainability and do not address human needs.

At the first "Earth Summit" (Rio 92) the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, declared themselves conscious of the importance of biological diversity for evolution and for maintaining life-sustaining systems of the biosphere. Also, one of the most significant achievements of the Rio Summit was the laying down of the Precautionary Principle as a universal guideline for consideration of any action that "may" harm biological diversity!

Sadly, ten years later, at the second World Summit for Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) it was recognised that we are still failing with regard to achieving sustainability! Commitments were again made, amongst other things, to reduce biodiversity loss and reverse the current trend in natural resource degradation.

Looking at the situation at South Africa, an estimated 10% of South Africa's mammal species are threatened, 2% of our bird species, 12% of our reptile species, 16% of amphibians and 36% of our freshwater fish species. The total number of threatened plant taxa approximately doubled between 1980 and 1995 and the trend is that the topsoil continues to be lost and virgin land is subject to "development schemes" at an alarming rate. Tourism and recreation are recognised amongst the list of threats to biodiversity and wilderness! The Tourism Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme states: "In fact, it (tourism) can be compared in its deleterious impacts and environmental risks to any other major industry."

The global norm for conservation is for countries to set aside at least 10% of the land for conservation. In South Africa, about 6% of the land is formally protected for conservation purposes. However, even that approach has not gone without destruction. Examples are widespread as a historical consequence of the country's 178 national parks and reserves. As Mavuso Msimang, Chief Executive of National Parks in South Africa has written, "Most of our wilderness areas were not empty of people and the establishment of national parks often involved the dispossession, removal, exclusion and social dislocation of indigenous communities". Examples include the pastoral inhabitants of Namaqualand in the western Cape exiled from the Namakwalandse Burgersvereniging facility, several thousand victims of the Tsitsikama forestry reserves in the eastern Cape, and the vast Kruger National Park, over 2 million ha in size, which exceeds the state of Israel and was subject to several waves of removal over the past century.

The broad definition of the environment includes the natural, economic, and social and political environments in which we move and reside. The limited, unequally distributed, resources of the world cannot cope with the present globalised pattern of consumption. Policy-makers make development decisions and these are primarily driven by immediate and short term (very occasionally medium term) social, economic and/or political needs and wants. The very long term --in fact, timeless-- needs of nature, including animals, plants, soil and future generations of people, fail to be taken adequately into account.

The time is overdue for some solid commitment to the physical and biophysical environment through demonstrable application of the precautionary principle. Even within the framework of the set conservation goals, a quick look at the maps of the National Parks and other important conservation areas such as the Greater St Lucia and the Drakensberg Parks, show that development, "subdivision" and privatization have taken place at a dramatic rate over the last twenty years or so and that it has escalated beyond acceptable proportions. Moreover, "sustainability" has first to get right on the 94% of the land in South Africa that has the primary purpose of making money (including many high intensity private game reserves and lodges).

It is a moral and ethical obligation towards the next generation. They must be left with some options of their own and the present generation has not the right, nor any longer the excuse of ignorance, to deprive them any further.

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