

# ENVIRONMENT

## AFRICA THIS WEEK



### LOOK TO THE SKY FOR SOLUTIONS TO OUR WOES

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THEY say “better late than never,” and an interview on SAFM’s breakfast show on Friday had me wondering if we should speed up the use of drones or unmanned aerial vehicles to fight most of the ills we face.

Traffic violations, cable-theft, poaching, human trafficking and non-compliance with lockdown regulations are among problems we could address with little resources.

Stephen Grootes interviewed Irvin Phenyane, the chairperson of the Drone Council of SA NPC, which was launched in a webinar on July 15. Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams attended the launch.

Two years ago, my hosts in Rwanda took me on a drive to the control centre of Zipline, a US company that designs, builds and operates drones. Zipline, which also participated in the July 15 webinar, operates distribution centres in Rwanda and Ghana. In less than an hour, the team at Zipline can pack, load and dispatch emergency medical supplies to more than 25 clinics all over hilly Rwanda with the help of drones – in almost any kind of weather. A road trip that could take up to four hours, was reduced to under 30 minutes.

“Our sluggish response to global drone technology trends has put us at an economic disadvantage resulting in many lost opportunities.

“South Africa was the first country in Africa to approve drone regulations, but subsequent international investment has gone elsewhere in Africa”, Phenyane says.

Rwanda, Malawi, Kenya and Ghana are among the beneficiaries of the investment he is referring to.

They have positioned themselves to not only deliver medical supplies during the Covid-19 crisis, but to monitor compliance, deliver important messages and enhance overall safety and security for a fraction of the cost.

Here in South Africa, known for excellent policies that hardly get implemented, we spend millions on media campaigns to encourage citizens to stop the theft of electricity cables, report crime, counter poaching and so on. We deploy human resources, with guns, dogs and other expensive amenities to fight the ills. Yet we are not that effective. For instance, we have organised crime syndicates following tourists to their hotels from our airports, something drones could eradicate and boost tourism.

South African National Parks (SANParks), as far back as 2016, has been experimenting with drones to stop poaching, but not on the scale that it should or could have. How about tracking stolen vehicles, monitoring the movement of unsavoury characters in places where children gather to reduce the peddling of drugs? There is nothing a drone cannot help to combat; all we need is the resolve.

Perhaps the pandemic will spur us into action. The Drone Council of SA, Phenyane said, undertook to implement their Operation Catch-Up 2023, which includes speeding up the licensing, introducing new players and aligning with the rest of the continent.

Of the 73 holders of the remote operators’ certificates, 99% are white men. There will be about 20 new operators who will be incubated in the next 12 months, with 50 more to be added, if the plan succeeds.

For now, let me unreservedly add my voice to that of the Drone Council of SA to accelerate the adoption of this overdue limitless innovation. We can only win.

Kgomoeswana is author of Africa is Open for Business, media commentator and public speaker on African business affairs

## CONSERVATION



RANGER on patrol in Liuwa Plain National Park, Zambia. | MANA MEADOWS

AFRICAN Parks in Joburg has garnered a reputation for turning tragedy into triumph.

It is held in such esteem that when African game reserves need help, governments turn to the South African non-profit organisation for partnership. There are 17 parks under management in 11 countries.

It’s not just the game wildlife that benefits; so do communities through health care, jobs and education.

Zimbabwe-born Peter Fearnhead, the chief executive and co-founder of African Parks, made his first foray into conservation at the age of 13 when he developed a 809ha wildlife reserve on his school campus.

Let’s turn back the clock 20 years, when the future for wildlife seemed dire. In Chad’s Zakouma National Park 4 000 elephants were being poached, some of Malawi’s reserves had been poached out and denuded as trees were felled for charcoal. A similar saga was unfolding in many other parts of the continent.

Nowadays, the transformation can be viewed as a shining light.

Fran Read, African Parks’s global media manager, said: “We are starting to see hopeful gains through the commitment and leadership of African governments with whom we have partnered, at their invitation to implement professional park management. Over 12 000 people legally live inside Liuwa Plain National Park, in Zambia.

“If you can make conservation work in concert with communities and to their benefit, there is cause for optimism. Wildlife populations (in Liuwa) had been severely reduced, but have rebounded remarkably since 2003, when we partnered with Zambia’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife for its management.

“In 2018 TIME magazine named it one of the World’s Greatest Places.” Community development is critical to ensuring long-term sustainability, and last year, when drought ravaged Liuwa, impacting food security for people, African Parks, acting in conjunction with the Zambian government, provided maize meal to 600 of the most vulnerable families, to prevent starvation and defuse poaching.

Looking at some of the achievements in other African national parks, Read mentioned a few restorative initiatives. One of the largest inter-



CHILDREN planting a tree in Majete Wildlife Reserve, Malawi. | MARCUS WESTBERG

## Saving our wild and wide open spaces

*Wildlife environments across Africa are under constant threat from human encroachment, poaching and climate change, but a South African outfit is turning the tide. Myrtle Ryan reports*

national black rhino translocations saw several of the animals relocated from South Africa to Malawi. It was done in conjunction with the WWF Black Rhino Range Expansion Project.

(Numbers and the name of the reserve are withheld for security reasons). Five eastern black rhino were translocated from the Czech Republic (working in tandem with the European Association of Zoos) into Rwanda’s Akagera National Park; cheetah were released into Malawi’s Majete Wildlife Reserve, and some 200 buffalo into Zambia’s Bangweulu Wetlands.

Zakouma is regarded as one of the jewels in the organisation’s conservation crown. Before its invitation into Chad in 2010, poachers had devastated the park. Transformation was achieved through overhauling law enforcement, providing expert training, advanced technology, equipment and a communications network. The key, however, was winning the support of the communities. African Parks helped set up 17 schools, and Zakouma is also the largest employer in the region.

Many elephants were fitted with GPS collars and 559 elephants were counted in the 2019 census.

What is particularly impressive, is that for many years the Zakouma elephants had stopped breeding, due

to stress and poaching... a fairy-tale ending!

Fourteen-thousand northern black cranes were also counted in Zakouma by the International Crane Foundation – the highest number recorded.

During Cyclone Idai, African Parks aided the Mozambique National Institute of Disaster Management by transporting vets, 37 doctors and food by helicopter to affected areas.

Dr John Nkoundouba, working with Odzala-Kokoua National Park, in the Republic of the Congo said: “What motivated me to work here, was the critical care people need living in the remote landscape, and my deep love for nature. Humans and wildlife both need cares.”

Nkoundouba’s truck is his hospital, and at times he drives this mobile health unit more than 600km to see a single village.

“People’s lives depend on me... My goal is to reach 72 villages ensuring that at least 10 000 people get the health care they need,” he said.

Samuel Kamoto, the park manager of Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve in Malawi, said he had overseen the revitalisation of an empty forest. By 2015, after decades of poaching and poor management, there were fewer than 100 elephants and animals had been largely hunted out.

“With most of the wildlife gone, there was no reason to visit such a quiet place; no revenue was being generated, and the reserve offered little to no employment,” said Kamoto.

Then came one of the world’s largest wildlife translocations.

“By August 2017, over a two-year period, we translocated almost 500 elephants and 2 000 other animals from two other parks in Malawi.

“Due to our well-trained and equipped ranger team, poaching has

become a thing of the past; tourism has begun to increase, with visitors coming from near and far to spot the reserve’s new herd of almost 600 elephants,” said Kamoto.

“With an increase in wildlife and visitors, two tourism lodges exist; employment has increased, school scholarships are being funded, and livelihood projects are running.

“Nkhotakota is developing along a pathway of hope and possibility.

“For the first time in decades, communities are beginning to experience real benefits.”

African Parks’ footprint can also be seen in Angola, Zimbabwe, the DRC, the Central African Republic and Benin. It signed a new 25-year agreement with the CAR for the management of its Chinko reserve, with the mandate including expansion plans that will see 5.5 million hectares under its management.

Benin’s Pendjari National Park has the largest remaining wild ecosystem in west Africa and refuge for elephants.

Some 4 000 people live around the park and their expectations also need to be met. Through the government’s commitment, with assistance from African Parks, the employment rate has doubled and manager James Terjanian said they were establishing watering points for livestock outside the park to reduce illegal access.

Park manager of Akagera National Park in Rwanda Jes Gruner said the anti-poaching dog unit had grown with the addition of 10 puppies, which came from a cross between a tracking dog and one of the original Belgian Malinois from 2015.

“They and their handlers, have been essential in maintaining very low levels of poaching.”

With roots locally, African Parks is flying the conservation flag high.

## FOSSIL FUEL

### The Blue Economy is punted as a salvation, but at what cost?

SARDINE season in KwaZulu-Natal represents the very essence of the bounty our seas can provide. If we look after it.

Much of what happens off our shores, for so many of us, remains a mystery. Out of sight and out of mind.

But our oceans are being abused. The so-called Blue Economy, punted as our salvation, is being raped by foreign vessels and foreign fossil fuel companies, under the auspices of Operation Phakisa. It is almost as if we are not amid a global pandemic and a looming climate crisis climax.

Humans with their consumptive patterns and disregard for the fragility of our finite planet like to believe they have nothing to do with the imbalance almost as if it is someone else’s fault. Whose fault is not clear, but governments and the increasingly redundant fossil fuel industry are hell-bent on business as usual.

Total and its environmental consultants, SLR, have put out a proposal to drill 11 more gas and oil exploration wells between Cape St Francis and Mossel Bay. This is where the warm Benguela and cold Agulhas currents meet, an ecotone. The area is fundamental

to the marine biodiversity of our coastline with a marine protected area just south of the prospecting block.

This is the same crowd that has been driving exploration for oil and gas across millions of hectares of farmland in KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, Gauteng and Limpopo. There is hardly a province where the consultancy and its partners have not been active.

The World Wildlife Fund produced a fascinating Facts and Futures report on the state of South Africa’s water in 2016. We learn that more than 44% of South Africa’s rivers are critically threatened by our actions and require human-centred solutions.

We have a penchant for committees and commissions but are slow in putting plans and policies into action that treats water as a key national asset. Projects aimed at improving South Africa’s water resources and other environmental goods and services are not getting the support they deserve. The 19th Strategic Integrated Project,



known as “SIP 19: Ecological Infrastructure for Water Security” is a case in point. Its purpose is to make a significant contribution to ensuring a sustainable supply of fresh, healthy water to equitably meet South Africa’s social, economic and environmental water needs for current and future generations

Instead of safeguarding one of South Africa’s most critical water assets – the Uthukela, Umzimvubu and Umgeni water catchments – a Strategic Environmental Assessment is conducted for the Karoo Basin gas exploration.

Ban Ki-Moon, the former UN secretary general, once said: “We are the first generation that can end poverty – and the last generation to tackle climate change before it is too late.”

We spend millions on water treatment but ignore the plight of wetlands and water catchments, when nearly 80% of people in some of these catchments are unemployed and do not have access to clean water.

At Cape Town’s Voëlvele supply

dam, for instance, the purification plant was in 2006/7 costing R4.7 million a year in chemicals, needed to treat algal blooms. An investment in job creation in the wetlands of this catchment, could have substantially reduced this cost or prevented it altogether. That is 100 full-time jobs of R4 000 a month, injecting R400 000 a month into a local economy and generating multipliers that would stimulate other opportunities, not to mention educating and increasing awareness of ecosystems.

We are so fixated on creating jobs through government procurement that we ignore our own basic needs, and imperil our water sources. We have to fight our government for the right to protect and preserve our resources. The Xolobeni community in Eastern Cape had to take the minister of mineral resources to court to preserve their traditional rights to the land.

And it is not that different here than in other countries. In the US, the Dakota Access Pipeline has just been ordered to shut after indigenous people fought for years for their right to freedom from potential harm – an issue ignored by the Trump regime. It seems civil servants are seldom neither civil nor servants to people.

Closer to home, Yolanda Daniels, a domestic worker on a farm in Stellenbosch for the past 16 years, was prevented from make basic improvements to her dwelling – levelling the

floors, paving part of the outside area and installing an indoor water supply, a wash basin, a second window and a ceiling.

She received a letter from the farm manager ordering her to stop, alleging the improvements were unlawful. In effect, she was denied the right to live in a dwelling that would afford her a modicum of dignity.

The matter was taken to the Constitutional Court which ruled in her favour. The judgment opens with the plaintive words from an old man, Petros Nkosi: “The land, our purpose is the land; that is what we must achieve. The land is our whole lives; we plough it for food; we build our houses from the soil; we live on it; and we are buried in it... in everything we do, we must remember that there is only one aim and one solution and that is the land, the soil, our world.”

Clean air, clean water and clean soil, the protection of terrestrial and marine life and our ability to earn a living off it. Is it too much to ask of our elected officials to ensure these rights?

Du Toit is chief executive of African Conservation Trust, an organisation that envisages a world that is able to sustain human life with abundant natural resources, which people can use to survive and flourish. This article forms part of The Future We Want series convened by Roving Reporters. Read more at rovingreporters.co.za