Sustainability – Everyone’s Responsibility

Conservation is “the wise or sustainable use of Natural Resources.”

The word “sustainable” is bandied about in every policy, strategy and project proposal and lately used excessively in marketing. But what exactly does “sustainable” mean and how far does it reach?

The dictionary says to sustain is to “carry weight of; hold up; keep from falling or sinking; especially for a prolonged period. Related to this, “sustenance” means nourishing; nourishment; nourishing quality; subsistence; food or means of support.

We can therefore gather that sustainability means maintaining something over a prolonged period of time. Humans require food, clean water, fresh air, warm shelter and exercise to survive. According to international conventions, the supply of these necessities is a right for every man, woman and child.

Survival was the daily focus of the ancient Bushmen who once lived here - they hunted and collected from dawn to dusk, and they slept in caves. Today we still need the same inputs to survive, but especially in urban areas, we focus on money as a means of buying food, clean water and warm shelter. The quantity, quality and availability of these inputs are the measures we use to gauge our quality of life.

Each day, the aspirations of people go further beyond the mere delivery of these necessities, to the increasing luxurious delivery thereof. Waste is easier and we grow more disconnected to the supply of these basic requirements as a result. Behind this monetary system however, remains a possibly larger overall struggle to maintain these fundamental life-supporting inputs.

Swaziland as a country is smaller than Kruger National Park. From the top of Luphohlo Mountain in the far north of Millwane, you can see both South Africa and Mozambique. Having a country with limited space and resources, coupled with an unlimited growing number of people, is where all the difficulty begins. Between these distant points live 1,2 million people (1 million in 1997). If you were to meet with as many as one hundred of these people every day, it would take over 32 years to meet them all!

Each of these individuals requires clean water, food, clean air and warmth or shelter for their survival, yet there is reduced awareness of where these supplies come from, coupled with increased expectation.

Above individual rights, we have a collective duty to ensure that the link between the availability of resources and their lasting supply is not forgotten. This is where efforts such as environmental education and the National Development Strategy are so essential. The former enables better understanding of resource management and the latter places this in its economic and socio-cultural context.

There is however, one other key effort, without which all else will fail. This is commitment and discipline. To avoid the exploitation of our resources to the point where they are no longer able to support those who rely on them, is going to take real courage on the part of individuals who lead these efforts.

A Paradox – Is Today’s Sustenance Tomorrow’s Famine?
Species in Trouble (These words described in 1997)

The Kiaat tree “invangatsi” (*Pterocarpus angolensis*) is being exploited unsustainably. The attractive wood, with its characteristic tan brown and cream colouring, is very popular in the furniture and craft industries.

Formally widespread in suitable habitat throughout Swaziland, whole populations have been cut down to the point where there are few large kiaat trees left outside protected areas in the Kingdom. The kiaat population occurring on Mlilwane, some of which was hand planted in 1960’s, is probably among the largest remaining in Swaziland today.

Tourism brings with it a greater demand for local crafts, which challenges the sustainability of resources. Creative solutions, education and cost-realistic prices will need to be implemented in the craft industry to safeguard biodiversity in the future.

The Woodfuel Crisis

The hardwood trees of the Swaziland lowveld are highly prized for their value as firewood. Their dense trunks burn slowly, giving off great heat for a long time. As many rural homesteads have no access to electricity, firewood is one of the most essential inputs in their daily lives.

Hardwood trees grow very slowly, some taking well over a hundred years to reach full size. In many places in the lowveld these hardwood trees are becoming rare. A fenceline comparison between vegetation in a protected area and a neighbouring human population is a valuable eye-opener to the impact that people have on their environment.

Rural people do need firewood – a fact that no one can deny. Domestic requirements will ultimately exhaust our natural firewood resource, especially as population pressure increases. However, this will take some time and hopefully alternative sustainable energy sources will be introduced.

The challenge is that the firewood in the lowveld has become a commodity, sold cheaply to commercial butcheries and urban homes. This unsustainable accelerated consumption of a limited resource are the makings of a tragedy – the rural people will be left with no hardwood for their own domestic use, and no alternative. What will they do then? A dramatically reduced quality of life may force them to abandon their traditional home areas in favour of city slums, overburdened by influx of poverty-stricken people.

The problem is two-fold – the buyer and the seller. The urban users have alternatives, but prefer the cheaper, natural option while the rural supplier is undervaluing their resource. Although the Flora Protection Act of 2001 made it illegal to sell hardwoods, policing is ineffective. Moreover, the wood has become an income stream.

Those selling firewood today are selling their children and grandchildren’s future. They are also denuding the land, accelerating desertification and water loss, rendering their land less productive for alternative land use. Their short-term gain, is their long-term loss.

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