

Sustainable Living – True Conservation by Errol Pietersen, Kruger Park Times

Over the past month or so much has been said and written about the National Norms and Standards for the Management of Elephants in South Africa as part of the Biodiversity Act (Act 10 of 2004) which allows the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism to provide regulations for the management of elephants in national parks, provincial nature reserves and private land. According to these regulations managers of these areas can manage elephant populations within the guidelines set out in the Norms and Standards and according to the approved Management Plan for the land. This has effectively re-opened the avenue of culling as a last resort in the management of elephant populations. In extensive protected areas such as the Kruger National Park this is seen by park managers and many conservationists and public as the only practical way to regulate elephant numbers in an extensive system.

The thought of our national park authorities re-implementing culling as an elephant management tool is horrific to many and specifically to the animal rights organisations and their supporters who equate elephants to people and see culling as murder. This extreme preservationist standpoint is based mostly on emotions and lacks a dedicated and thorough study of the implications of rapidly increasing elephant populations within the confines of limited habitat. These arguments surrounding the management of elephant populations have been going on for decades, with neither side really gaining any ground, although protected area managers now have the legislation that will allow them to implement such measures if they comply with the conditions set out in the Norms and Standards.

However those opposed to the regulation of animal numbers and specifically elephant numbers, as well as wildlife managers have in fact miss-read the entire situation. Wildlife managers argue that they want to regulate numbers of elephants and other animals in order to sustain biodiversity and maintain that this cannot happen in a system that is dominated by a species with the destructive potential of elephants when occurring at high density and contained within an area, either by means of a fence or by people pressure forcing them to remain in a fixed geographical area.

Many animal rightists maintain elephants and man can co-exist harmoniously, people maintaining this are generally those living safely within cities and areas where they need not fear elephants. They most certainly are not peasants living off the land who have to compete directly with elephants and other wildlife for their very existence. If one consults rural populations in many African countries to the north of us who do share their living space with elephants outside of protected areas their resounding plea is to be rid of the elephants. To this end governments such as Mozambique have adopted a policy that all damage causing animals and particularly elephants are to be destroyed. To this end they are busy training a group of professional hunters to deal with damage causing pachyderms. Their argument being that they place the value of people above that of animals, even in some protected areas. One must also remember that it is an election year in Mozambique (municipal elections and presidential elections next year) and a great deal of canvassing and posturing will be taking place, but never the less the elephants are seen as number one enemy of rural communities.

The above being the case animal rightists will be arguing that this is all the more reason to protect our elephant populations within protected areas and wildlife managers will be arguing that they cannot do this to the detriment of the system as a whole. Both arguments are right, but both are totally missing the point. Rapidly declining biodiversity

on a regional, national or international scale is not as a result of growing elephant populations, or any other animal population for that matter, but as a direct result of the exponential increase in the human population putting unprecedented strain on all the natural systems of our planet which directly influences the survival of all other species, including our own, but yet it goes unchecked and ignored as if it does not exist.

Why do we not hear calls from conservationists and animal rightists alike to check the human population? The reason is that there is no future in it. Nobody wants to take the responsible but unpopular stance of proclaiming the negative effects of our burgeoning population. There is no future for the animal rightists for adopting such a campaign, they won't get any funding and very little support and can therefore not sustain it and as a result they simply ignore it. It is far easier to raise funds and support for Save the Elephants, Rhino, Panda, Whale or Dolphin, but it would be suicidal to proclaim the extravagant use of natural resources by man is the direct result of the threatened nature of the above species and thousands of others. In the last analysis the plight of numerous endangered species are not the issues, it is a simple matter of economics. One won't garner very much sympathy, empathy or dollars for a dung beetle, but you will for a cuddly Panda or a long-lived and intelligent whale or elephant. And with the economics and public support comes the status to be seen, quite incorrectly, as the bastions of conservation, the saviour of our beleaguered planet – utter rubbish, they are little more than jam stealers, misguiding public opinion and cashing in on the gullibility of an ill-informed public. While the true threat, ourselves, goes unchecked.

So who's responsibility is it one asks, to do something about the rapidly increasing human population and the associated poverty and disease suffered by millions of underprivileged and starving third-world rural people. Surely one would think it is a governmental task? A task involving educating the public and ensuring that through a process of education people will realise and come to accept that smaller families are actually the way to go for a better and longer life. Not in South Africa it isn't!

While expensive campaigns are being undertaken by Government to combat HIV and AIDS costing millions in an attempt to save lives, the very same government is encouraging young women, girls actually, to fall pregnant because then they will receive state aid to the tune of R180 per child per month until the age of 15 years. Not only that, but they get maternity leave from school and get free treatment at hospitals and clinics for the first year of the child's life. Thus by falling pregnant a girl can receive sufficient money to support herself, her child and extended family on essential food. So where does that leave the HIV and AIDS campaign? More and more young rural women are taking this option as it guarantees an income, even though a meagre one, in an economic climate where work for unskilled rural people is virtually unobtainable. But more seriously what is happening to the population growth and structure and the effect this has on our nation as a whole and in a broader context the plight of our planet.

This governmental posturing is nothing new, it has happened all the time, the former government gave rebates for the number of children one had, the more children you had (if you were white) the less tax you paid. It has been used by governments all over the world in the name of social upliftment, but in fact all they are trying to achieve is stay in power longer by gaining the support of the uninformed masses and by so doing increasing the burden on the national and international economy.

Greater populations lead to a greater demand for fuel, in rural terms we are talking trees which are being cut down at an alarming rate. (More than 50% of the population of the city of Maputo rely on charcoal for cooking) A greater demand for electricity (an item we most certainly do not have) and a greater demand for fossil fuels, an increase in carbon

emissions and an increase in global warming and so the cycle escalates. Instead of trying to address the problem our government is doing the exact opposite and are going out of their way to expedite the forces that will ultimately lead to the collapse of the planet to sustain itself as we know it.

Just a few years ago one could drink out of any tap in the country without fear of contamination. Today one buys bottled water! Not only was the water in the taps safe to drink but as little as thirty years ago one could virtually drink out of any river in the country without fear of contamination. Today most rivers carry very heavy and dangerous contaminants including very high *E.coli* values. Even more worrying is the fact that most rural boreholes are also contaminated with *E. coli*. Not only have we been able to contaminate our river systems but we have also succeeded in contaminating subterranean water resources. The main reason for this too is excessive human population. Our sewage reticulation systems cannot keep up and are hopelessly inadequate for the function. They are outdated and not properly maintained (in some instances not maintained at all) allowing raw sewage to be vented directly into rivers and the ocean and becoming a direct threat to both man and beast. Most of the rural population use open pit latrines and these can be traced back directly to the contamination of subterranean water and this all leads back to a human population that has grown beyond the carrying capacity of the land. There are simply too many of us, in conservation terms we would be saying it is time to cull.

Harsh words aren't they? But what are we doing to try and check it? One doesn't hear Green Peace or IFAW, or WWF for that matter mounting massive drives to educate people on the dangers of over population. After all it is the human over population that is threatening the elephants, rhinos, pandas, chimpanzees, gorillas and whales. One doesn't hear national debates where local animal rights groups take on government about the current practices encouraging teen pregnancies and increasing the spread of HIV and AIDS. It would be suicide, they would rather address the symptoms and not the cause it is far more expedient and lucrative to do so.

The Al Gore Movie, "An Inconvenient Truth" was found to be alarming by most, but even there the real issue is not addressed. The Kyoto Protocol identifies carbon emissions as the problem, but here again we have misidentified the problem the problem is people who are initiating the excessive carbon loads. While carbon bartering can be practiced between developed and third world countries such a scheme will never work. The wealthy countries will just pay for the use of the poor countries carbon quota and continue to pump Carbon into the atmosphere and console themselves that they are complying with the Kyoto Protocol, while the illiterate people of the world will be absolutely oblivious to the threat their world is facing. Even if carbon loads could be curtailed and targets reached, which they won't, (its not good economics and not politically expedient for certain nations to do so) that would just retard the inevitable self destruction!

HIV and AIDS are most probably currently seen as the world's number one human enemy as far as diseases go, but prepare for something far worse then AIDS. It is the function of disease, amongst others to limit the population of any specific species beyond carrying capacity, the higher the population becomes the greater the chance of some holocaustic disease incident. Man has through his ability to reason and learn been able to counteract most diseases thus negating their effect and increasing longevity and the quality of life. A good thing we say and I must agree, for were it not for modern medicine and technology I would not be here and the massive strides we have made in medical science do not need to be seen as bad, but we need to recognise that too many people is bad and unless we do something about it ourselves nature will do something

more drastic than HIV / AIDS. We are alarmed by the high incidence of Cholera, we have a resistant strain of Tuberculosis, Avian Flu is seen as a potential threat by some, Mad Cow Disease the evidence is mounting just wake up and look around.

If mankind is to save the planet he inhabits and by so doing save himself, then it has to be done with the aid of the churches and religious leaders. Many religions, the Roman Catholic Church being one of them, shun contraception and any form of birth control, maintaining it is forbidden by God. This is based on a scripture in the Old Testament which the Roman Catholic Church has chosen to interpret in this way. However many modern Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic Church quite happily ignore many other commands and exhortations in the Old and New Testaments finding all kinds of valid excuses why they should not apply today. Where man has chosen to ignore the Word of God and implement a policy far more expedient to himself and current philosophies, yet we still have the Roman Catholic Church urging their followers not to practice birth control, this in a world where millions are dying from disease and hunger and where the burgeoning human population threatens to annihilate the planet as we know it.

I believe God gave us minds and the ability to think and reason and He expects us to use these gifts. Looking at the current conservation scenario with the prediction of thousands of species currently facing extinction, decreasing oil reserves and increasing cost for all forms of energy I think we can quite safely say this planet is headed for a major shake-up, the only question is when? I for one do not think this event is too far ahead. It is possibly too late to take any drastic steps to reduce populations as any such step, were it to miraculously happen would take a few decades to kick in and I don't think we have that much time. However I still think we should apply those "superior minds" of ours that are supposed to set us apart from the animals and do something to save ourselves instead we are depicting typical herd behaviour when faced with threat, we ignore it and hope it will either go away, or it will happen to someone else and not to anyone near or dear to us.