



Beyond the Wildlife Economy: A Conservation Economy

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September 2020

Governments around the world, including our own South African government and many other important, learned and experienced stakeholders, have for the past few years (decades) been grappling with terms such as *Green Economy*, *Biodiversity Economy*, *Wildlife Economy*, *Natural Capital*, *Ecosystems Services*, *Sustainable Use*, the list is seemingly endless.

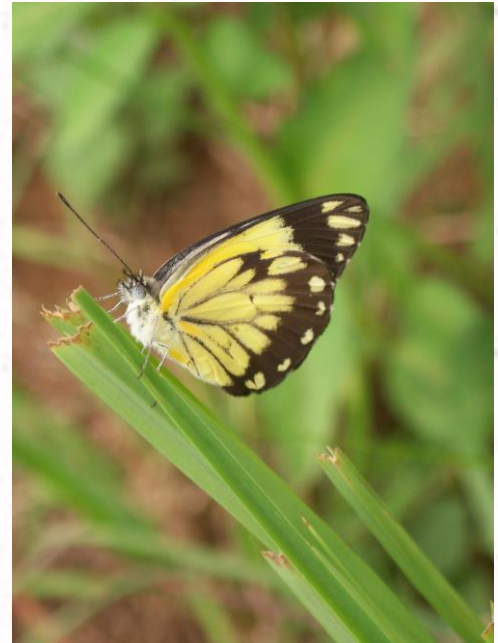
Eminent scientists collate discussions and papers, and gather like locusts with government officials and nations' leaders every four years (and frequently in between) at various prestigious Global Climate Summits and sign accords and treaties, which are increasingly irrelevant to the rural climate impacted poor. The 1992 Rio de Janeiro **Convention on Biological Diversity** (CBD) is the international legal instrument for "the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources" that has been ratified by 196 nations. This ground-breaking treaty, hailed as a victory, is a hollow promise of what might have been.

There are 20 AICHI targets that were to be achieved by 2020, at the latest.¹ They are, quite frankly, a joke. If anyone read these and understood how our governments have failed us, you would be ashamed. They have been sacrificed on the altar of political expedience and corporate greed, defiled by corruption and manipulated by a system that increasingly serves itself.

What were wonderful ideals, and well worded wishes, are sadly now a litany of failures with the environment and society paying the cost.

¹ <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>

In South Africa, we have managed to package the Biodiversity Economy into neat packages, 3 core focus areas of BioProspecting, and the Wildlife Economy, (hunting and tourism). It is important to package these issues into neat little parcels to make them understood by the little people, the voters and the public. But most importantly for our government to understand. Anything more complex than a plastic water bottle and nylon conference bags at a climate change convention needs packaging. We like to operate in silos, without cross pollination of ideas or budgets, as this only confuses us. Our government and scientific services are so well packaged that they serve the corporate polluters well. The complex system of legal loopholes and a communication vacuum, coupled with a complete lack of trust at almost all levels of society, within a construct built on the heinous apartheid system, has stripped the public of a fighting chance of stopping the apocalypse of climate change. But this is changing, I believe.



Life is a complex. After decades of empty promises, the rise and rise of social media, the 2020 (not hindsight) triple blow of COVID, looming recession and real climate change impacts striking at the very foundations of our society, our food security.

Governments of the world knew of these threats in 2005. In fact they knew of them in 1992! Whilst SA did not officially sign off on the Rio declaration, a high level delegation on ANC officials attended that conference of the parties, and in 1994 it was ratified by President Nelson Mandela. Those same officials helped draft the world's most progressive and forward thinking and insightful environmental legislation, building on a brilliant constitution. Just as the cigarette companies knew of the dangers of cancer, our government knew of the impending impacts, and like most other governments around the world, did nothing.

The following is taken directly from the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity website when I searched South Africa:

The diversity of topography, climate, geology and people in South Africa presents a wide variety of natural and cultural resources. It is notably considered one of the most biologically diverse countries in the world due to its species diversity, rate of endemism and diverse ecosystems. Terrestrial biodiversity can be divided into nine biomes, rivers into 31 different river ecoregions, and estuaries and coastal marine habitats into three biogeographical zones around the coast (subtropical, warm temperate, cool temperate). In addition, numerous structural types of vegetation, rivers, wetlands, estuaries and marine habitats add considerably to the biodiversity within these environments. While it occupies only 2% of the world's land surface area, South Africa is home to 10% of the world's plant species and 7% of its reptile, bird and mammal species. Furthermore, it harbors around 15% of the world's marine species. Endemism rates reach 56% for amphibians, 65% for plants and up to 70% for invertebrates.

This is beautiful to read and makes me proud to be a South African. Unfortunately it continues thus;

...South African biodiversity is at present greatly endangered. National Red List assessments indicate that 10% of South Africa's birds and frogs, 20% of its mammals and 13% of its plants are threatened. In terms of natural ecosystems, the National Spatial Biodiversity Assessment (NSBA) (2004) revealed that 82% of the main river ecosystems are threatened, with 44% critically endangered, 27% endangered, and 11% vulnerable. Of the country's 440 vegetation types, 5% are critically endangered, 12% are endangered and 16% are vulnerable; 3 of the 13 estuary groups are critically endangered, a further 5 are endangered and 2 are vulnerable; 65% of the 34 marine

biozones are threatened, with 12% critically endangered, 15% endangered and 38% vulnerable. In regard to freshwater ecosystems, the assessment revealed that only 29% of the country's main rivers were unmodified, or largely unmodified, and an estimated 50% of South Africa's wetlands have been destroyed. An example is taken from the Cape Floral Kingdom, a particularly rich area in terms of flora. Home to 38% of South Africa's plant species, this region is also the smallest and most threatened of the world's six floral kingdoms, with 1,850 of its plant species (over 20%) now threatened with extinction.

This information, as far as I can tell, is out-dated. The decline in our systems is greater than we acknowledge and the impact worse, with higher levels of vulnerability and toxicity across the board.

The loss and degradation of South Africa's biodiversity has serious implications for society and the economy. Natural ecosystems provide many essential services, such as the provision of clean water and air, prevention of soil erosion, pollination of crops, provision of medicinal plants, nutrient cycling, provision of food and shelter, as well as meeting spiritual, cultural, aesthetic and recreational needs. Large portions of the country's economy are heavily dependent on biodiversity (e.g. fishing industry, game and livestock ranching, horticulture and agriculture based on indigenous species, commercial and subsistence use of medicinal plants, ecotourism). A recent estimate placed the total value added to the economy by all provisioning, regulating and cultural ecosystem services in South Africa, excluding the marine environment and the value generated by the extraction of water resources, in the order of R73 billion per annum (which is approximately 7% of the country's annual GDP). In addition, intact ecosystems (i.e. ecosystems which are in a natural or near-natural state) are likely to play an important role in providing cost-effective resilience to the impacts of climate change, including buffering human settlements and activities from the impacts of extreme climate events. Finally, the majority of South Africans are highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, well-being and health care (it is estimated that over 70% of South Africans use traditional medicinal plants as their primary source of health care).

So now what?

