



A family homestead near Mkhuze in northern KwaZulu-Natal; the rolling hills of Somkhanda Community Game Reserve just beyond. Image: Michelle Dye.

Our Wild Economy: Beyond Open Spaces

Francois du Toit

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Africa is a vast continent, 3 billion hectares of forests, swamps, deserts, wetlands, grassland plains, mountains, rivers, streams, communities and cities. African people are connected to the earth. We have been through wars, conflict, and almost constant scrutiny, been subject to interventions, interruptions, assumptions, deviations and definitions. We are a complex people in a complex landscape, torn apart by historical forces.

South Africa, and our home province KwaZulu-Natal, is no different.

Visitors flock to African shores to see the last remaining megafauna and vast open spaces that exist only in their wildest imagination (or on Natgeo channels!).

With the multiple threats of a COVID-19 global pandemic, drought, human population growth, habitat loss and increasing human wildlife conflict, what we require now, more than ever are African solutions for Africa problems, by African people. Nothing about us without us.

The fragility of our planet, and our tenure on it as people, our sense of place, and purpose is challenged. Not, I believe, by this current pandemic, but by a new generation of youth and leaders in Africa, and other developing nations, that understand and value, and are determined to benefit from, a growing Wild Economy. But sadly, Merlyn Nomusa Nkomo, aspirant ornithologist and Conservation Biology Masters

student at UCT points out in her recent post ([The Achilles heel of Conservation](#)), the prevailing stereotype that black people in South Africa believe that the love of nature and wildlife is a “white thing”. This is indeed a tragedy.

We have a Wild Economy. It is an all-encompassing economy. It is generational, responsible, sustainable, and valuable. It is unique, creates more jobs than any other sector. It is growing at a higher rate than any other sector. Many of us see this value. But I do not believe that all see it. Empty stomachs have no ears. We have issues to address here in KZN, and in Africa, real pressing issues of poverty, unemployment and hunger. These we can address if we genuinely embrace this Wild Economy.

A Wild Economy is an economy that is built on the foundation of respect.

Respect for future generations, and respect for their ability to enjoy the fruits of the Wild Economy for generations to come, respect for the earth.

The Wildlife economy is not just about Hunting, Tourism and Bio-Prospecting. It is broader than that. It is diverse, domestic, and demand driven. Bush meat, pangolin, rhino, elephant poaching and the raping of our shorelines by foreign vessels is symptomatic of a deeper ill, lack of service delivery and corruption. People are starving whilst cash-fat tourists (or businesses) photograph or hunt their game. Ms Nkoma notes that since colonial time have been “fortresses to protect nature from black communities that had lived with it in harmony for centuries before”. Never a truer statement!

Our Wildlife Economy needs to start with basic needs. Why are we not farming diversity? Well-managed rangelands supported many people in the past and ecological agriculture or wild management could well prove the provider. Game meat has massive potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs alongside a vibrant red meat industry and a self-sustaining ecological approach to landscape management.

And most importantly, how do we make the Wild Economy attractive to our next generation, our youth? What if we really invested in this Wild Economy? Created roads and infrastructure, and bursaries and discounted tertiary education to support it? Cleaned up our act, removed aliens and cleaned water courses because it makes economic and ecological sense, not simply because it creates jobs. What if we created a 50-year vision to grow our entire economy on the back of a Wild Economy? Link it to renewables, to clean water, air and soil, to carbon sequestration, to a vibrant red meat industry, grazing on open grasslands, not factory farmed via feedlots, but responsible use, ethical, equitable, economic and ecologically sound.

A natural resource based economy. If you had to make a choice between oil, gas and coal or clean air, clean water and clean soil what would you choose? The answer is obvious. It is in fact our constitutional responsibility to look after this for future generations. Let’s start talking about responsibility rather than rights?

Too often we tend to focus on international markets, tourists, and hold them up to be the experts on everything from community relations, resource usage and maximising returns. What we tend to forget is local is lekker, and whilst the international tourist does generate fantastic local benefits, jobs and income, what this latest Pandemic has taught us is just how vulnerable we are. Our neighbours and “friends”, the East, North and West, are interested in Africa for their own selfish interests. History has taught us this. Why are we so slow to learn?

What we need is a leader with the guts to show us a clear, bright future, based on a diverse, local and eventually international market. We need to become more self-sufficient, and feed ourselves first.

But this new Wild Economy must compete with vested commercial economic interests that include in the definition of natural capital, the extractive industries that have decimated landscapes, wetlands and forests in the name of progress. Mining, coal, platinum, gold, uranium, copper, diamonds, Africa is rich in these assets. These have historically decimated communities, destroyed their access to water, grazing land, building materials, sacred sites, and through restricted use and access has deliberately divided nations.

There has been much talk about sustainable use. It has created divisive and in many instances irreconcilable rifts between organisations and individuals. Some disconnected urban media keyboard warriors and the organisations they have founded rely on this conflict. Indeed, do they fuel it to justify their very existence?

The entire issue of sustainable use and, in fact, the Wildlife Economy, seems to pivot around hunting, tourism and trade. It is seen as an either / or scenario. You are either for Hunting or against it. You are either for Trade or against it. For consumptive tourism or against it.

Why not responsible use? If it is not ethical, equitable, ecologically and economically sound it shouldn't be permitted? So a high end, luxury photographic safari, using thousands of litres of water per person per night, creating only a few jobs falls in to the same category as captive lion breeding in my eyes!!

Stop trying to box this Wildlife Economy into neatly packaged containers so that our politicians and economists can understand. Politicians are supposed to be civil servants, many of them neither civil nor servants, and economists believe in infinite growth on a finite planet, the very definition of insanity. We live on a finite earth, with finite resources, and a growing population. Human Wildlife Conflict is real, but not an insurmountable problem.

Our goal should be to foster resilient, empowered, enterprising communities who understand, cherish, own, manage and protect the Wild Economy, reducing the need for donor and government support, enabling strong, responsible and sustainable communities.

This starts with interventions as simple as homestead gardens, collaborative scale beekeeping enterprises, job creation through guiding, hunting, tourism, and maintenance, building and embracing management and beneficiation of traditional income generation such as cattle, goats, sheep, a red meat industry, processing and value adding, finally a viable multi-layered biodiversity/tourism offering in iconic locations. That is a Wild Economy. Diverse, domestic and demand driven. International guests and donor communities are the means to get there, and the cream to create more resilient, responsible landscapes.

That is what we should aim for, not cheap political points, or short-term economic gain. And when the value on the inside of our wildlife reserves is appreciated and benefits realised (economically and socially), then we reduce conflict and begin to move in the right direction.

This simple observation by Ms Nkomo sums up our problem: "The researcher who fell in love with Africa and her wildness from National Geographic films or at zoos and shows will have a different commitment to the problem than the one who knows the hunger of an elephant raid, one who herded cattle in a village where lions prowl at night and one who knows the true meaning of your life and next meal depending on the environment you live in"

Last time I checked, we only have one earth, one Africa, one South Africa. Isn't it time we started looking after it, investing in it, instead of tearing it apart for personal gain?

I, for one, hope to play a small part in this. I look forward to working with you.

Let's build a future we deserve.



Grappling with the issues of conservation and wildlife crime – 165 youth attended the 2019 World Youth Wildlife Summit and were engaged, educated, equipped and empowered to become conservation leaders of the future. Photo by Rifumo Mathebula Wild Shots Outreach.

This story forms part of Roving Reporters [The Future We Want](https://rovingreporters.co.za/wild-economy/) series, available online at <https://rovingreporters.co.za/wild-economy/>. A shortened version was also published by the Sunday Tribune, entitled, “Responsible use the driving force of SA’s wild economy.”

