



A Currency of Respect

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For quite some time I have been wondering how we are going to redefine the way we interact with each other in this new world. Not just because we are in the midst of a COVID pandemic, but simply because we cannot expect infinite growth on a finite planet. To believe that you are either an economist or insane.

I am also not just referring to the way we interact within the human species. We are a small, relatively insignificant part in the history of earth but have managed to impact its delicate balance to the point that we are at risk of extinction. It is recognised that we are now in the Anthropocene Age, the era where human action has a profound impact on our earth and our possibility of survival. COVID has shown that a small break on our exhaustive consumption allows this fragile planet to breathe. I speak of our interrelationship with humans, animals, plants, earth, the oceans, fish, amphibians, and birds, our respect for the foundations upon which we have built this apparent wealth. Respect.

There are plenty of experts in the fields of the circular economy, green economics, natural capital, triple bottom line, people, planet, profit, sustainability, wealth, currency, investment, returns, shareholder and assets. But what does this mean to normal people such as us? For most of us, we define our success by the size of our car, our house, the school our kids go to, the suburb we live in, and the clothes we wear.

It is my contention that should not reduce value to a common denominator of money, all transactions to some form of economic coin. There are other measures of value, other currencies apart from crude coin.

Wealth is not just money; it is also health, time and our relationships with each other and the plethora of other life forms and support systems that share our planet. I ask this often of the groups I talk to about fracking, the rhino poaching crisis, and of myself. If you had to choose between clean air, clean soil and clean water, or fuel, gas and coal, what would your choice be? The answer is obvious. We breathe air through masks and drink filtered water because we have poisoned these bare necessities, and the food we grow is so far removed from us, we barely recognise it.

I recently listened to a [TED talk by Dambisa Moyo](#), a global economist, who hails from Zambia, and has made her mark in corporate investment in the USA. She addresses “What we get wrong with Global Growth,” but I’ll admit, she lost me when she started defending the fossil fuel industry. But listen to what she has to say, start questioning your core values and what you place value in. Prosperity without growth is an ideal we should be exploring.



Whilst delivering food parcels to a rural community near Vryheid, as part of Project Rhino’s Feeding the Wildlife Community, I was again deeply impacted. A heartfelt thanks in a windswept landscape, from the local Induna. We had brought a relatively small package of nutritional porridge and some basic food items, and our message of hope for a new wild economy. She thanked us in simple words for showing “hlonipa abantu” respect for her as a person and her people. (Forgive my interpretation). It was a reminder that we simply need to be heard, that at our core, we are all the same. Do not forget us in your busy-ness.

I believe we are not showing respect. Not for ourselves, not for our planet, not for our water, our air and our rich heritage. We don’t take time to listen each other, to genuinely reflect on dialogue. We listen instead for a gap to inject our opinion and driving it home until we get our way, pushing each other apart. We should instead be listening more, to the desperate pleas of an earth that is struggling to breath. We should be observing more, taking in the beauty that surrounds us and reflecting more, about what we can do to make the world a better place for future generations.

The natural economy is our future. Our Constitution demands it.

Rebuilding an economy based on our abundant natural resources is imperative if we are to survive into the new millennium. And by natural resources, I am not referring to oil, gas and coal. I refer to our fragile overfished coastline, our wide open spaces, our world heritage sites, our game reserves, our watersheds, and our transnational reserves, our megafauna, our diversity, our complexity and quite frankly our ability to survive and thrive by working together rather than to different agendas.

Africa In Fact, the Journal of the Good Governance Africa’s most recent publication,¹ brings no less than 24 African journalists and experts into a riveting journal that focuses on Africa’s environment. Nathaniel Mathews opens, noting that climate change could affect Africa severely, but that it is “also an opportunity to build resilience and diversify livelihoods”.

Editor Richard Jurgens summarises the plight of real Africa. In Harare, Zimbabwe, flooding threatens the city as corruption allows building in wetlands. In Malawi, government debates a new coal-fired power station as the technology approaches redundancy (and South Africa forges ahead despite its commitment to the Paris Agreement!). In Nigeria, women are assaulted as they journey kilometres to gather water. It is no different in many African countries.

¹ Issue 54 / July-September 2020/www.gga.org

Wallace Stegner, Professor of English at Stanford University perhaps summed this up best:

“Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed, if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases: if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will people be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste, and so that never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it. We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in, for it can be a mans of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, as part of the geography of hope.....”

The new Africa will build a Wild Natural Resource Economy on a foundation of respect. It must be, or we will surely perish.



This story forms part of Roving Reporters, [The Future We Want](https://rovingreporters.co.za/foundation-of-respect/) series. Find it online: <https://rovingreporters.co.za/foundation-of-respect/>

Cover image by the Kingsley Holgate Foundation, taken during a Feeding Wildlife Communities food parcel delivery in northern KZN, July 2020.

