



# A Conservation Economy: Something worth fighting for

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What a sad day for South Africa, for the family of murdered 65 year old anti-mining activist Fikile Ntshangase, for the community around Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park, and for our civil servants who appear to be hell-bent on pursuing a future that flies in the face of every climate change and environmental accord South Africa has signed on the global stage. Shame on you.

Fikile is another statistic in the battle of environmental activists. More than 212 environmental defenders were murdered in 2019, the highest ever in a single year, 4 persons every week across the world, fighting for their simple right to a clean environment. [Global Witness annual report](#) highlighted the urgent role land and environmental defenders play in fighting climate breakdown, opposing carbon intensive and unsustainable industries that are accelerating global warming and environmental damage. Rachel Cox, Campaigner, Global Witness noted that, "Agribusiness and oil, gas and mining have been consistently the biggest drivers of attacks against land and environmental defenders – and they are also the industries pushing us further into runaway climate change through deforestation and increasing carbon emissions...Many of the world's worst environmental and human rights abuses are driven by the exploitation of natural resources and corruption in the global political and economic system."

s24 of our Constitution guarantees everyone the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being and to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation; promote conservation; and secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.

The citizenry in our fragile nation are fighting the very people we elected to protect our rights. Our political elite are disconnected from the realities on the ground. Justifiable development is not worth the death of a mother, a sister and friend in this modern world. We have lost respect.

People are simply fighting for their rights. Their right to clean air, clean soil, clean water, and the ability to survive and thrive and build a future that they determine. Jan du Preez of Tendele Coal, and Philip Steyn of Rhino Oil and Gas share a common goal: Shareholder wealth and personal enrichment at the expense of the citizens of this country. It appears that President Ramaphosa, Ministers Gwede Mantashe and Barbara Creecy and a cohort of national and global players are intent on destroying what little hope we have of a discourse.

Amir Jina, an environmental economist at the University of Chicago and a co-author of a [recent study](#), published by the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) found that “in a high-emissions scenario where little is done to curb planet-heating gases, global mortality rates will be raised by 73 deaths per 100,000 people by the end of the century” The Guardian reported. “This nearly matches the current death toll from all infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, HIV/Aids, malaria, dengue and yellow fever.”

“The economic cost of these deaths is set to be severe, costing the world 3.2% of global economic output by the end of the century if emissions are not tamed,” the report added. “Each ton of planet-warming carbon dioxide emitted will cost \$36.60 in damage in this high-emissions world, the researchers calculated.”

And yet here in South Africa, home of the Big Five, home to globally recognized biodiversity hotspots, megafauna and flora, and World Heritage Sites, the Limpopo Special Economic Zone is being fast-tracked, the watersheds of KwaZulu-Natal are being sold the highest bidder, gas fields and an economically disastrous network being actively pursued, bringing wealth to a select few and destroying millennia of environmental infrastructure, and fragile ecosystems. These same systems, deeply entrenched and protected in social and cultural traditions are recognized by rural communities, whose very lives depend on them.

I would suggest that we hold political decision makers personally responsible, as directors of our nation for future damages if they choose to approve any new coal mining, or gas exploration and extraction. They have a responsibility to take international peer reviewed studies into account and observe the accords we signed to minimize climate impacts, to immediately decarbonize our economy, to ban gas extraction as nearly 100 nations around the world have done. To ignore this evidence is irrational and irresponsible and they must be held accountable. They cannot hide behind the cloak of government any longer.

Our coastal fisheries will collapse, our watersheds will be destroyed, rural livelihoods be decimated, and our ability to produce food severely compromised, unless we embrace a Conservation Economy.

It is entirely possible to [decarbonise at pace](#) whilst raising living standards, and protecting the future. Money is out there and can easily be accessed but is being used poorly. Political will is our problem, not funding nor technology. We must stop carbon subsidies. Simply, we cannot afford to vacillate any longer, and NOT to take bold, decisive and immediate action to achieving a Conservation Economy.

A Conservation Economy is different from the new Green deal, the biodiversity economy, the wildlife economy. It embraces complexity, and cannot be simply put into neat boxes for our politicians or economists to comprehend. It requires respect, and integrity, and values honesty and collaboration.

A conservation economy is an economy in which economic wealth is harvested from a bioregion's local natural resources in a way that meets local communities' needs yet restores rather than depletes natural



and social capital. It comprehensively integrates Social, Natural, and Economic Capital to demonstrate that a sustainable society is both desirable and achievable.

The time is now. We can choose to ignore the science, the social and the environmental facts at our peril. Elected government and civil servants in South Africa are no longer leading the nation in the direction that has the best interests of the citizens at heart.

People are dying for basic rights whilst executives and ministers debate their next medium term expenditure framework, convene workshops and re-tread tired policies. They are paralyzed by their own sense of self-importance and have forgotten to serve.

A Conservation Economy is not a short term election promise, the survival of our planet; our people and our profitability depend on it. Anyone with any sense of service will reap benefits if they have the courage to actively pursue this Conservation Economy.

David Attenborough recently implored the world to act. Please South Africa, let us choose the future we deserve, a Living World, a world of respect, and we can create an economic future that restores rather than depletes our environmental foundation.

*Francois du Toit is CEO of African Conservation Trust, a co-founder of FrackfreeSA, the Imfolozi Community Wilderness Alliance and Project Rhino. We are deeply concerned at the violence associated with mining affected communities.*

*Our Vision is Simple. A Living World: People on a profitable Planet. A World which is able to sustain human life, profitable as a result of investment into our most precious asset: Planet Earth, with its abundant natural resources; profitable enough for people to draw from its environmental goods and services, and from a social and economic sense. Living, in that our Planet and its inhabitants are not simply surviving, but are flourishing, and have capacity to give, share and grow.*

*Images: Pxfuel*

