
South Africa: Civil society networking to channel environmental concerns and actions

A meeting of the Mpumalanga Civil Society was held on 5 March, 2005, in a barn at Tim Brewer's trout farm, Katrinasrus , near Machadodorp . This somewhat out-of-the-way venue provided most of the participants with an opportunity to explore roads less travelled . About 50 people attended, some from as far afield as Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal.

Convened by Philip Owen of Geosphere , the meeting “aimed to allow diverse organizations to share knowledge and gain insight into... common ground and explore ways of... networking more effectively”. Facilitated by Rob Clanahan , speakers covered wildly diverse subjects ranging from “saving the endangered vervet ” to the harrowing account of the plight of people living above the still burning abandoned coal fields near Witbank . This concern was raised from the floor by Doctor Maseko of the Buhle Bemvelo Environmental Group. More information or offers of assistance should be addressed to docmaseko@hotmail.com .

Tony Ferrar introduced the Mpumalanga Biodiversity Conservation Plan, and Philip Owen discussed the threat to our vanishing grasslands of ever expanding commercial tree plantations. He pointed out that less than 3% of our grasslands are protected; that grasslands on average are composed of some 4000 species of plants, of which only 11% are actual grasses, the remainder made up of forbs, bulbs and so on.

Wally Menne from Durban, chairman of TimberWatch , spoke on the dubiousness of carbon sequestration by means of commercial tree plantations. He pointed out that the plantations are only a carbon sink for roughly twelve years, and that environmental degradation associated with monoculture tree farming far outweighed any benefit from carbon absorption.

George Dor , General Secretary of Jubilee SA and member of the Environmental Justice Networking Forum, talked on Ecological Debt. The plight of a community of Ga-Pila , removed by Anglo Platinum and inadequately recompensed, was used as an example of an unpaid ecological debt. His group strives for recompense of similar injustices by major corporations.

The latter part of the meeting explored ways of linking up the organizations present to enable a sharing of knowledge and resources. Besides creating a database available to all that will include contact details and a short summary of the activities of each organization; an environmental action hotline was also created. This hotline will enable people to ask questions and raise issues and then be referred to individuals / organizations on the database that could best assist with an environmental problem.

The meeting represents an effort to start mobilizing the local environmentalists and organizations into a more effective and interlinked group in society able to support each others causes and share resources. It is hoped and expected that similar future events will continue to build on the momentum that was created to find more ways to achieve higher levels of communication and co-operation.

