

**Address of the Patron of the TMF, Thabo Mbeki, at the WWF SA Living Planet Conference 2012: Somerset West, Western Cape: 16 November, 2012.**

Programme Director,  
Chairperson of the Board of the WWF SA, Hon Valli Moosa, and other  
Members of the Board,  
Hon Pravin Gordhan, our Minister of Finance,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies, gentlemen and friends:

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a European philosopher made the bold assertion, using the language of his day – “man must eat before he can think”.

I request that you - Honourable delegates - keep in your minds what I have just said about the European philosopher to which I will return later.

In this context I would say that today, perhaps more than ever before, there is great need for a renewed and realistic understanding of the intimate relationship between human development and the protection of our natural heritage.

When the Hon Valli Moosa served as our country's Minister of Tourism and Environmental Affairs, he urged that my wife and I should spend our annual Christmas-New Year holiday break here at home, rather than outside our country.

He suggested that we should use this most welcome annual two-week break to discover South Africa.

In particular, he insisted that we should visit all our National Parks, which were an important part of the complex of responsibilities included within his Ministerial Portfolio.

I am certain that you will have understood why I have told you, distinguished delegates, this story about Valli Moosa's role as an organiser of our holiday programmes.

During the many years when, at his urging, we accordingly used our holidays to 'discover South Africa', thus becoming students once again, we learnt a great deal about our own imperative to help protect our total national environment, the Living Planet we had inherited as democratic South Africa.

During our 'journey of discovery through South Africa', we learnt a great deal about:

our country's extraordinary bio-diversity and its meaning to our long-term welfare as a people;

the intimate relationship between nature and human welfare;

the things that had been done during the previous centuries, which were destructive of our environmental heritage;

- what we, the present generations, were doing to perpetuate the negative practices inimical to the protection and preservation of our ecology; and therefore,
- what we needed to do to effect a veritable 'about turn' with regard to the critical matters which stand at the heart of the Mission of WWF SA, and indeed the Global World Wildlife Fund.

And so do I return to what I said at the beginning of this speech, citing an assertion made by a European philosopher – that "man must eat before he can think".

As you would know, given that this was said by a philosopher, obviously it has various layers of meaning.

In this regard the only meaning to which I would like to refer today relates directly to the subject of this Conference – the Living Planet.

Simply, the philosopher sought to make what he believed was a statement of fact about the evolution of the human species, that first you have to be a living person today, before you can face the challenge of thinking about what you should do to be alive the following day.

I would like to believe that all of us, South Africans, present here today, who proudly claim that our country is the Cradle of Humanity, will understand the assertion made by the European philosopher.

In simpler terms, given the reality that the first and earlier members of our species, *homo sapiens*, sustained themselves exclusively by hunting and gathering, and therefore by what nature provided with no human intervention, it was the natural environment which guaranteed the very possibility of life for the earliest of our ancestors.

I am certain that the then balance between the size of the human population, its growth, its needs and technological capacities, and the extent and capacities of the natural habitat, and for millennia afterwards, made it possible to maintain the equilibrium between human need and the protection and preservation of the natural environment, the material base that made it possible for human beings “to eat!”

All of us must look to a much later period in the evolution of human society, to date, to understand when the disjuncture occurred as a result of which the now “thinking” humanity came to believe that it had no obligation to respect the obvious reality that that humanity could not continue to exist if it destroyed the nature which makes such human existence possible.

This disjuncture, whenever it occurred, marked the circumstance when the now “thinking” humanity, understood within the context of the philosophical statement I have quoted, lost understanding of the imperative to maintain a balanced relationship between human existence and a sustainable natural environment.

As this thinking humanity, we have, among other things:

- evolved extraordinary technological capacities;
- given our important business corporations a socially accepted and therefore a legal right to pursue the goal of corporate profit for a long period virtually with no restriction with regard to environmental matters;
- elevated the related material satisfaction of our selfish individual appetites, whatever the cost to society, virtually to serve as our respective national value systems; and have therefore,
- entrenched the public understanding according to which the public good, and therefore the preservation of the natural environment,

unarguably a part of that public good, the nature which, millennia ago, provided the means for 'man to eat so that he could think', is no longer such a public good!

This has to change, so that we and the rest of humanity recognise that indeed the natural environment in all countries is a public good, and therefore that all conduct, private and public, should be consistent with such recognition.

Like the rest of our Continent, our country got integrated in the world economy as a result of, and as part of the evolution of the Western Countries.

Apart from the earlier period when Africa exported millions of human beings to serve as slaves in the Caribbean and the Americas, that integration meant the exploitation for export of a wide variety of natural resources, ranging from minerals, to our forests and fisheries, to fossil fuels such as oil.

While the benefits of these resources were felt in the West, the negative environmental impacts such as over-fishing, deforestation, pollution, and the social impacts of exploitative labour practices were felt in Africa.

At our local level, the mining industry in this country was built on the impoverishment of millions of people as well as such immensely destructive practices as the migrant labour system. We continue to battle to this day to overcome the negative consequences of all these developments.

In sum, I am therefore suggesting that when we estimate the meaning of our country's and Continent's integration in the world economy, we must also look closely at the impact of that integration on our natural environment.

The World Economic Forum estimates that to respond to the growing needs of humanity as a whole, it will be necessary to create 3 billion jobs over the next 20 years.

I am certain that it is obvious to all of us that this will require huge volumes of natural resources to feed the global economy so that it achieves the goal mentioned by the World Economic Forum.

For instance, the Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that we will need to produce more food in the next 50 years than was produced in the

last 10,000 years. Other projections suggest that 77% of the power stations that will be needed by 2030 are yet to be built.

What does this mean for the African agenda?

The Continent holds many of the resources that will be needed for the projected larger global economy.

Africa has the largest tracks of unutilised arable land in the world, reasonably intact large river systems and huge renewable energy options. The Inga hydropower scheme and the Desertec Sahara solar project are two examples of the opportunities for the generation of renewable energy in Africa.

Africa is also home to some of the world's most unique and important biodiversity. As an example, our black and white rhinos are an iconic species, symbolic of the natural wealth of Africa. The threat they face from criminal poaching activities is symptomatic of the plight of exploitation of our Continent's resources.

As you know, in recognition of this unique and important African biodiversity, the Global WWF has specialised programmes relating to the preservation of the heritage along the East African coastline and the forests of the Congo Basin.

Again as we all know, the WWF Global Programme Framework of 35 Outstanding Places in the World includes our own Cape Floristic Region and the Nama Karoo Kaokoveld.

This variety of our natural resources - in many ways the true wealth of nations - is inextricably linked to our heritage and the concept of our being as African.

All this places our Continent in a strategically powerful position which we must use, recognising the imperative, among others, that biodiversity remains crucial in our efforts to reduce poverty and support human development in a way that is both sustainable and equitable.

Unlike in the past, we cannot afford to provide the globally strategic resources that are and will be required, without managing and accounting for the costs to our social and ecological systems.

We need to work towards a sustainable future for our people, places and species, based on an equitable pro-poor society that maintains the proper balance between meeting human needs and protecting the environment.

According to many commentators, Africa will be most vulnerable to climate change and is in many ways already experiencing its effects.

Negative climate developments will impact on our food and water resources and hugely affect the livelihoods of many of our people. Some of our key challenges will be to ensure food and water security as well as access to clean and sustainable energy.

As South Africa and other fossil-fuel dependent economies, we need to look at our growth and development paths and find a way to shift away from the unsustainable and inequitable models of growth that the developed Western countries have followed for centuries.

For example, the current development of coal reserves in some of our most important water production areas in Mpumalanga is an example of the exploitation of one resource and how it is impacting on one of South Africa's most strategic and scarce resources - water.

It seems clear that the short-term gains we will derive from coal exports and power generation will be far outweighed by the long-term impact on our water supplies.

We only need to look as far as the current bill of R30 billion that is required to rehabilitate almost 6,000 disused mines to understand the scale of this impact. This number does not include potential revenues lost due to the poor quality of this water or the extra investments required by the authorities to clean polluted water, making it available for human use.

In this context I sincerely hope that our Government will remain open to further discussion of the proposal to allow "fracking" in our country to produce natural gas.

In this regard, I was struck by the decision taken by the Governor of New York State in the US, Andrew Cuomo, only six weeks ago, not to allow "fracking" in the State, pending further investigation and public hearings on its potential impact on public health.

If Africa is to capitalise on its strategic resource endowment and utilise this position to rectify some of the global and local inequalities we face, we will need to ensure that we do not give away our crown jewels only to be left to clean up the mess after the party is over.

It is self-evident that in the context of the projected much expanded global economy, our country and Continent will become further integrated in the world economy.

Given everything I have said, I believe that we are obliged to take all necessary measures to ensure that all economic actors whose activities impact on our natural resources and environment operate in a manner which protects that environment, contrary to what happened in the past.

Among others, this will require careful planning and co-operation through the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities, such that our healthy social and ecological systems are seen as fundamental to growth and development and not as an unnecessary impediment to short-term revenue generation, and such that all of us, including our leaders and governments, remain accountable for the impact of our decisions on future generations.

As the WWF SA, you occupy a particular and important place in our country. To the best of my knowledge, you are the only institution we have in our country which pursues an integrated agenda which includes:

- conserving our national biodiversity;
- ensuring that our natural ecosystems and their services are integrated into our country's sustainable development programmes;
- improving the livelihoods of communities who are most directly dependent on natural resources through better environmental practices;
- ensuring that South African consumers have the knowledge to influence appropriate environmental practice from the private and public sectors; and,
- increasing environmental skills and capacity among our current and future leaders.

I fully agree with all these and your other important objectives. However, I think that one of the eminent challenges we all face in this regard is how to expand the footprint of the WWF SA in our country.

Surely all of us must do everything we can so that much larger numbers of our people also take ownership of the vital goals you pursue, participating in a mass movement for sustainable development, under the leadership of WWF SA.

When I addressed our Constitutional Assembly in 1996 on behalf of the ANC, as the Assembly adopted our Constitution, I thought it was proper that we must acknowledge the fact that we owe even life itself to our natural world, the natural endowment which made it possible for our most ancient ancestors "to eat".

It was for this reason that I said:

"I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land."

Surely, we have an obligation to protect that natural heritage to which we owe our very being.

Thank you.