

# Emphasis on sustainability in new approach to environmental reports

**D**EVELOPERS need to contribute more, otherwise nature and mankind will continue their "race to the bottom", a leading international thinker on sustainable development has warned. South African Dr Nick King was the CEO of the Endangered Wildlife Trust and is now the director of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility in Copenhagen.

He was a guest speaker at the department of environmental affairs and tourism's environmental impact assessment (EIA) 10-year review conference in Somerset East last week. The department is calling for greater emphasis to be put on proactive and strategic environmental planning, and for monitoring and enforcement to be bolstered.

Better strategic frameworks can play an important role in avoiding unnecessary impacts as they "should discourage applications in areas that are not suitable", according to this latest thinking from the department.

King argues, however, that while these proposals are laudable, they will

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not halt the catastrophic slide in biodiversity that rampant unsustainable development is contributing to.

Even if these proposals are implemented,

the EIA system is still geared towards "mitigating *ad nauseam*", allowing, finally, even the most potentially hazardous projects to be approved.

The international community appears to be making relatively good progress towards achieving, by 2015, seven of the eight millennium development goals - to eradicate hunger, achieve universal primary education, empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV and malaria, and form a "global partnership for development". But this progress is short term at best, because we are failing calamitously to achieve the most important, framing goal - "to ensure environmental sustainability".

Part of this failure is a failure of governance, and South Africa is a case in point, King says. We have excellent environmental policy, but our water and air



Nick King

quality continues to decline, as reflected in the government's own Outlook report, just published.

Climate change is tightening the vice further. As species are lost, so too are the myriad ecological services they contribute to, not least, pollination of crops. Food security and other pillars of our civilisation face collapse if wild animal and plant species vanish.

Natural disease controllers like frogs, which eat mosquitos, will perish if habitat corridors are not maintained. Mosquitos, which can travel with human communities, will survive. Diseases like malaria will flourish.

The only way to turn this "ship of the dead" around is to decide on a policy level that human health and well-being is the central objective of sustainable development, not profit for a single company or small group of people.

Once that is decided, then the envisaged new approach, environmental contribution assessment (ECA), becomes a logical step, King says.

"ECA will ask questions like will this development improve local livelihoods, without causing loss of tradition, culture, land, access to resources?



Will it improve water quality and quantity? Will it create/improve habitat contiguity? Will it improve the status of threatened species? Will gains last beyond the life of the project?"

ECA will ensure not only that impacts are minimised or that there is "no net loss", but it will ensure "net environmental gain".

It will eschew "balancing trade-offs" which, by definition, means someone or some part of the environment will be a loser. Rather, it will recognise ecological and social inter-dependencies and achieve "multiple reinforcing gains or trade-ups".

Well into the consumption of our "second Earth" in terms of the sum of resources available to us, we have left ourselves just two options, King says.

One is to continue along the collapsing trajectory that will take us through poor governance, unsustainable resource use, continued degradation of natural capital, degraded social capital, and around again. The other is to push for good governance, which will result in sustainability, enhanced natural capital, enhanced social capital – and around again, in a steadily strengthening "arc of hope".

Wouldn't it be amazing if our metro took the lead on to this path?