

Proclaim the wise use of nature

By Capt Rod Jeffery,
RFIM Cape Town

The Corporate Environmental Policy Statement for Defence, promulgated in DODI No 33/2000, makes a profound and far-reaching statement in which it proclaims that the DOD will "accept responsibility for sustainable use of the environment entrusted to it". In an organisation where it is presumed that its activities inherently destroy the environment, this is truly a huge responsibility that we as members of the SANDF have to take up.

But what is meant by this new "green" buzzword - "sustainable use"?

Put simply, it refers to the "wise use" of the environment in which we operate. The use of nature seems to contradict everything that the conservationists have been fighting for. However, at the 18th General Assembly for the IUCN - the World Conservation Union, held in Perth, Australia in as far back as 1990, utilisation of nature, per se, was formally recognised as a legitimate and potentially powerful conservation tool! So, is it an about-face by the conservation movement? Or has there been some serious soul-searching, which has resulted in new insights?

The latter is almost certainly the case. There is a growing awareness that the conservation of many plants and animals, and of large tracts of

In the name of conservation.

habitats, may ultimately depend on programmes being introduced that encourage the wise utilisation of the environment. In a Defence Force context, far from hindering conservation by utilising military terrains for training, one may well be relegating the plants and animals in these areas to extinction by not utilising such areas. Globally speaking therefore, the key conservation issue today is how much of the earth's surface can be allocated to conservation programmes that seek only preservation?

The Brundtland Report on the environment and development makes a profound contribution to our understanding of global conservation problems. It points to poverty as the single most important cause of environmental degradation, while advancing the concept of sustainable utilisation as a means of attacking the problem without incurring severe environmental degradation, the same point that was voiced at the World Earth Summit held in Johannesburg in 2002.

In reality, the net result of conservation efforts around the world translates to about five percent of the earth's land surface being within nominally protected areas. Even here, a major international effort will be needed to achieve and maintain that protection, which has so far proved almost impossible - even on five percent of the globe. Yet our survival, and that of most plants and animals, will depend largely on what happens in the remaining 95 percent.



One of many cultural historical resources protected on DOD controlled properties.



The White Rhinoceros, one of the various Red Data animal species protected on DOD controlled land.

The time has come to question the basic philosophies that have been so successful in initiating interest in conservation and environmental issues over the last thirty years. For many of us, simply "liking" plants and animals is sufficient reason to work for conservation. But such forms of motivation or incentives are not very effective when the very survival of people is dependent on the primary use of land and natural habitats. The challenge facing conservationists today is the development of innovative strategies for maintaining habitats outside protected areas.

The Defence Force must realise that it is not in the core business of animal preservation or game farming. DOD controlled land is made available by the State for the primary purpose of its military application and Force Preparation. Added to this is the goal of ecological management, which is to ensure the sustainability of the terrain for present and future uses, whatever that may turn out to be.

In respect of military training areas, a basic economic question becomes: "How much do training

areas have to be 'worth' before it will generate more value per unit area than can come from conventional agriculture?" If it can be made more "valuable" than conventional agriculture, it can be legitimately pursued for the country's benefit!

The keeping of military terrain solely for the "destructive use" of military activities without any regard for the sustainable management and wise use of the land does not cut it any more. Modern civil society will not tolerate it. As custodians of the land, we have a responsibility to look after it to its fullest economic (not necessarily monetary) potential. If the land becomes more viable for agricultural purposes, what justification does the military have to keep that land while the African continent suffers from poverty and famine? As a well-trained soldier cannot march on an empty stomach, a country cannot feed itself on a well-trained Defence Force!

In the same breath, keeping military controlled land as nature reserves in the name of conservation also does not make sense. What economic right or business does the Defence Force have to keep large

tracts of land in the name of conservation and animal preservation?

By themselves, these two reasons for military training areas have no justification, but what is needed is an amalgamation of these two concepts, which boils down to Military Integrated Ecological Management, a new buzzword that means nothing more than the sustainable wise use of our environment. The "fighters" and "Bokwagters" must stop seeing each other as adversaries and join to make our ecologically important terrain sustainably viable in the name of conservation and training integrity.

Clearly, terrain utilisation programmes need to be evaluated carefully and should be tailored to the specific conditions that exist in the area under consideration. It is not simply the solving of a biological problem, but rather the evaluation of a complex, interdisciplinary, multi-variate problem in which socio-economic factors may be all important. Utilisation of a military terrain also requires careful and continuous monitoring; and, flowing from the investigative results of the monitoring programme, management objectives must be constantly reassessed, readjusted and sometimes redefined. This is essential if the use to which the terrain is being subjected is to remain efficient, effective and consistently sustainable.

To reject sustainable utilisation (Wise Use) of terrain outright, on philosophical grounds, is a narrow path to tread. If one believes that habitat utilisation cannot be an effective tool in ecological management, than one should devote energy in trying to prove that it can. However, having been through this exercise, I suspect strongly that the majority of people will soon realise that there are sound reasons why the DOD Corporate Environmental Policy Statement proclaims the wise use of the environment. It remains for the rest of the Defence Force to evaluate whether they are helping or hindering conservation by not accepting this responsibility. 