

## BIOPHILE 14 – MAY 2009

### ‘NIMBY’ CONSERVATIONISTS

Conservationists. You gotta love ‘em – it seems they’ll do anything but conserve. Well most of them, that is. These days they’re invariably part of the cocktail classes. They have a mansion in Jo’burg, a place at the coast and a pad in London. Perhaps even a wine farm. And once they’ve filled their play-pens with Irma Sterns, Verve Clicquot and world-weary friends they move their languorous gazes to what they can ‘conserve’. Good for the CV and the obituary, don’t you know. And the mukkers will regard you as a jolly fine chap.

So they shunt some shekels at the EWT, join the WWF and buy a large chunk of wilderness – preferably a larger chunk than the Jones’s. This they promptly fence off and stock with whatever species take their fancy. Then they build a thatched monstrosity, buy a bird book or two and whiz around their new sand-pit in their Toyota Landcruisers. After a weekend’s over-indulgence on foie-gras and Brittany oysters, they put their chino trousered buns into the heli and fly back to the board-room battlegrounds, congratulating themselves on their work as planet-savers.

They just don’t get it. And they’re not alone, either – I see this staggering myopia playing out all the time in our national game reserves, private conservancies and bush tour operations. I see it on TV shows like 50/50 and channels like National Geographic and Discovery. You see, as Fritjof Capra so eloquently puts it in his book *The Turning Point* (which became the 1992 movie *Mindwalk*):

**“Healing the universe is an inside job.”**

Conservation begins and ends with altering our *personal* conduct to the point where we leave as small a footprint on the earth as possible. And there’s no room for the Nimby principal here (as in ‘Not in my back yard’). There is absolutely no point in preserving one corner of the planet that we love, while our general life-style messes up someone else’s.

And in order not to foul up those places beyond our immediate reach and gaze, the most pressing (but unpopular) thing we need to do is to address the way we *eat*. Think about the following (if you haven't done so before, and I know most readers of *Biophile* have):

- Meat production is accountable for more greenhouse gas emissions than transport.
- Meat production is the primary cause of deforestation and habitat destruction.
- Intensively farmed animals are the leading consumers of water resources.
- Intensively farmed animals' effluent is a major cause of ground- and surface-water pollution.

Ergo, if you consider yourself a 'conservationist' surely you should not eat meat? Or eat it only very rarely.

I am so tired of visiting game reserves and conservancies where the owners trot out smug assurances of how 'green' they are just because they use long-life bulbs, separate their garbage and 'adopt' iconic individuals of doomed animal species. Meanwhile guests are served obscene quantities of meat three times a day (plus the customary biltong with drinks). Leaving aside the gross speciesism inherent in this decision-making, it seems to me that you can't fancy yourself a fighter for the range-states of buffaloes when you are literally eating up those range-states by eating their bovine cousins. Clearing a river bed of wattle on your private piece of paradise is all well and good, but not when you then consume a half kilo steak for dinner which cost the earth 50 000 litres of water.

Perhaps, though, things are starting to change. Last year I traveled with some conservationists who really do try and walk their talk. They're championing a long-gone migration corridor between Knysna Forest and Addo Elephant Reserve, whose partial or complete restoration would be a tremendous boon for biodiversity in the region. One of the fundraising and educational projects they stage is a hike between these two places involving a 400km traverse of 7 mountain ranges in 18 days. It's a wondrous thing, and deserves a column of its own. But for now, trust me when I tell you that if you're a nature lover and hiker, this should be on your bucket list. (Visit [www.edentoaddo.co.za](http://www.edentoaddo.co.za)).

What impressed me were the efforts shown by organizers Joan Berning and Galeo Saintz to try and engage the footies on how to live mindfully, but without being prattish and preachy. Sure, some of the stuff they did is now commonplace: trees planted in recompense for air-miles clocked up; campsites chosen and managed with care; talks and debates around the fire on topics like how humankind has lost its connectedness with most things that sustain and inspire. Etc, etc, etc. But it was their meals that really made me rubber-neck. No pork was served, because of the shocking way in which pigs are intensively farmed in South Africa. Only free range beef and lamb were on the menu, because although these animals' deaths might be horrific, at least their lives are quasi-natural. It's a start, and at least these folk are making an effort to address the issue of meat-eating and its huge impact on bio-diversity.

And the hike gave some classic pointers on how far we still have to go in getting people to join the dots between what's on their plate and what's not in the *veld*. This region's predators (notably their leopards) are under a terrible siege by local farmers who still use those barbaric gin-traps. But the average consumer of lamb doesn't appear to recognize his or her culpability in what's being perpetrated. I remember one especially poignant day. We had walked for hours through what was once a massive springbok *vlakke*, now completely ravaged by a combination of drought and badly managed sheep farming. Buck lay twisted and rotting against the fences, erected to keep livestock in, but preventing the game from finding what little water was available. If a place can be called evil, this surely was. But that night, what should be on the menu? Lamb *potjie*. And the footies tucked in with glee and gusto. Go figure.

One of the questions asked on the post-hike feedback form was whether hikers would sign up for the *Eden to Addo Mega Hike* if only vegetarian food was served. "No" was the overwhelming majority response. Ho hum. A luta continua.