

## **How green is my politics?**

### **Book review**

Cock, J and Koch, E (eds) (1991) **Going green: People, politics and the environment in South Africa**. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

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**Going Green** sets itself out to inform its readers about some of the most urgent environmental issues within the political framework of South Africa, both historically and at present. The editors, Jacklyn Cock and Eddie Koch and seventeen other contributors ranging from ecologists, through journalists to trade unionists have collectively addressed ecological/environmental problems facing South Africa, and attempted to show the atrocious damage done to our environment and in particular as a result of apartheid politics. There are seventeen chapters and ten profiles on some of the more active people within South Africa's green movement. Each page has bold type quotes extracted from the text and highlighting some of the more startling perspectives in each chapter. Profiles are brief but informative and serve to introduce readers to some of the people who have contributed to the green movement in South Africa. Selected references for each chapter follow at the end of the book.

Reading this book is not a particularly pleasant experience, not because it is superficial or lacking in fact, both of these things it definitely is not, but

because of the constant realisation that every aspect of our South African landscape has been irretrievably damaged through the ravages of apartheid. Each of the contributors has addressed their area of expertise with an understanding of the inextricable link between the environment and the people within it. It is this approach which constantly reminds us that despite the understanding of environmental processes and ecological dynamics within a human oriented world, the environment is continuing to suffer under ongoing and unrelenting stress, and will continue to do so for some time to come. In this respect the editors have achieved their goal - to provide a host of facts which are aimed at engendering ongoing concern. There are few solutions offered, but rather a clear set of do's and don'ts.

Some of the chapters (for example by Jacklyn Cock, Eddie Koch, Marianne Felix, Rod Crompton and Alec Erwin) concentrate mainly on the relationship between people and the environment, in contrast to those (by Mark Gandar, Henk Coetzee, David Cooper, Francis Manuel, Jan Glazewski and John Ledger) which examine some of South Africa's natural resources more specifically. It is the former approach which is particularly useful for readers interested in environmental problems as there is a constant confrontation between the environmental resource and the human population, and suggestions are made about how the two can work compatibly. However it is essential for readers to be informed of some of the basic ecological factors that affect the South African people, and the two approaches are well integrated.

There are constant reminders that caring for the environment does not only mean saving endangered species (the importance of this work cannot be denied), but also caring for those basic resources that improve the quality of life for all South Africans. Mark Gandar in his chapter concerning the sources of power/energy in South Africa, notes how wasteful South Africa is regarding energy usage and says "it is only possible to have true energy conservation in a resource-conscious society". He comments that it is essential to examine new relationships between energy, development and the environment, at the same time remaining aware that the sustainability of the economy rests on the ways that energy and other resources are used. Similarly Henk Coetzee and David Cooper emphasise the generally poor water supplies in the country and also the appalling levels of pollution within those waterways that are used as waste disposal avenues. John Ledger reviews the status of South Africa's flora and fauna, and appeals for the conservation of biodiversity, particularly in the light of criticisms that have been levelled at conservationists who apparently have more concern for wildlife than the very people who populate our country. The proposed removal of people in the Mbangweni Corridor that lies between Ndumo

Game reserve and Tembe Elephant Reserve is such a case in point. It is argued that the consolidation of these two reserves would be to the benefit of the wildlife, and especially the elephants as they would have access to the large stretches of water that occur within the Ndumo Reserve. However since the initial controversial removals took place that allowed for the creation of the Tembe Elephant Reserve, some kind of understanding is emerging in some of the more progressive conservation bodies, which seeks to include local communities in the conservation movement. This would preclude removal of people from land which is historically their own. David Fig documents the community struggles in Namaqualand, and outlines the process by which the Richtersveld became established as a community Reserve. Here the local people are involved in the management of the area and receive the benefits from conservation directly. This trend is also followed in Namibia where communities are being included in the maintenance of wildlife reserves. Margaret Jacobsohn outlines some of the difficulties faced in this region where local people were threatened by wildlife and apparently viewed the desert elephants in particular, as enemies fighting for similar resources. Consequently the Purros Project was set up to reconcile the development of the Reserve (and consequently the tourist trade) with the needs of the local communities.

John Ledger believes that it is critical for all South Africans to "create some kind of consensus ... concerning the environment that must sustain this and future generations, irrespective of what political dispensation may prevail". He further outlines the IUCN's Ethical Basis for conserving Biodiversity, and emphasises the clause, "All persons must be empowered to exercise responsibility for their own lives and for life on earth. They must therefore have full access to educational opportunities, political enfranchisement, and sustaining livelihoods". It is some of these sorts of issues that are the focus of the chapters by Eddie Koch and Marianne Felix. She focuses on some of the community consequences of living in the vicinity of asbestos mills, and the manoeuvring of big companies such as GENCOR, when evidence of asbestos related diseases began to trickle out. The continued lack of awareness and also helplessness of the affected communities is highlighted. Eddie Koch looks specifically at the development of "rainbow alliances", the phenomenon where communities rally around an ecological problem, and comments on the need for more permanent organisations to lobby around environmental issues and their effects on people.

The problems of an ever-increasing urban population are addressed by Lesley Lawson. She notes that one of the most effective ways of dealing with these problems lie in the development of active civic organisations. The common belief that overpopulation is the causative agent of environmental degradation

is examined by Barbara Klugman. She argues that both colonialism and apartheid have together destroyed the balance between economic resources and population growth, with the resulting environmental degradation. In order to overcome some of these problems adequate health care and education are vital, thus allowing women in particular, to take control of their lives and promote a reduced fertility.

Rod Crompton and Alec Erwin take a very careful look at the environment within the context of labour. After situating the environment for the vast majority of South Africans within industry, they show that separation of the "work environment" from the "environment" is false. Crompton and Erwin outline the COSATU position which aims to "address basic problems of poverty, unemployment and shortages of basic social infrastructure such as housing: to increase employment, wages and incomes from small-scale business enterprises: to re-integrate our manufacturing sector into world markets on a competitive basis; and to upgrade the skills and capacities of our human resources". The concern for the environment is not ignored and they stress that economic development can only go as far as the environmental limits.

It is clear that **Going Green** does not answer the multitude of environmental problems that face South Africa, but simply outlines some of them. As one of the first South African books to attempt an eco-political evaluation of the environment, it will be of immense value to both environmentalists and green politicians. All too often the struggles faced by communities are buried in special reports which are not available to the general public, or they receive brief newspaper coverage. Similarly the efforts of conservationists are seldom presented to the general public outside the ambit of expensive coffee-table volumes. In **Going Green** there is an attempt to link these two aspects, and to present them for general consumption in a relatively inexpensive collection.