

Government and industry need to shift their mindset on the environment

By Hannah Winkler MP – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs

We are standing at a crossroads and the path before us should be clear; but we are floundering, blinded by a lack of understanding of the environmental catastrophe that is unfolding around us. Of the National estimated expenditure for 2018/2019, which is 1.83 trillion, the estimated expenditure for the Department of Environmental Affairs is 7.5 billion. Of that, the amount spent on Administration is more than 10 times what is allocated towards Air Quality Management, or more than 7 times what is allocated towards Integrated Waste Management. Astoundingly, a whopping R 242 million will be spent on office accommodation, in the current financial year.

What you see here is not just a plastic bottle, but a warning, an omen. By 2050, it is predicted that there will be more plastic in the sea than fish. If this isn't enough to sound the alarm bells, research has suggested that we may be eating one credit card worth of plastic per week.

As South Africans we use 30kg – 50kg of plastic per person, per year. Our land, rivers, and oceans are full of plastic and waste. In the deepest trenches of our oceans, the places we know least about, animals have been found to have ingested microplastics. In shallow waters, the devastating impact is even more apparent with fish, whales, turtles and seabirds found with gut-wrenching stomachs full of plastic garbage.

According to the World Wildlife Foundation, only 10% of waste is recycled in South Africa: single-use plastics which include packets, sachets, wasteful frivolous packaging on consumables, and microbeads in cosmetic products; these are not a need, they are a scourge. We are throwing away our plastic garbage as if there were no tomorrow – with the bare minimum of re-use and recycling.

Plastics continue to find their way into landfills because of a lack of recycling culture in South Africa and constant failure by municipalities to allow effective separation at source. In addition to this, almost 40% of plastics that find their way to landfill sites are not recyclable because of their toxicity. The only way to fix this is through legislating corporates to act responsibly in plastic production.

We urgently need a shift in mindset in government and industry: right from the producer down to the consumer to get the circular plastics economy functioning. We are the only custodians of the environment; yet, we are failing her miserably.

We speak of the priority of job creation, yet we sit on a goldmine of around R17 billion worth of waste materials dumped yearly at landfill sites. There is an entire informal economy of waste pickers that are being sidelined in favor of private contractors in the recycling sector. They should be absorbed and empowered into organised and functioning co-operatives. The various waste streams could be used to generate 1000s of jobs; instead, we are burying our waste with zero economic benefit and destroying our environment in the process.

The Department of Environmental Affairs instituted a plastic bag levy in 2004; yet, where is the money going? In 2018/2019, the plastic bag levy was increased by 50%. Of this, the vast majority went towards the National Revenue Fund, instead of being funneled back into fixing the myriad environmental challenges we face ahead of the coming ravages of climate change. I find this illogical and unconscionable.

Whilst plastic pollution has become an economic and ethical crisis, municipalities are filling landfills with waste faster than they can manage and the trajectory of our ability to manage waste is in crisis.

There is a grave problem with many municipalities and their inability to manage and enforce regulatory obligations which exist to protect people living near dumpsites: our people are suffering from serious respiratory illness and other diseases - they are dying. Where is the hazardous waste management plan? Where are the working, ambient air quality monitors for these hazardous landfill sites, so that we can protect the most vulnerable? We are spending R245 million on tyre recycling operations this year; but can't seem to get the data from one working ambient air quality monitor in KwaZulu-Natal?

Caring about our environment is not an elitist cause – how can the desire for clean air, clean water, for oceans and rivers teeming over with fish and marine life, and the preservation of wildlife for future generations be elitist? In the wake of environmental catastrophe, it is those with economic means that are able to flee – to access clean water, air and land. It is the poorest that will have to remain behind and suffer for our collective lack of conscience.

Honorable Minister, the environmental ethic that informs our relationship to the world around us is antiquated and must be revised. It is in fact one of our most important questions of our generation and our moral obligation to do so.