

In order to succeed the Department must be capable and corruption-free

By James Lorimer MP – DA Shadow Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs

There are some overarching priorities for this portfolio. First, we must work out how South Africa's environmental resources can be harnessed in the best way to provide a path out of poverty for as many of our people as possible. Use of the environment must be sustainable, or it is pointless. Government must ensure that in climbing out of poverty, we do not inherit a wasteland that is unhealthy or not worth living in. Aspects of our environmental legacy are a birth right that our citizens should have an opportunity to experience.

The second priority is oversight. Money allocated for environmental tasks should be well spent. A first look at the department charged with these tasks shows a decidedly mixed bag. I understand that it is natural in presenting a report for any department to want to play down its failures, but the absence of the word "adverse" in relation to its audit findings from the Department's report to last week's committee meetings was amateurish and has presented a credibility problem that will endure. Mumbled explanations about a change in accounting practices do not hide the fact that statements were not delivered on time and vast amounts of money cannot be accounted for. This amounts to managerial ineptitude on a massive scale.

If we can't trust the Department to be straight with Parliament as it conducts oversight it will cast doubt on everything the Department does. We must ensure that our oversight has a focus on eliminating corruption. Corruption is powered by graft, encouraged by a lack of consequences and enabled by mismanagement. This must be cleaned up, and quickly.

If you want to tackle corruption you need look no further than the awarding of a South African National Parks tender to Thebe Tourism for the Selati Railway Bridge hotel development at Skukuza in the Kruger National Park. In case anybody needs reminding, Thebe Tourism is a subsidiary of Thebe Investments of which the largest shareholder at almost 50% is the Batho Batho trust. The sole beneficiary of the Batho Batho Trust is the African National Congress. So here you have the ANC government entity of SANPARKS giving a tender to the African National Congress. If that's not criminal behaviour it should be. At the very least it is unethical and has affected SANPARKS's credibility. The officials involved in the award of this tender should be investigated and disciplined.

If the Minister is truly concerned with outing the rot in the entities in her new department, she should introduce lifestyle audits of officials and follow-through investigations of those who have unexplained wealth. It doesn't have to be everybody but a random audit of a number of officials every month would encourage good behaviour.

The third priority must be protecting our rich wildlife heritage. In his recent State of the Nation Address, the President put forward the ambitious plan of doubling our tourism in the next eleven years. It is a laudable aim and speaks directly to an area where this department can most impact our unemployment crisis. If we are to receive tourists, many of whom will come to view our rich wildlife heritage, we will need to expand the land area that is allocated to protected conservation areas. We will be urging the authorities to focus on this as a major goal. There are many areas of the country

that have the potential to be declared national parks or to be conservancies, some of them privately owned, that could be integrated with our national park system to create major areas where biodiversity can be enhanced and protected.

It is going to be important when we do this, to ensure that areas designated for preservation are not degraded by other activities. To this end, I believe we should be looking at legislation that ensures a barrier zone that will keep activities like mining away from the direct boundaries of our parks. A case in point is the proposal for a giant coal mine directly on the southern border of the Kruger National Park. This is an area which provides major tourism earnings which would be destroyed if the noise and dust of an open pit were recklessly permitted. Barrier zone legislation, that specifies exact exclusion zones around exactly which protected areas will provide a degree of legislative certainty for prospective miners that is currently missing.

There's another anomaly in our mining licencing process where the Mining Department is also the authorising authority on environmental permits for mines. The Department of Mineral Resources or DMR as it is now, does not have the expertise or the capacity to properly perform this function and it should be carried out by the people who can do it, the Department of the Environment as is the case of the majority of mining jurisdictions worldwide.

Mining has left a historic legacy of adverse environmental effects. When things go wrong, as with the disgraceful official neglect of the bad operational practices at Mintails on the West Rand, the environmental authorities should be empowered and capacitated to act. In the end, the liability will become the problem of the environmental authority. Efforts to amend rules covering this situation should be fast tracked.

South Africa's natural heritage is an asset that belongs to all our people. When a rhino is poached from a national park, it is an asset that belongs to all of us that is being stolen. Are we winning the battle against rhino poaching? Poaching statistics may be down, but it is unclear how much of this reduction is due to improved law enforcement, poverty relief programmes or the disquieting thought that it may be down because there are simply fewer rhino to be found in our national parks.

It is time for the Department to be transparent on this issue. We need to know how many rhinos are left in our national parks and whether their numbers are growing or shrinking. If they are shrinking, then the Department needs to come up with a new plan that works to preserve the future of rhinos. There are other forms of wildlife trafficking too, which need to be given more attention than they are currently getting.

These are just a few of the big issues that confront our environment. My colleagues will focus on others. These issues need to be addressed and the place to start is in ensuring an honest and capable department. Until that happens, chances of success are remote. People's livelihoods and lives are at stake.