



ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES

by **Charl van der Merwe**,
Pr.Sc.Nat.

*On behalf of Sedgefield
Ratepayers Association*

Our Constitution, and specifically our Bill of Rights, gives us the right-

- (1) to an environment that is not harmful to our health or well-being, and
- (2) to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through legislative and other measures that-
- (a) prevent pollution and ecological degradation,
- (b) promote conservation, and
- (c) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.

However, we also have a responsibility to protect and sustain our environment. That responsibility could be simple actions such as reducing waste, recycling, and using energy-efficient products, conserving water, learning more of the subject, influencing others and advocating for environmental policies. We can support businesses that prioritise sustainability and boycott those that harm our environment. We can also participate in community initiatives like tree planting, clean-up drives, and awareness campaigns and report ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES. Protecting and improving the quality and safety of our environment is one of our critical outcomes aimed at ensuring that the current and future generations will continue to enjoy their constitutionally enshrined right to an environment that is not harmful.

What is an Environmental Crime?

An environmental crime is an illegal act which directly harms the environment. These illegal activities involve our

environment, wildlife, biodiversity, habitats and natural resources.

The following are environmental crimes any reader can encounter:

- **Wild life crime:** Illegal wildlife trade in endangered species in contravention of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES).
- **Illegal mining:** is not only mining for precious metals, but also sand mining.
- **Pollution crimes:** Littering, or dumping of any waste on or in the soil, in the ocean or in a lagoon.

Illegal and unregulated fishing

- in contravention of controls imposed by various management organisations.

Illegal logging

- and the associated trade in stolen timber in violation of national laws. Illegal cutting or pruning of protected trees such as Milkwoods
- **Illegal collection of** wildflowers or bulbs or any other flora.
- **Illegal collection of** chameleons, tortoises and other reptiles or indigenous fauna.
- **Poaching** in the sea or on land.
- **Deliberate destruction of** cultural historical sites such as kitchen middens.

Environmental crimes are liable for prosecution and the 2024 Western Cape State of Environment Outlook Report points out that the continued degradation of Western Cape biodiversity resources is evident, *with current safeguarding and restoration efforts unable to counteract the overall decline.* This loss, especially in Critical Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) and Ecological Support Areas (ESAs), threatens not only our province's rich natural heritage but also its livelihoods, water security, and climate resilience. Immediate and effective action is needed to halt particularly unlawful habitat destruction and deterioration in

general, but specifically in CBAs, and to hold transgressors accountable.

Biodiversity delivers valuable long-term contributions to people, such as clean water for drinking, irrigation, and industrial use; fishing grounds; grazing land; pollination of crops and natural vegetation; soil formation; clean air; climate regulation; tourism opportunities; flood attenuation and disaster risk reduction. Biodiversity fundamentally sustains life and underpins many aspects of human well-being and socio-economic development. Such biodiversity includes our mountain catchments, rivers, wetlands, coastal dunes, tracts and corridors of natural vegetation, and the immense diversity of plants and animals in our province. Biodiversity forms the foundation for all ecosystem goods and services, which in turn provides the base upon which the economy and all of society functions.

The 2005 State of Environment Report for the Western Cape, and again in the 2013 edition, concern was expressed that the health of the coastal zone was deteriorating, citing increasing pressure from tourism, economic growth and over exploitation of fish stocks as the primary drivers of this situation. The ongoing high levels of transformation of terrestrial threatened ecosystems in the coastal zone (our dunes), primarily due to human activity, and rising pollution levels, are particularly alarming.

The Western Cape Province highlights many areas of concern with regard to the impact human populations are having on the dynamic and often sensitive coastal and marine environments. Of particular concern is the threat status of large areas of marine ecosystems and the high levels of transformation of terrestrial threatened ecosystems in the coastal belt, mostly as a result of human activity. Furthermore, these impacts are exacerbated by global environmental problems such as climate change.

Our Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning encourages the public to take responsibility in the protection of the environment. **An Environmental Crimes and Incident Hotline** has been established for members of the public to report environmental crimes and incidents happening around their areas - **0800 205 005**.

Enjoy the holiday season, be safe and take care of our environment, it is all we have!