

OPINION PIECE: PROJECTS WEBSITE

THE BAYWATCH MARINE CONSERVATION PROJECT, A FIRST FOR AFRICA, ESTABLISHED 1992.

The challenges of conservation in South Africa.

South Africa's vast biodiversity has stunned visitors since the first naturalists in 1644 until recent day tourists. The terrestrial side is under threat from habitat destruction and invasion by alien species. The marine sector faces rampant over utilization of resources and pollution. While most of Europe's biodiversity was unwittingly destroyed many years ago, the indigenous people of South Africa lived in relative harmony with nature. Knowing the evils of the past in Europe and South Africa, we need to preserve what we have left.

Unlike Europe, our state departments entrusted with preserving biodiversity have been the centre of many a storm, being exposed for corruption and non execution of their duties. We have some of the best environmental laws in the world but are simply unable to apply them effectively. This is exacerbated by the expanse of the country and high levels of poverty, pushing people towards poaching as a means of survival.

Often the problem with privately funded conservation projects is that they have to dance to the tune of the funders. Some spend too much money on running costs than on getting the job done. More intermediaries mean less money available for effective conservation actions. Self funding seems to be the least costly and most effective way forward.

The Baywatch Project has marine education as its main objective. It started off using off duty policeman and community volunteers to enforce marine laws i.e. more effective policing without additional costs. After a while our emphasis shifted towards marine education. Rather educate people in order to try and prevent environmental destruction from happening in the first place. We educate the community and especially the youth about the marine environment and the need for its protection and conservation. This educational initiative is self funded by money generated by our marine eco cruises into Algoa Bay. We give hundreds of presentations throughout the Eastern Cape and South Africa. At schools learners are given marine conservation tasks and top achievers are rewarded with marine eco cruises into Algoa Bay. The best way to breed new activists is to take them into our marine wonderland.

We produced an educational book on the marine animals of our bay in 2005, as well as a constant stream of articles, radio and television programs about the need to protect our environment. We help save entangled whales and assist scores of marine scientists in their vital research in and around Algoa Bay.

So how can Europeans be of assistance in preserving biodiversity in South Africa? We recently introduced the volunteer program and volunteers from Europe have helped us enormously in achieving our objectives. Unlike others, we do not work through agencies (reducing intermediaries reduces costs) and our volunteers are actively involved in our projects after the necessary training. We need to regularly

recruit suitably motivated volunteers that will assist us in facing the new challenges to our fragile eco systems that confront us on a daily basis.

Lloyd Edwards
Raggy Charters/The Baywatch Project