

Councilors 'Work on Nature Projects'

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LEADERS in traditionally black residential areas have never been overly speedy coming forward on environmental issues – but Kwazakhele councillors are changing that paradigm.

In May, on behalf of his Ward 10 constituency, councillor Mike Msizi challenged the air pollution being generated by Algorax.

The company said at the time that the timing of the April 30 equipment failure, which resulted in a discharge of carbon power, did not correlate with the residents' specific claim of when they were hit, and neither did the wind direction.

A spokesman for the company said yesterday that the matter had been probed, and no evidence of wrong-doing on their part had been found.

Which may or may not be the end of the story. But the point here is that the residents' councillor raised a question on their behalf on an issue which has seldom been interrogated in this way by these leaders.

Another Kwazakhele councillor, Monwabisi Gomomo of Ward 21, is also taking the environment seriously.

As we reported last week, Gomomo is spearheading, together with Ilungelo Primary School and Birdlife Eastern Cape, a project to turn Pond Six – a wetland stretching along the east side of the Madlingozi-McAppukiso thoroughfare – into a nature reserve.

The vision is to capitalise on the rich birdlife on the vlei, to clear away the litter and to plant indigenous trees. Gomomo's aim is that the residents will benefit directly from the healthier environment and from gaining access to an urban zone of beauty and peace of the kind previously confined to white suburbia.

The second-phase vision would be to attract paying tourists, with the funds raised to be ploughed back into the community.

When we visited the site last week, a spokesman for the volunteer clean-up team told me they were scared of snakes next to the vlei, so an application had been made to the metro for gumboots and gloves.

One hopes that, in line with Gomomo's excellent initiative and the metro's stated support for the project, this request will be speedily approved.

The thing that makes the Pond Six project such a special one is that, across the Eastern Cape, our wetlands – key waterfowl zones which supply a range of free services, including stemming floods, filtering out pollution and replenishing groundwater – are under siege.

The threats come from agriculture, invasive alien plants, dumping, pollution and infrastructural, commercial and residential development.

Here, a vlei that was barely surviving, is being resuscitated and reassessed in terms of its intrinsic value for the community. What's even more special of course is that it's happening in a township, surrounded by residents who up until now have regarded it simply as a generator of mosquitos and a place where their children could drown.

As has been explained to them, the mosquitoes would have been thriving on the dirty water trapped in the piles of rubbish and if this is cleared up the problem should abate considerably. The more the birds and frogs are welcomed, furthermore, the more they will control the mosquitos and other goggas.

In a more affluent area, the humble brick homes and shacks along the vlei, with their view of flamingoes and water, would comprise instead a millionaire's row.

These households may never reach those heights, but much more attainable is quality of life, which is much more valuable anyway.

A fence around the vlei is being planned with the aim of keeping out untended children – although the pledge to local stock owners is that their cattle will not be barred, quite rightly, in keeping with the African setting.

One wonders how it is going to work, then. Kids also get through fences (in fact they are probably attracted to them). And this kind of barrier anyway seems at odds, aesthetically and spiritually, with the aim of opening up hidden value.

Perhaps there is a more holistic solution. With a little application and money, an awareness programme aimed at households and schools could be launched, swimming lessons could be introduced and a team employed from the local community to patrol the banks.

About a kilometre north of the vlei is the abandoned, dilapidated but very intriguing old Swartkops power station.

How about creating a "green lung", a corridor of open space for people and wildlife, linking the nature reserve and the power station – which could be turned into cultural hub for art exhibitions, theatre, dance, film, music?

Imithi yesiXhosa – Plants for Health, Life and Spirit in Africa, a landmark exhibition staged at the Grahamstown Festival this year, identified the visceral link between Xhosa tradition and the natural world, arguing that the protection of our bio-diversity is vital to keeping this link alive.

In a different way, the "power station theatre", linked by an umbilical cord to the vlei, could be used to take forward this equation, to re-fire especially our youth, of all races and cultures, to create something vibrant and unique.

After attending the launch of Lumka Nzimela's African Habitat B&B in Uitenhage last week, I wanted to find out more about black-owned accommodation establishments in the metro, so I spoke to Nelson Mandela Bay Tourism.

Unlike Jo'burg, which is bursting in this regard, there are not many of these establishments here, which is interesting. The only ones on NMBT's books, besides African Habitat, are Ekhayeni B&B in Motherwell, Fundani Township Lodge in New Brighton, Ebony Lodge in Kwazakhele, Moonlight B&B in North End and Bethel B&B in Cleary Estate.

Tourism spokesman Phumeza Gxashe said that, while the organisation was always happy to see new formerly disadvantaged owners coming into the industry, they should be aware of the realities. Bookings now, for instance, are very quiet, and anyone involved in offering tourism services needs to be able to ride these quiet periods.

Tying in with the vlei reserve and the power station cultural hub, if a couple of traditional Xhosa-style B&Bs were established along the edge of the vlei, in line with Gomomo's mid-phase plan, they would not only dovetail with the character of the project, but could do well, I think.