

Power to the planet

IT IS difficult to think of one area of South African life that has not been distorted by apartheid.

It has distorted our society, our economy, our education system, and, most obviously, our politics. Less apparent has been the way in which it has degraded our environment.

The most obvious effects can be seen in the degradation and erosion of much of the land in the homelands. These scattered tracts of land have been forced to cope with hundreds of thousands of "surplus people", whose presence in "white" South Africa was unwelcome. Now we face the "future shock" of the environmental effects of rapid urbanisation with all its attendant pollution.

More insidious has been apartheid's invisible effects on the sub-regional environment.

By brokering civil wars in Mozambique and Angola, South Africa has contributed to widespread poaching, and in some cases, the wholesale slaughter of much of the indigenous wildlife in those unhappy countries. And this leaves aside the toll in human suffering.

South Africa is, in environmental terms, richly blessed and doubly cursed. We have a benign climate, rich diversity of flora and fauna, substantial deposits of minerals and a wealth of expertise. On the other hand, we lack some essential resources, notably rainfall distribution and water, while our politics and desire to dominate the sub-region have cut us off from the beneficial effects of co-operation with the sub-region.

This distrust of sub-regional co-operation has had at least two environmental effects. First, it is unnatural: the environment knows no boundaries, and however well South Africa may have conserved its environment, the environment as a whole will be undermined unless problems are addressed holistically. Secondly, it has forced South Africa to think strategically and to plan accordingly.

TO ILLUSTRATE this: South Africa at present produces 60 percent of Africa's electricity, and 80 percent of this is produced on the Eastern Transvaal highveld. If South Africa were an island, this would make perfect sense: we possess enormous reserves of low-grade coal. The point is that the emissions into the atmosphere from those power stations amount to 125 million tonnes per year. Common sense would suggest that we look around for alternatives, particularly as the atmospheric pollution is causing acid rain on a level comparable with that in Europe.

And there is an alternative! Eskom main-

The SA government's strategic need for independent electricity supplies is polluting our world, costing us dearly and keeping millions of South Africans in the dark, writes **JAMES SELFE**.

tains that there is a suitable stretch of the Congo River where without constructing a dam, it would be practical to place turbines capable of generating 100 000 megawatts, equivalent to the total current capacity of Africa. One could then have a plentiful, relatively cheap and non-pollutant source of power, which could supply not only South Africa, but the entire sub-region.

The problem is that up till now South Africa, for strategic reasons, does not want to be dependent on foreign sources of power. And so we continue to keep the coal-fired generators going, with all their attendant pollution while investigating alternative sites for more extremely expensive nuclear power stations.

Obviously we have inherited this situation

to distribute our resources to sections of our population to prevent further degradation and to rehabilitate our environment. To use electricity once more as an example: 70 percent of our own population is excluded from the benefits of electrification and, as a consequence consume wood as fuel. This leads to deforestation, and from there on to desertification and erosion.

It is thus urgently necessary to electrify as widely and as comprehensively as possible, but this requires a conscious political decision to re-allocate resources away from their present patterns.

Finally, it is necessary to make environmental issues relevant to that section of our population which is involved in a battle for survival. At present this section is uninter-



In the absence of electric heat or light, many are forced to use the fuels which destroy the environment.

'A plentiful, relatively cheap and non-pollutant source of power north of South Africa waits to be tapped'

and it will take some time to shed ourselves of the consequences of the "total onslaught" mentality. A new approach should even now be formulated in which each state within the sub-region compiles an inventory of what it needs, and what it can contribute, in order to develop the region while simultaneously husbanding its natural resources.

Simultaneously, political decisions will have to be taken by South Africans in order

ested in environmental issues because of grinding poverty and general alienation.

If the race against environmental collapse is to be won, civic and youth organisations will increasingly have to assert the right of our citizens to live in situations which are not befouled. They will also have to create opportunities for them to articulate demands of this nature.

It is a race which is nearly lost. Political systems come and go. Our planet is the only one we have.

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