

## 2018 WRSA/COTTONDALE CONFERENCE

### “Partnerships in Conservation and Politics”

*Keynote address by: Dr Mathews Phosa*

**The Ranch Resort, Polokwane, Friday, 23 March 2018**

- Esteemed leaders of industry and business,
- Fellow game breeders,
- Ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour to be here with you today and participate in the annual conference of WRSA. I have been asked to address the topic: **“Partnerships in Conservation and Politics”**.

and I hope that my presentation provokes further thought and discussion on this topic. I hope that I will be forgiven for the fact that I will cast my net a little wider than partnerships in the game industry.

The recent death in Kenya of the last male Northern white rhino received wide international coverage. With just two females of the subspecies surviving, and neither being pregnant, the demise of this one male confirmed the imminent extinction of yet another subspecies. It is easy to get depressed and pessimistic by a seemingly unending catalogue of bad news. Human beings are currently causing the greatest mass extinction of species since the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. *If present trends continue one half of all species of life on earth will be extinct in less than 100 years, mostly because of rapidly increasing human populations, habitat destruction, illegal hunting, pollution, invasive species, and climate change.*

Do we have any reason here in South Africa to be even cautiously optimistic about the future of wildlife and its habitat? I believe we do, and here are just some of the reasons why.

- ❖ There is a growing awareness in government circles and particularly in the private sector, that environmental conservation stretches far wider than worrying about the long-term security of what I refer to as the “charismatic megafauna”, namely elephants, rhinos and lion species that

always attract international headlines. Rather, we must conserve the full spectrum of plants and animals if South Africa is to have a sustainable future. This new awareness is closely linked to the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**, a vitally important program which has recommended urgent action to halt and reverse Africa's environmental degradation, noting that the immense value of the continent's environmental assets is particularly ill-understood. Against such a background, environmental education has moved beyond simply creating an awareness of Africa's extraordinary celebration of diversity of fauna and flora *to become intimately entwined with issues of development, especially conservation and management of our water catchments, the conservation of pollinators and food security, improved quality of education and quality of life, and more sustainable living practices.*

- ❖ South Africa has some of the continent's leading exponents of biodiversity conservation. They have pioneered innovative approaches in the fields of land management, environmental education, and applied research. For example, the potential contribution to species conservation through corridors linking protected areas across international borders through Transfrontier Conservation Areas, as developed by the **Peace Parks Foundation**, is already making a significant difference. To mention just one more, **The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI)** leads and coordinates research, and monitors and reports on the state of biodiversity in South Africa. The Institute has set standards for the rest of Africa by providing knowledge and information, giving planning and policy advice and piloting best-practice management models in partnership with stakeholders. Once again, it is not just the charismatic megafauna, because SANBI engages in ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation, *leading the human capital development strategy of the sector.*
  
- ❖ South Africa has some of the continent's leaders in environmental education at the primary and secondary level. For example, the **Lapalala Wilderness School (LWS)** has as its Mission *To help our children and young adults discover the value of biodiversity in our natural world and our place within it, and to identify and nurture Africa's future conservation champions.* Since its inception 32 years ago, over 80,000 children and their teachers have attended courses at LWS. It is most encouraging to see how these young people are already taking up key environmental posts in South Africa.

- ❖ **GreenMatter** is an outstanding South African initiative whose Mission *is to develop human capacity for biodiversity conservation*. The exemplary work this NGO is doing at the Tertiary level at producing specialist, research and management skills for all organisations with biodiversity mandates, objectives, interest or impact, has already addressed the skills shortages in this sector, and provided opportunities for growth and employment in the greening of the South African economy.
- ❖ Unlike the rest of Africa, we have a good news story to tell with rhino conservation, despite recent losses to poaching. For example, the overwhelming rhino conservation success story is that of the Southern white rhino. With numbers as low as 50-100 left in the wild in the early 1900s, all in South Africa, this sub-species of rhino has now increased to between 19,666 and 21,085 and become the most populous of all five rhino species. All the Southern white rhinos living today in the rest of the continents originated from here, and today we have at least 18,400 of them, some 90% of Africa's total.
- ❖ South Africa has the best managed network of protected areas in the continent. These include national parks and marine protected areas managed by the national government, public nature reserves managed by provincial and local governments, and private nature reserves managed by private landowners. Just looking at rhino conservation on its own, the privately-owned reserves contain over 6,200 rhinos, *more than the rest of Africa combined*.

South Africa has just emerged from a decade which, politically, saw us trample on the legacy which the Father of our Nation, Madiba, bequeathed to us. The signals coming from government, and the President, is good. A number of critical issues have been addressed and the leadership of non-functioning institutions are in the process of being changed.

Until such time as we have deep changes effected in the National Prosecuting Authority, SARS, SAA and a number of other state owned agencies, scepticism will remain about our intentions. We have to fundamentally change a number of institutions in the short and medium term.

It is another positive that the National Assembly seems to have found its voice and illustrated in a number of hearings that it takes its oversight role seriously.

South Africans expressed themselves in a particular way in the local government elections some time ago. It showed that the electorate has lost trust in government, and was taking the transformation of executive institutions into their own hands.

We must never underestimate the current depth of the disconnect between the government leadership and the electorate. Trust has been broken and that trust needs to be earned back. Personnel changes and one or two prosecutions are not enough. Until such time as corruption and service delivery are addressed in a fundamental way on all levels of government, deep-rooted suspicion will remain.

As part of the solution white and black businesses need to form partnerships; business, labour and government need growth partnerships, and political parties need to reach across the divisions of petty politics to illustrate that the interests of South Africa outweigh sectional interests.

We have taken the first step towards re-building the nation that Mr Mandela envisaged. I hope and pray that we will not be side-lined again on our journey.

I thank you.