

Green Topics

Environment: crucial issue that's being marginalised by the press

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An interesting situation arose last week when two Vaal River residents wrote to me (and a third telephoned) giving me details of how Sasol wanted to develop an open-cast coal mine on the south bank of the Vaal, just upstream of the Barrage.

This is agricultural land and is across the river from Millionaire's Row, where a number of wealthy people have built river-side mansions. The mine would be hidden by a 30 m-high (10 storeys) earth wall set 300 m back from the edge of the river. It *could* operate 24 hours a day.

Its siting is, to say the least, sensitive.

Meanwhile Sasol, I have since learnt, is determined — and has been all along — to be totally open about its proposal and is seeking public input.

It called in Walmsley Environmental Consultants of Rivonia, whose first move was to start preparations for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) to find out whether the effect of such a mine would be environmentally intolerable and to apprise the public of the alternatives.

Walmsley's Andrew Duthie (former conservation ecologist of the Wildlife Society and, ever since I have known him, an advocate of compulsory EIAs) posted a comprehensive briefing document to each of 600 "interested and affected parties". He also, personally, informed the major and local newspapers by telephone.

This, sadly, is where the thing became unstuck. The press was not interested.

My first inkling of the proposal was when I received the letters which gave details of the "clandestine plan". The writers patently had no knowledge of the Walmsley document and wanted to know: "Where is the environmental impact assessment?"

Why they did not receive the briefing document is academic. What is more important is that the newspapers (and media generally) missed such an important story.

"What more could I have done?" asked Duthie. The ball is clearly in our court.

I believe that the press has a vital role to play in any EIA process. Unfortunately, even at this advanced stage of South Africa's development, there is still a reluctance on the part of major newspapers to view "the environment" as important enough to be regarded as a speciality on a par, say, with the political beat.

Politics

Many newspapers feel that a journalist who deals with wildlife and nature conservation is, *ex officio*, "the environmental specialist". In fact, conservation (wildlife management, the ecotourist industry, etc) is a full-time job and an important one considering how polls show one in three readers seek out news in this subject area.

But the conservation beat is to the environment beat what the labour beat is to politics. It is just one facet of the total picture. It is up to the political editor and, in the case of the environment, up to the environment editor, to maintain the holistic view of the country and present the big picture.

Because most editors in South Africa have risen from the ranks of political reporting there is a natural tendency for them to concentrate newspaper coverage (and even over-concentrate it) on the political drama — the impersonal and sometimes academic human picture.

I believe there has to be an equal effort to keep readers informed of what is happening to the *fabric* upon which this human picture is being painted. Such an effort is patently lacking.

Duthie told me he was invariably channelled to conservation writers who, by default, are considered to be environmental reporters, which they are certainly not.

The "environmental beat" — and *The Star* was the first newspaper to create such a beat in 1971 — must embrace land (agriculture, rural development, land use, soil erosion, etc); air (climatic changes, industrial air pollution, the ozone layer, etc) and water (including marine resources).

It must include population dynamics (Aids, public health, etc); urban matters (including urban design, public vs private transport, civil engineering, housing, building science, etc) and, of course, nature conservation.

It is, obviously, as I found out myself during my 20 years as *The Star's* environmental specialist, impossible for one person to cope. There must be, in my not-at-all humble opinion, an "Environment Desk", from where the holistically tuned environment editor works with one or two assistants.

Had Duthie been able to telephone an environment editor, there is no doubt the import of his message would immediately have been recognised and a confrontation avoided.

I have read through the Walmsley briefing document (which seeks public input) and it is the most competent I have seen — a model, in fact, for this kind of process.

It is tragic that, in the media, it fell upon deaf ears. ♦

James Clarke