

Planet South Africa – World Wetlands Day 2011

Instead of celebrating World Wetlands Day, many of us should be soberly considering how we can cut down on consuming products that are derived from large scale industrial plantations, that produce palm oil products, sugar, soya, paper, and other commodities that are consumed excessively in the world today, and that impact directly or indirectly on wetlands.

Your average chocolate bar is a good example: layers of foil and paper to help fill our garbage dumps, mostly situated in valleys that once contained streams and swamps; loads of addictive sugar from former wetlands in flood plains and valleys to give you a cheap energy high; "vegetable" oil that comes from huge Oil Palm plantations that have engulfed peat swamps in Malaysia, West Africa or Brazil where bio-diverse forests once grew; and genetically engineered soya from recently flattened forests in Argentina or Brazil! Most of our paper/packaging is literally recycled grassland, including all the pretty little plants, birds, insects etc that conservationists hold so dear! And don't forget the cocoa bean tree, now also grown in extensive plantations in tropical regions to satisfy the insatiable appetites of overpaid and overfed people everywhere!

The energy to make products such as the chocolate bar, derived from dirty coal in our country, also takes its toll of our wetlands. In Mpumalanga new coal mines have been established in wetlands and even river-beds to feed the crazy production targets of energy producer Eskom. Acid mine-drainage just adds to the problem. Did we really need all that gold jewellery?

All too often, out of sight, is out of mind. The trashing of our planet is usually happening in some faraway place where it seems to be someone else's problem, but we as consumers are also out of our minds to continue ignoring the reality that we only have one planet, and to carry on consuming things that are really not necessary, or excessive quantities of things that are.

We also need to think about the people who once lived sustainably off those forests, grasslands and wetlands that wasteful consumers have destroyed. Kicked off their land to make way for the bulldozers and tractors, their choices have largely been limited to choosing which squatter camp to move to!

Sorry folks, but there is really very little to celebrate on World Wetlands Day, or any other day, until we reverse the mindless industrialisation of our economies, and learn to respect what's left of the world's biodiversity, including people and ecosystems.

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