



Year of environmental tipping points

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The Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE) says 2018 has led to significant shifts in awareness on a number of issues in Namibia, including the Chinese-driven pillaging of timber in the north, the destructive role of plastic bags, the expansion of informal settlements and the impact of climate change.

Speaking on Thursday at a year-end function, NCE's Chris Brown said 2018 will be remembered as the year "of deforestation and timber stripping by the Chinese, aided and abetted by the directorate of forestry and the ministry of agriculture, water and forestry".

He said environment minister Pohamba Shifeta's "firm intervention" by placing a moratorium on all timber harvesting, transport, sale and export should be applauded and hopefully signalled a "tipping point in woodland management and monitoring".

Nevertheless, Brown warned that the danger was not over and that an urgent investigation into the forestry directorate should be launched. He added that an independent assessment of the rate of woodland loss over the past five years is critical.

Moreover, an effective reforestation programme was now needed.

Other tipping points in 2018 were the establishment of a National Solid Waste Advisory Panel, legislation banning plastic bags in national parks and pending legislation providing for a plastic bag levy, Brown said.

He praised plans to ban plastic bags and drinking straws altogether, and the pending introduction of a deposit scheme for single-use plastic bottles.

While the effects of climate change are increasingly being felt in Namibia's agricultural sector, Brown said it had the potential of opening doors to alternative opportunities, including wildlife and all its uses such as meat, conservation hunting, high-value live sales and tourism.

"We need to move from a primary production land-use economy based on meat and protein sales to a service-based land-use economy, which is far less vulnerable to climatic events and highly competitive on the global stage."

This model included buffalo as part of the wildlife mix, Brown said, and also the resumption of controlled international trade in rhino horn.

Over the past year the issue of growing informal settlements and their negative socio-economic and developmental consequences has received much broader attention.

"It is also the year that people started to realise that the answer was not to provide a few hundred expensive houses, but rather to provide thousands of minimally serviced and affordable urban plots which people could buy with a title deed."

That would allow plot owners to invest in buildings and upgrade their homes at a pace that they can afford.

Brown said the NCE and others who have pushed for this model underlined the broad civil discontent over the issue of housing and the government now fully appreciated the issue.

Brown said the year unfortunately also highlighted "how ineffectual" the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process is in promoting sustainable development.

He said poor EIAs, low levels of professionalism, poor systems and poor reviews contributed to a “fatally flawed concept”.

On the bright side, there has been increased recognition and acceptance of the environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) community, which is wielding increasing influence.

“We need to use our voice wisely and judiciously, working for the best outcomes, often quietly behind the scenes and outside of public sight,” he said.