

PRESENTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE SUMMIT, 2nd To 4th FEBRUARY 2009

A CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HUMAN WELL BEING

**FRED ORBAN,
BOGGOMSBAAI CONSERVANCY**

My talk today will not really be to agree or to disagree with what other learned speakers have said or will say during this summit programme. I am just a normal guy who has lived on a wonderful beach for many years in a beautiful and relatively unspoilt bay and who wants to share his concerns and observations with other citizens of this wonderful country. In my talk I refer job creation and job losses, human well being and to recreational activities and how all this can be affected by climate changes.

Neither will the statements which I make, be considered answers. Rather would it be that they could pose questions to which the answers may be in the facts and statistics which the scientists can link to their arguments and proposals. My talk will be from the observations which I have made in the area where I have now lived for 25 odd years and from listening to and watching other local residents, visitors and observing the greater environment. This is the area which I love and where I have passionately been dedicating much of my time to ensure that it remains as pristine and unspoilt and unabused as is possible-and at the same time ensuring that it is sustainably and sensibly utilised and enjoyed by all people for their own benefit and to the benefit of it's natural elements.

Much of what I say today may not indicate or prove whether the observations I am declaring here are due to global warming, permanent climate changes or whether we are in cyclical phases of short term climate changes. What is important though is that peoples lives have been affected and will be even more affected by any unusual and/or lasting changes in climate patterns. This has been the case through millions of years. One should listen to the archaeologists who have made the incredible discoveries in the caves at Pinnacle Point of proven human habitation 165,000 years ago to realize that climate changes are part of the earth's cycles. What is true though, is that where these changes have taken place it was due to natural influences and processes and took many thousands of years to complete cycles. Plants, animals, organisms and people therefore had enough time to adapt to these changes and cycles and in that way ensured their own survival as different species. Where they could not adapt, they went into self imposed extinction. The scary part about what is happening with our world today is that we humans, as the self declared all conquering and mighty species, are busy accelerating this process by many thousands of years through our own greed and our quest for power and for more and more natural resources. We should therefore take warning that we do not become the architects our own self destruction.

Countless people across the world and in South Africa are totally ignorant and/or sceptical of the fact that there may be a real threat from Green House gases, melting ice bergs , ozone layers etc. Many people, except those who have been subjected to sudden and dramatic changes in their life styles, as a result of natures way, do not believe that such things are real. There are those who are just ignorant and then there are those who consider it economically or politically in order to deny the threats and realities of climate change.

The coastal belt of our beloved country, South Africa is arguably one with the greatest diversified natural regions on the planet. Here in the Western Cape and on the Garden Route and Little Karoo in particular. We have world famous plant biomes and fynbos, we have inshore charismatic marine life, such as whales, dolphins, sharks, seals, reef fish, oysters, rare sea and shore birds. We have river systems, estuaries, wetlands, indigenous forests, spectacular mountain ranges, incredible dune systems, immense varieties of succulent vegetation and much more.

This region in which we live is also considered to have one of the best all year round holiday climates in the world, particularly suited for sun seekers, hikers, nature lovers and lovers of

fresh air, open space and nights with stars. Our area is therefore geared to ensure that our peoples could have unrivalled quality of life, provided that we take the necessary steps to take heed of the warnings given to us by nature, by history and by our scientists.

This all adds up to the fact that we have all the given assets to promote an industry which is still in its infancy, in a region with so much potential to uplift its communities if managed properly and if cognizance is taken from the signs of changing patterns in nature. This industry is tourism. It is not a farming area of note, neither is it really suitable for intense industrial development. It has natural assets given to us on a plate that are virtually unrivalled anywhere on the globe. These assets must be managed and looked after and improved so that the citizens of all its communities can reap the rewards-in-waiting! Such management, goal direction and implementation is the responsibility of governments- national, local, provincial, regional and municipal, who should guide its citizens in the right direction. This management should include the management of exploitation of natural resources, recycling of waste materials as well as the necessary enforcement of policies.

There is a grave and urgent warning though, overhanging us all, and that is our limited and critical water resources - not the vast ocean, but Fresh Water. Should rain patterns change for the worse, all the abovementioned is in the balance. Life indeed will be in the balance!

Because ...

There can be no life without water!

During the years that I have lived and worked here, a few important things got stuck in my mind and sets the alarm bells ringing.

15 to 20 years or so ago it was wonderful to experience the green and gold agricultural fields near Boggomsbaai and Vleesbaai at certain times of the year. There were very exciting late afternoons and early evenings when we would go to the cultivated lands nearby and collect a bag of freshly harvested peas from those who were doing the harvesting. Many a time one would just walk in the area and marvel at the wonderful colour of the fields of ripe wheat.

Today, those large commercial concerns who did the planting and harvesting no longer have a presence in the area. Not for a number of years has there been any planting of those type of crops. The reason simply is that rainfall patterns have changed. Today ostriches are farmed in large numbers where previously the peas, wheat and sweet potato-covered the fields. These kept many farm and other workers employed. However, factories had to close down and many people lost their jobs due to the change in agricultural activities.

I am not sure whether annual rainfall has decreased in these areas. It may even be that annual figures are higher, but that the rain falls at different times and varying peaks. During the past 3 to 5 years this area has had rainfall patterns that have filled up pans and natural hollows due to much concentrated storms in a short time periods as opposed to the rain being spread in previous years. New wetlands have been created due to peaking rainfall storms which brought in species of water birds and waders that are not really abundantly naturally in the area. Biodiversity losses and changes to eco systems are also inevitable with a change in rainfall and weather patterns.

Regular thunder and lightning are also fairly new phenomena on this coast.

Recently an unusual thunder storm was the cause of many ostriches panicking and getting killed or maimed by running straight into fences in the dark of night.

It is a known fact that a number of severe storms has hit our coast line on the Garden Route in the past number of years, resulting in serious damage to beaches, houses and other structures. The aquarium on the Point of Mossel Bay was completely submerged and ravaged by a fierce storm hitting the coast. Such damage costs are substantial.

At Vleesbaai, also recently, civil sewage works and properties were seriously damaged or were under threat of being washed away by freak storms that lashed the coast. Dune systems have been eroded away by as much as 5 meters inland. Walkways and hiking trails have been simply destroyed by the force of the water and tides. Many of these items and structures were there for years and years, undamaged until recently.

It is a fact that warm water, tropical type fish were caught in the Vleesbaai area as reported by our coastal ranger. This can be due to extreme mid ocean current changes or can it be perhaps due to water becoming marginally warmer?

Beaches are narrower and recreational beach users have to move higher up and away from the incoming tides, more often than before. Land nesting birds, such as the African Black Oystercatchers are not able to adapt fast enough to unusual and rapid climate and tide changes. Their nests are destroyed as a result of unusual high tides and unseasonably high velocity winds. White (sand) mussels have dramatically declined in numbers during the past 15 years, possibly also due to rip currents and fiercer tides.

Changing and unpredictable weather patterns can make it more difficult to get tourists to visit our area, which focuses on the outdoors, at specific times of the year.

The warning is out to us all. We must accept that changes are occurring in weather patterns because these patterns will have an impact on the lives of all of us, especially on the lives of the poor. We must also accept that it is the responsibility of all of us to adapt to these changes and plan accordingly.

It is indeed the responsibility of our political leaders, big business and big industries to ensure that the correct planning is done and that the international rules and protocols are abided by.

There must be commitment to eliminate the causes of global warming and weather pattern changes, such as emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere, in the water and under the ground. There must also be commitment to manage the effects of changing rainfall patterns such as developments that require unreasonable or uncalled for quantities of water or fossil fuels.

In this way we will be able to play our part to see that the natural assets given to us on a plate and that I have referred to at the start of my talk are protected, because these assets will be the future bread and butter of communities through the vehicle of eco tourism based activities.

Alternative, affordable and sustainable energy resources should be built into all future planning by authorities as a matter of extreme urgency. This should be across the board, from residential and recreational to industrial developments.

It would be inappropriate for me to end off without declaring that I have been trying to play our part in ensuring that our dependence on fossil fuels for energy is limited.

The development which we built and where I live is a true, low density bona fide eco estate on the coast at Boggomsbaai. 25 Years ago when I moved to the area my partners and I decided to go the Solar Power route. All the houses have their own independent solar systems with the resultant total independence from grid electricity. We live normal lives with TVs, lights, fridges, computers, cell phones, etc. All this is provided for us at no cost..... by our abundant and free sun. We have not yet even really ventured into wind power for individual homes. Here alone there is vast potential, if needed.

We are proud to say that our carbon footprint is small. The success of this first development ensured that I carried all the eco related principles through to our next and adjacent development. All in all, a coast line of 3 kilometers near Boggomsbaai is protected now by these fundamentals. An underlying principle is also that indigenous and endemic species of plants, animals and birds are left totally undisturbed. Only the footprint of limited size dwellings and their driveways as well as roads are allowed to disturb the natural vegetation. This protection of naturally occurring vegetation further ensures that no external water resources are required for them to survive and to flourish. Throughout the millennia nature

has created its own plants and creatures resilient to the gradual changes that occur naturally. The abundance of plants also helps with the reduction in unwanted green house gases.

I thank you all, on behalf of the Boggomsbaai Conservancy, for your participation in this summit, for PetroSA who made it possible and who will no doubt play its part in emission controls and for the Eden District municipality who initiated it. Also thank you to the organizer and his staff as well as our hosts, Mossel Bay and the Diaz Hotel. For me it is an honour to have been invited. I hope my contribution will play a small part in ensuring urgent action from all responsibly minded government bodies, industrial and commercial concerns, developers and individuals.

Fred Orban

stay@sandpipersafaris.co.za

Tel.: +27(44)699 1204

Fax: +27(44)699 1951 (Overseas)

Fax: 086 555 2604 (SA only)

www.oystercatchertrail.co.za

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