

COMMENT ON THE ARTICLE "FUNDING SHOCK FOR KZN WILDLIFE" – THE MERCURY
28TH SEPTEMBER 2012

The Animal Interest Alliance responds to calls by the Kzn parliamentary committee on finance for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife to become self-funded.

It is not the first time that a parliamentary committee of the province has demanded of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife that it should "stand on its own feet" or become financially self-sufficient. As Dr Ian Player points out, there is no precedent for this nonsensical move. Indeed, when the Mpumalanga Parks Board was ordered to find its own funding some years ago, it had disastrous consequences for nature conservation in that province.

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is a conservation agency whose primary function is the protection of the biodiversity resources of the province. Burdening it with the obligation to be hospitality and tourism operators to justify its existence is plain stupid. There are obvious contradictions in the functions of a nature conservation agency and a tourism operator. Conflicts of interest are inevitable and this is not good for conservation. Despite the fact that Ezemvelo has had an unfair advantage over private enterprise, it has never been able to exploit this or to operate profitably, not even in the halcyon days when its former CEO was named "marketing man of the year". Why should things be different now?

By its own admission, Ezemvelo has a serious skills shortage, many of its most competent officers having been drummed out of the organisation over the last few years. It has become so bad that the "old guard" that once drove the organisation have been recalled. What are the financial implications of this for Ezemvelo? What of the employees whose poor performance made it necessary to bring in the missing skills – have they been retained?

The chances of the organisation mounting a successful financial turnaround strategy, structured as it is and propped up by outside help, seems highly improbable.

The natural resources of the province are critical to its social and economic prosperity. The protection of biodiversity is essential to the security of these resources and should be in the hands of a properly funded and competent agency with the sole mandate and function to do perform this function. To suggest that nature conservation management has to make a profit is as absurd as asking the department of social welfare to make a profit out of the management of its orphanages.

The parliamentary portfolio committees of the province are forever roasting Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and its board for its poor corporate governance and chronic financial mismanagement. Have they ever bothered to investigate the real reasons

for the failure of Ezemvelo to properly discharge its statutory mandate? What have they done to stop the rot?

On 4th September 2012, the High Court in Pietermaritzburg ruled that the current Ezemvelo board was not validly appointed. Although the declaration of the invalidity of the appointment of the board was suspended for six months to enable the MEC to get his house in order, the effect of the ruling of the judge was to confirm that Ezemvelo has been operating without a properly constituted board since about 2003. This means in effect that Ezemvelo has been operating illegally for nearly ten years. What has the KZN Committee on finance had to say about this? Nothing!

What of the legal costs running into several million rand that MEC must pay, all because successive MEC's allowed themselves to be led by the nose by officials who were promoting their own agenda without reference to their board, deficient as it may have been? Deafening silence!

Without a validly appointed or constituted board, Ezemvelo officials have been accountable to nobody. They are a law unto themselves and have directed the organisation away from its statutory mandate and its core function. The fact that only about 30% of its budget is spent on conservation activities says it all. It is no wonder that rhino poachers have the upper hand in KwaZulu-Natal.

Corruption is rife, standards are dropping, staff morale is low and a once world class conservation agency is in ruins. The R500 million rand question is whether it can or should be rescued. The KZN parliamentary committee on finance seems to think not. They want to see Ezemvelo become self-funded. This is surely a death sentence.

Ezemvelo has lost its focus. Instead of concentrating on its core function it has made itself extremely unpopular in just about every sector of society in which it operates, and in some cases, has no business to be:

- Environmental consultants complain that officials are arrogant and obstructive in environmental impact assessment processes. Officials throw their weight around and then hold up the process by refusing to adhere to the statutory timeframes applicable for responses. To make matters worse, Ezemvelo officials after having participated in the process, have a say in the decision of the environmental authority.
- Property developers complain that interventions by Ezemvelo officials in planning matters, in which they have no statutory mandate, have cost them tens of millions of rand in losses because of the delays they have caused.
- Game capture operators accuse Ezemvelo of unfair competition because Ezemvelo is able to manipulate the issue of permits and divert contracts to itself.
- Obtaining permits for the keeping of wild animals in captivity for any purpose became almost impossible until the judge put a stop to this on 4th September

2012. Despite the order of court, conditions included in recently issued permits and threats made to aviculturists suggest that not even the order of a judge carries weight with Ezemvelo officials.

- The once extensive library at Ezemvelo's headquarters at Queen Elizabeth Park has been virtually emptied through theft and a lack of basic controls.
- Because of the inefficiency of the central reservations office, empty space in the game reserves is unused.

The conservation of the province is not in safe hands. Instead of treating the symptoms, the KZN parliamentary committees on finance and nature conservation should look to the root cause of the problems in Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. Its board has been dysfunctional for years, aside from the fact that it has operated unlawfully.

The MEC has the opportunity during the six months reprieve given to him by the court to sweep the organisation clean. Apart from appointing a new board, the MEC must look to those who have led the organisation over the last few years. It is time for a clean-out in this department too.

The idea that the conservation of the province is best served by placing it in the hands of an "independent" board is good in theory. That is if the board is indeed independent, that it has on it people with the requisite competence and interest in conservation, and that it will be lawfully appointed. Most importantly, the new board must have the strength of character to control its officials so that it the new Ezemvelo does not become the rogue organisation that it has been for the last decade.

If the parliamentary committees really want to grasp the nettle, they must start with an investigation in to why the Animal Interest Alliance took the MEC and Ezemvelo to court in the first place and how in the face of certain defeat from the outset, the very Ezemvelo officials who provoked the litigation, were able to persuade the MEC to continue with a case that has ended up costing him millions.

It is time for those that have brought Ezemvelo to its knees to be held accountable for this.

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