

Reimagining, recreating and restoring our ecosystems - one change at a time

By [Kate Stubbs](#)

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Life on Earth is symbiotic, each component within the ecosystem plays a significant role - you only have to examine how the loss of the bee population today is affecting food systems to be reminded of just how interconnected everything really is.



Kate Stubbs, marketing director at Interwaste

However, as population numbers rise and urbanisation, intensive farming and resource extraction increases, so we are witnessing the fragmentation of the environment even further. Our ecosystems are under pressure and this pressure will impact every living being on our planet – and so, this National Environmental Month is a perfect time to reflect on how and why we need to restore our ecosystems.

We live in challenging times. Every country is examining ways in which they need to develop and grow, but this unfortunately comes with a cost. Our natural environment is being eroded and this much-needed development has brought about adverse effects of soil damage, pollution, biodiversity loss and deforestation – and even the extinction of species in our world. If we don't check ourselves now, we will run out of time to make any sustainable difference to our ecosystem, and then we all suffer as the ripple effect is massive and will impact each and every one of us. We cannot turn back time. but, together, we can start to make the necessary changes required for the benefit of our future and our planet.

Destroying our planet

Over the years, we have been exploiting and destroying our planet's ecosystems. If we consider that South Africa alone generates 122 million tonnes of waste per annum, what does the rest of the world produce? In our country, this is about R25.2bn worth of waste being generated, with 90% of this waste going to overcapacitated landfills. When we take into account that over 90% of the food produced in the world comes from terrestrial ecosystems, which also provide clean air, fresh and clean water, energy, building material, clothing, and medicine, you can see why it is crucial for the consumer to shift their mindsets around the 'throw-away culture' and start developing a deeper appreciation around the risk to our planet.

Couple this with the fact that between 2015 and 2020, the rate of forest degradation loss was estimated at 10 million hectares per year – this is one-third of our forests being cut down each year – and that is a massive loss to our planet's ability to absorb carbon dioxide as well as loss to a rich variety of life that keeps so many natural systems running.

It is also troubling that through human activity, we have managed to threaten our wetlands, causing degradation and loss, resulting in flooding, extinction of species, and declines in water quality. Additionally, we have experienced the pollution pandemic for far too long where we've filled our oceans with more plastic than fish and contaminated our soil. When we think of greenhouse gas emissions, global warming, and climate change, there is a cause for concern, and if we continue, we are headed towards a catastrophe at a time humanity can least afford it.



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Commemorating our environment

During the month of June, we commemorate National Environment Month in our country, a crucial time for reflection about what is happening to our world and the role we can play in restoring it. Days such as World Environment Day, 5 June; World Oceans Day, 8 June; Global Wind Day; 15 June; World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, 17 June, are all commemorated in this month and provide an opportunity for the world to raise awareness around the number of environmental issues affecting the planet.

And we know that it doesn't, and shouldn't, be the burden of government or large organisations/businesses to make the much-needed change. Each and every one of us can take small actions towards reusing, recycling, and repurposing to restoring our environment, biodiversity as well as our natural heritage.



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The beginning of ecosystem restoration

They say, "one man's trash is another man's treasure" and this couldn't be truer when looking at developing a circular economy in South Africa. The 'circular economy' model is a relatively new concept. However, as a reformative system, it offers significant opportunities to deliver on more inclusive economic growth, which includes job opportunities and positive environmental practices that are needed for sustainability in countries around the world – not just South Africa. The premise is that by stripping out all unnecessary waste materials, reducing the consumption of energy and raw materials, and allowing these materials, energy, and resources to be 'fed' back into the cycle, there is an opportunity for businesses to optimise their own waste streams for use in other industries. This, in turn, creates not only an opportunity for cost savings or revenue generation, but also – very critically – protects and restores the environment.

Waste is a universal issue that presents much broader challenges which not only affect human health and livelihood, but the environment and ultimately the economy.

As a result, effective waste management can have a profound effect from an economic point of view as it not only makes a massive difference to reducing the impact on our biodiversity and ecosystems, but when done correctly, can have a critical impact on the long-term sustainability of South Africa's wildlife, our oceans as well as our economic resilience.

As such, with over 90% of waste today merely being discarded, or burned, especially in low-income countries, it becomes crucial to examine ways to introduce innovative and sustainable solutions where rapid growth and resilience are at the forefront of these decisions. Therefore, promoting 'circular economy' thinking, which aims to challenge the status quo in waste management, will be the key to encouraging the 'nothing wasted' mindset.



New Barbie collection made using recycled ocean-bound plastic

11 Jun 2021



Zero-waste sustainability

We know, of course, that the zero waste to landfill goal, which needs to be reached by 2030, looks at diverting 90% of waste from landfills using a 'whole system' through recycling, reuse, recovery, beneficiation technologies – as well as value-adding opportunities which has the potential to create numerous environmental, social, and economic opportunities for South Africa. If a zero-waste sustainable country is to be realised, then 'at-the-source waste' needs to be managed far more effectively to drive successful waste management, innovative solutions, a working recycling system and creating a culture of responsible consumption.

Given this challenge, we need to use this National Environment Month to be part of 'Generation Restoration' and start making real in-roads into restoring our ecosystems.

The global mission to revive billions of hectares, from forests to farmlands, from the top of mountains to the depth of our oceans, by 2030 is certainly an ambitious one. However, through 'reimagining, recreating and restoring' our ecosystems, it is possible.

Reuse, recycle and repurpose

The reality is that only through healthy ecosystems will we be able to improve people's livelihoods, reduce climate change and stop the collapse of our biodiversity. We can certainly start by growing trees, encouraging our cities to go green, ensuring that we are rewilding our own gardens or cleaning up our rivers and beaches while managing our waste effectively, and all this will help, and will help a lot. But it is only through the reuse, recycle and repurposing thinking that we can make the change and truly immerse ourselves in the generation of restoration and doing 'right' by nature.

We don't inherit the land from our parents, we borrow it from our children and so there is no greater time than now to identify ways in which we can preserve it and 'give it back' to them in a better state than we found it.

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