

Bring the long-term benefits of the Dome back to Earth.

Business Day (South Africa)

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Byline: Graeme Addison

Politics of conservation Bring the long-term benefits of the Dome back to Earth TO THE amazement of nature lovers, tour planners and scientists at home and abroad, there is now talk of delisting the Vredefort Dome as a Unesco World Heritage Site (WHS). The Dome is one of eight sites in SA designated by Unesco (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), including another troubled site, Robben Island, but also including such favourites as the Drakensberg, Mapungubwe and the Cape Floral Kingdom. More are likely to be added as time goes on unless the country embarrasses itself to such an extent that Unesco simply walks away.

The Dome is at the centre of a very old impact crater, the oldest and largest visible on Earth. It is a site of immense scientific significance and also natural beauty. The movement to delist the Dome has been brewing for some time as landowners and developers on the Free State and North West sides of the Vaal River, which runs through the Dome, complain that the draft Integrated Management Plan (IMP) for the area is too restrictive and will seriously impede business.

Government officials seem to have formed the impression that landowners as a group are not interested in conservation and only want a free hand to cash in on the reputation of the area. But some landowners and environmentalists among whom I count myself insist that the Dome regulations must finally be enacted after years of dilly-dallying by the provinces and the central government.

Ironically, Unesco itself is threatening to delist because a management plan is not in place and there is much evidence of plunder of resources, pollution and property speculation, which does nothing to conserve nature. In an alliance of the frustrated, both Unesco and the developers who oppose the WHS now find themselves converging on the same outcome: scrapping the Dome.

In 2005, Unesco approved the citation of the Vredefort Dome and the government undertook to formally recognise and regulate the area. A petition to save the Dome has drawn hundreds of responses. One, from Dr Stephen Tooth of Aberystwyth University in Wales, who regularly visits for research, underlines the potential cost if SA backtracks on its commitment: Just how damaging do you think delisting a WHS would be to SA's reputation? It should be a privilege and an honour to have such a site (or, in SA's case, sites) and to delist the Dome area would make a mockery of any claims to environmentally responsible stewardship and sustainable development. This astrobleme, or cosmic scar, is evidence that about 2-billion years ago a Table Mountain-sized asteroid, travelling at 20km a second, hit our planet with a force equivalent to millions of Hiroshima-scale nuclear bombs. It gouged a 50-60km-deep hole in the planet's crust, which then collapsed, leaving a central uplift, the granite core known as the Dome, in the middle. So big is this structure originally as much as 360km across but now much eroded that it can be seen as a whole only from space.

The Vaal and the surrounding Bergland or mountain collar of the Dome make it immensely attractive to tourists and outdoor adventurers. Being deeply eroded, it discloses the form of a complex impact crater and draws researchers and tourists from all over the world. Unlike the impact that caused the second-largest crater, at Chicxulub on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, which finally finished off the dinosaurs about 65-million years ago, the Vredefort impact was not responsible for any Great Extinction as it happened before the emergence of multi-celled life on Earth.

But never mind the science, what counts is to convince the government that delisting would be a disaster environmentally, internationally and, in the long run, economically.

Conservation of the Dome and protection of the world heritage brand will lead to balanced and sustainable development, creating high-quality jobs and stimulating ecotourism enterprises of all kinds. Anything else will be short-term, perpetuating existing inequalities in the region, making use of unskilled labour, and degrading the Vaal River system and the mountain wilderness flanking it.

Arguments of the same kind have been waged before, for instance over Lake St Lucia, which was seriously threatened by dune mining and is now a WHS depending to a great extent on tourism. One critical question faces both the

opponents of protected-areas regulation and those who support it. How can either side get its way with a government whose priorities lie in poverty alleviation, health, housing, broad-based black empowerment and small business development? If politics is the art of the possible, established interests have the advantage. Developers with lots of money can dangle the carrot of immediate job creation in front of struggling municipalities and win approval from government officials whose eyes are set on growth at any cost. Conservationists have to face up to the fact that they need to manoeuvre politically to make it possible for government to do the right thing.

There is a feeling in conservation circles that to get involved in politics is to dirty one's hands in what should be a clean cause. There is also, among whites and especially the Afrikaners who make up the bulk of those now signing the Dome petition, the fear that their views will be discounted because of their race and perceived elitism.

These concerns are founded on the old distinction between green conservation (meaning game reserves for the well-off) and brown grassroots consciousness (championing better basic living standards for the masses). Scenic roads and a pleasant bucolic landscape preserved for tourists remain a green issue, of course, but underlying the movement for world heritage status is a very real sense of alarm at the destruction of our natural resources.

Another comment on the Dome petition puts it clearly: This is a globally important resource that is also central to the character and economy of the region. Delisting would be vandalism not just of ecosystems and heritage but also of a valuable economic resource, writes Dr Mark Everard, who has been an adviser to the water affairs department on behalf of the British government.

This argument needs to be communicated to the government officials who will advise the political leadership on what to do about the Dome. Looked at one way, there is a simple choice between jobs today, from localised building construction, quarrying and other piecemeal developments; and longer-term growth initiatives based on a management plan for the entire area. But this is not very persuasive because a job in the hand is worth two or more in the bush.

Conservationists have to break the elite-masses barrier and make the case politically for the retention of the WHS. I have been involved with the proposed launch of a new community newspaper in Parys, the Zenzele News,

and it is fairly obvious that township residents need more information about the value of nature conservation but they are already fiercely aware of the poor state of their own living environment. They want a better quality of life with steady jobs and a voice in civic affairs.

The environmental lobby has to get smarter by working with the majority to identify the benefits of conservation and show the government that its socioeconomic agenda can and must be met without caving in to demands for short-term gain.

Like the super-volcano the Dome was once thought to be before the impact scenario was largely accepted in 1995 Vredefort blasts into prominence the conflict between selfish exploitation and the public good.

- Addison is a landowner in the Dome and author of books on rivers, science and technology.

COMMENT

Jobs before scenery.

Business Day (South Africa)

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Byline: Jim Harris

Jobs before scenery Graeme Addison's review of the Vredefort Dome issue is interesting (Bring the long-term benefits of the Dome back to Earth, August 3). He reports landowners and developers complaining that the draft integrated management plan for the area is too restrictive and will seriously impede business.

That is indeed a serious matter and it suggests the sensible solution of lifting restrictions so as not to impede business in the least. Cannot the drafters of the plan accommodate such an approach? Don't they want jobs in the hand from localised building construction, quarrying and other piecemeal developments? Don't they share what Addison calls the brown grassroots consciousness that champions better basic living standards for the masses?

Scenic roads and preserving pleasant bucolic landscape for tourists may sound fine. But the question we should always ask green conservation activists like Addison is this. In exchange for not developing a mine or quarry or resort for forfeiting the available growth boost what are you actually offering? Leaving St Lucia's coastal dunes unmined has not yielded promised tourism profits to compensate for forgone billions of rands in local development. The same will follow if Pondoland's coastal dunes are not mined, and if the Vredefort Dome's possibilities are not exploited.

The bigger picture is whether the eco-nuts among us want the poor among us to stay that way or to prosper within a growing economy. World Heritage Sites are all very well but we have many millions of unemployed to consider first.

Honeydew