

sustainable living

The choice is ours

by Dr Phoebe Barnard

Picture the following: it's the year 2038 – a rare, windless summer morning on the South Peninsula. The Southeaster has been truly ferocious all month. But now your neighbours are spilling out of their homes, despite the oppressive heat already settling, just to get outside again.

You pause for a moment, with a fleeting memory of your childhood on Muizenberg and Fish Hoek beaches, and your teenage surfing years. You desperately wish you could swim now.

But instead, Fish Hoek Beach is an unsightly mess – dunes draped around the crumbling concrete and rusting steel of what were once restaurants, municipal bungalows, shops, railway station and a petrol station. Surfing or swimming around these rusting casualties of sea-level-rise – even if it isn't physically reckless – is banned due to broken sewer pipes and oily sludge from petrol depots. Only daredevils, and those who desperately need a wash, dare to swim. So far, Muizenberg Beach is free of wreckage except near the old pavilion. But you can't swim there either, after repeated storm damage to the Strandfontein sewage works. All over False Bay, the water is foul and increasingly acid. You remember seeing whales, penguins, and luminescence as a kid, but have almost forgotten what they looked like. Jellyfish and algal blooms appear, but no sharks, anemones, or fish. Crayfish, mussels and perlemoen are fast headed for extinction as the acidity prevents them from laying down shells.



The destructive power of the ocean

So instead of swimming, you cool yourself with damp rags in the shade of the crowded block of flats you and many other families occupy. Shade is a precious resource, as there are few shade trees left on the South Peninsula. Fuelwood-use, summer drought, wind, heatwaves, wildfires, and loss of pollinating insects have left mostly a withered carpet of rooikrans which springs back after fire.



Glencairn Beach in wrecked state

Everyone in your block lost houses in the first big global economic slump 20 years ago. The Far South Peninsula's population has tripled to 71 000, despite infrastructural collapse. With sea-level-rise accelerating, disaster-management staff have drawn up plans to resettle residents further uphill in the Silvermine part of the National Park. Frankly, you're weary of hearing scientists explain how the Fish Hoek Valley was underwater in past times and will be once again. Annual budgets are increasingly spent not on community development, but on disaster management and relief.

The sea has risen a metre since 2010, and will probably rise 3m more in the next decade as the Greenland ice cap floods the Atlantic with 250km³ of fresh water per year. Storm-surges flood what was once Clovelly Golf

Course; destroy the remains of the old coastal railway; and cause panicked abandonment of Muizenberg flats on what used to be Atlantic Drive, with a number of deaths in one frighteningly stormy night. You reflect on the irony of all that fresh Greenland water pouring into the sea while water shortages across the world have triggered wars, economic strain and agricultural collapse. The sublime, now obscene, luxuries of a water spray, swimming pool or green garden for keeping cool, are also fading childhood memories. Water supply is increasingly limited to rainwater captured from rooftops

– not even enough for all to drink and cook. People strain it through cloth, just as in the old days, or charcoal, as electricity for filtration is too erratic.

We could dismiss this scenario as fiction. But we are already on the road there – locally and globally. It has little to do with politics, and a lot to do with consumption and wealth. It is woven around the rigorous published projections of thousands of the world's best scientists.

Fiction will increasingly become fact unless we shake ourselves out of our complacency now to address the enormous challenges we face as a community in the next century: extreme water scarcity, climate change, loss of species, accelerating environmental degradation, the near-demise of fossil fuels and private transport, social and economic instability, and governments barely coping.

We have, scientists say, only perhaps seven or eight years to turn the tide of waste and mismanagement of natural resources. Given our complacency, this is frighteningly little time.

We can carry on as though our beautiful Peninsula and relatively predictable, comfortable lives will last forever without intervention.

This would be a fatal mistake. Some of the trends above are already in motion. Some are reversible, others are not. The quicker we act, the more we can limit future instability and the costs of our previous inaction.

This is emphatically not a doomsday story. The warning signs are really very serious. But if we address them today with a purposeful outlook, we can instead have a healthier, happier, more balanced

society in the future. The rest of the *Sustainable Living* series will sketch out some practical ways to do so. The choice is up to us. ♻️

Full Circle will continue to feature articles on making the transition to a sustainable society. This is a global challenge but one which we will make personal to all of us in the South. Articles will combine visions, principles and practicality to bring readers a taste of what can happen as a result of simple choices – good or bad – that we make today. The series is co-ordinated by Lesley Shackleton, lysnew@iafrica.com and Phoebe Barnard, barnard@sanbi.org

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