

Why we must realise that climate change is a human rights issue

DESMOND TUTU

WE, AS humanity, face a conundrum. Very few among us willfully advocate the extinction of species or the suffering of our fellow humans. Yet we face rampant environmental destruction that is imposing hardship on millions.

If so many of us care about nature, why is our impact on the Earth accelerating, rather than being mitigated? If so many of us care about our fellow human beings, why is there such disparity in living standards? Why do so few have so much, while so many have so little?

Dr Ntombi du Plessis, the CEO of WWF in South Africa, has mused

that a byproduct of the industrial age is the disconnection between us and the natural world that sustains us. We have developed a temporal and physical disconnection from the resources that sustain us, and from our impact on them.

Our forefathers had a direct, visceral connection to nature. Meat had to be caught, and killed, carried, then tinned as a taxing business. Fruit and vegetables had to be sought out, growing in the wild or carefully tended. That effort caused our ancestors to waste very little.

Modern life has removed that connection and the realisation of our impact on the Earth. Supermarket and package foods

hide the processes involved in feeding us. In short, the consequences for our actions are delayed or hidden, so we assume they are waived.

Yet the laws of physics are not mocked and the distance between us and our resources is being shrunk, like an elastic band returning to its original size. That process usually involves a stinging sensation and we're starting to feel the pain in many ways.

Ask fishermen about the size and numbers of the once-abundant stocks in their nets and you'll get a depressing picture of just how great the fishing is. Fishing communities all over the world are ending a way of life

that's changed little over centuries. That's one example of one sector. But it's a telling, urgent and tragic one.

So how does humanity reduce the sting to come? We simply have to act individually and collectively to reduce our impact on the world. There's no shortage of information on how to do that. It just needs to be done by enough people. And acting on it must be impressed on the government leaders who will meet in Copenhagen later this year to devise the next generation of guidelines on limiting carbon emissions and fighting climate change.

We cannot continue to live like this. We cannot maintain our assault on the natural world and expect it to

sustain us. That blunt reality is why I took part in the Climate Justice Dialogue last weekend and why I've accepted the invitation to be the global patron of WWF's Earth Hour on March 28.

Earth Hour is a lovely idea – millions of people turning off their lights at the same time to show they care about their impact on the planet.

They are, in effect, acknowledging the laws of cause and effect are as applicable to overspending on a credit card or depleting the "bank account" of fresh water, clean air and unpolluted soil that keep us alive.

WWF's 2008 Living Planet Report

shows living as we do now will require the resources of two planets by 2030. The report tracks 2,000 species and shows they have declined by 30 percent between 1970 and 2006 as a result of human activity.

Again, I accepted the invitation to be the global patron of Earth Hour in 2008, because I believe the event can be a turning point for humanity. This is important for all South Africans, but especially for the poor.

The delegates at yesterday's conference heard how the world's 50 least developed countries produce less than one percent of global emissions, while the US, Europe, Russia, India, China and Japan

produce more than 75 percent of the emissions between them.

The reality is that the rich have a far greater impact on the planet than the poor. Tragically, is the reality that the impact of climate change on the poor is first and worst.

So Earth Hour is not just a "green stunt" – it's about social justice, sustainable development and a more equitable world.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is the global patron of WWF's Earth Hour on March 28. Sign up to climatechange at www.earthhour.org.za and remember to turn off your lights for an hour at 20.30 on March 28.

