

Work or volunteer for a conservation initiative

By Anuradha Rao

The Kommetjie Environmental Awareness Group turns environmental activism into economic opportunity.



Lorraine Hendricks and fellow KEAG crafters paint horns made from kelp. (Photo: Anuradha Rao)

Lorraine Hendricks lives in the South African township of Ocean View. It is a poor community made up mostly of people from the “Coloured” ethnic group: people of mixed ancestry who were separated from other racial groups during the apartheid era. Although many people in the community are unemployed, for the last nine years Hendricks has been employed by a group called KEAG - the Kommetjie Environmental Awareness Group.

KEAG is a small non-profit organization located south of Cape Town. The organization employs people from poor communities to do work that protects or rehabilitates the local environment.

Hendricks spoke with pride of her work and the doors it has opened for her. “There are lots of opportunities. I learned a lot of things from KEAG, things I didn’t know [such as] first aid, customer care and skills to run a business.”

During its 18 years of operation, KEAG has employed hundreds of people in work as varied as beach cleanups, monitoring of coastal and marine activities, looking out for sharks near popular beaches to prevent human-shark conflict and invasive alien plant removal.

As is the case with many environmental organizations in Canada, KEAG’s funding is entirely project-based and comes from a variety of external donors. It is striving to become more financially secure through revenue generated by its longer-term, larger-scale projects.

One of KEAG's financial successes has been its craft-from-waste project, which employs artisans from local townships to create useful and decorative objects out of mostly plastic garbage. This project is nearly to the point of being self-sustaining.

Hendricks remembers how the idea for that project developed. "We were doing the Coastcare project, cleaning the beach. We were finding lots of rubbish on the beach, and we found out we can make something from that rubbish. We started to make curtains and some necklaces out of plastic." Other crafts include chandeliers made out of plastic bottle caps, and wall-mountings such as cow heads made from detergent bottles. Orders for these crafts have come from as far away as Europe.

Driving from the airport into Cape Town, one passes row upon row of tiny, haphazard shacks in the sprawling township of Khayelitsha. Difficult conditions in surrounding countries such as Zimbabwe have led to a massive influx of refugees to these townships.

Environmental problems are on full display in such high-density areas. Litter clogs waterways and municipal infrastructure is often inadequate to fully service formal settlements. For example, raw sewage enters a river that flows through Ocean View. Informal settlements are unserviced.

In a place where so many people live hand-to-mouth in crowded and often dangerous townships, how do you not only foster conservation efforts - often seen as the luxury of the wealthy environmentalist - but do so in a way that provides direct and tangible benefits to those most in need?

There are no easy answers, but KEAG's strategy is to undertake environmental stewardship projects that bring both economic and environmental benefits to the community. These projects provide people from local townships with training and meaningful jobs from which they can not only see and appreciate the environmental benefits of their labour, but can afford to support their families as well.

"The joy of KEAG's projects," explains the organization's director, Wally Petersen, "is that they create employment for people to address and deal with real environmental needs. In an area where we have considerable under- and unemployment and pressing environmental needs, it really does make a difference."

KEAG creates environmental work opportunities for people who don't get many opportunities to begin with. Drug use in Ocean View township is rife, for example, with the myriad social problems that come with it. Many children are not in school because their parents cannot afford to pay their school fees. For six hours a day, dozens of young men stand on the road near Masiphumelele township and wait - often in vain - for someone to drive by and offer them work.

Nancy Phanginxiwa, who has been working on coastal restoration projects with KEAG, describes the daily struggle of life in Masiphumelele. "We are staying in shacks. There

are no jobs. There's no housing." She appreciates the training that KEAG has provided her. "If the job expires I can go look for another job."

Daniel Dwashu, also from Masiphumelele, has been working for KEAG since 2000. He emphasizes the importance of the investment that KEAG makes in its employees. "Many people are not skilled," he explains. "That is why many people cannot get a job. [At KEAG,] we do different trainings so that after a project we can go and get jobs."

Whereas many environmental organizations in Canada find it frustrating when they lose staff they have trained to other, higher-paying institutions, KEAG celebrates this phenomenon.

"Although a lot of our projects are short-term," says Petersen, "we take great pride in enabling people to use them as stepping stones for better and longer-term employment. We've been successful in placing a number of our employees in full-term positions as park rangers and coastal monitors."

There are plans for Lorraine Hendricks to expand her role in the organization to become the shopkeeper at the store where KEAG sells its crafts. The store's name is Ilitha Lomsa, which means "A New Dawn" in the local Xhosa language.

Can Canadians learn from KEAG's example and turn our own economic crisis into a "new dawn"? Doing so will require looking upon environmental projects as an opportunity for social enrichment, an investment not only in the future but also in the present day.

For more information about KEAG's projects, go to
www.keag.org.za.