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Climate Change: WESSA Position Statement

This position statement reflects the Vision, Mission, Aim, Style and Values of WESSA. The position statement should be used to guide WESSA (internally), as well as seek to position WESSA (externally), as an active and credible influence on environmental governance in South Africa.

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This position statement replaces all other WESSA position statements relating to this issue that pre-date this one.

FOUNDER MEMBER OF IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature



Summary

For WESSA climate change is real, rapidly unfolding, related to human carbon fuel use and a global problem that threatens the environment, social structures and economies. South Africa is the biggest CO2 emitter in Africa and, as such has a clear and exemplary leadership role to play in mitigation and adaptation efforts. Its own diverse and, in many respects, already stressed environment, especially water resources, is a further prompt to urgent action. While such action should ideally aim to redress past inequities in the costs and benefits of fossil fuel use amongst the global community, protracted political negotiations are causing dangerous delays to necessary action. It is therefore essential that every country commit itself independently to take as much remedial action as it possibly can. Mitigation and adaptation are equally important though the latter is urgent to address unavoidable impacts.

In response to the above WESSA commits itself to using its resources in several specific ways aligned to its programmatic priorities of water, waste, energy and biodiversity and in pursuance of its driving education and conservation mission to promote active and informed public participation in caring for the earth through purposefully confronting the challenge of climate change.

Position Statement

WESSA believes that climate change is a real and urgent problem that goes beyond purely biophysical (or environmental) dimensions. It is a phenomenon almost certainly precipitated by human industrial activity over the last two hundred years, specifically related to the burning of fossilized carbon based fuels such as oil and coal that has added in a cumulative way to the concentration of greenhouse gases, notably carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. While we accept that these and the other suite of gases that make up the earth's atmosphere occur naturally and are produced through normal earth-system functioning, it is the additional and accumulating fraction contributed by people that is altering a key aspect of our life- support system into a fast-developing threat. Human populations, especially those living in countries with large industrial bases, including South Africa, have upset a dynamic equilibrium that has been in place for millennia. They have a duty to help solve the problem and while some commendable efforts have already been made, much more is possible.

Climate change warrants significant political, economic, technological, societal and scientific action from every nation on earth in a co-ordinated, sustained, co-operative and resolute way. South Africa, as the biggest African contributor to the problem with half a billion tons of CO2 per year, is no exception and should be demonstrating its commitment to reducing threats in an unambiguous way that acknowledges part responsibility and shows a desire to change.

Much of the South African economy, its well-being and global status as a conservation-oriented country stand to be negatively affected by climate change which may already be starting to show impacts on habitats and biodiversity in our coastal marine environment, in the Northern Cape and in bushveld areas. Though these may be subtle and contested in some circles the precautionary principle should guide thinking and decision making. Ocean acidification, intensified drought and flood events that are predicted and already being experienced, along with desperate human reactions to such changes, add to biodiversity threats and the loss of ecosystem goods and services and the natural capital that underpins sustainable livelihoods. At a pragmatic resource use level water quantity and quality issues are nationally problematic even outside climate change considerations.

Unfortunately, there may not be time for a slow conversion from one energy source to another as envisaged by several government policy documents. Fortunately, many of the technologies to help make the shift via renewable resources, efficiency and demand management exist in advanced form and are deployable in relatively short time frames. Furthermore they do not rely only on government resources, the tax base and international loans for installation. The scale of installation work and attendant employment opportunities would, to an extent, offset the disruption caused by a carbon-judicious new energy path. Many more people than are currently involved in the energy sector would be able to



participate in the numerous economic and social benefits of such a move which would be in line with a "green growth path" and "climate jobs".

Despite the many successful projects resulting from the Cleaner Development Mechanism (CDM), one of the tools for financing greenhouse gas emission reduction, Africa has received very few benefits from this scheme. As it is the continent with some of the highest impact predictions, the CDM system *status quo* should clearly not be supported in the longer term. The paying to pollute aspect of CDM is also troublesome and something that undermines the environmental integrity of the approach. The carbon tax policy as instituted in Australia and mooted for incremental application in South Africa would appear to have more direct benefits, but the use of incentives for voluntary emissions-reducing action should also be explored.

While WESSA fully endorses the principle of climate change redress and a mechanism for compensation being paid by the most polluting countries to the least, waiting for the implementation of such a balancing procedure must not impede all countries from taking as much independent action as they can beyond consensus decisions.

Therefore, WESSA believes, there is a moral ethical imperative for every state, organization and person to demonstrate good faith, lead by example and seek collaborative efforts. South Africa should use its unique status in Africa and the world to promote and exemplify uncompromising action especially considering South Africa's ambiguous roles as contributor to and sufferer from climate change. A comprehensive adaptation strategy is obviously a priority requirement to help deal with inescapable change. In many cases adaptation and mitigation actions overlap and these are the ones that are most worth supporting.

This all being said WESSA commits itself to use the media and resources at its disposal to advocate for timeous and meaningful action at all government levels and amongst businesses, industry and civil society. In this regard the organization will:

- Support all genuine efforts by role players to adopt an eco-system approach to mitigation and adaptation programmes
- Endorse and support all international political efforts to extend the Kyoto Protocol commitment period or design a similar, binding convention that attracts more global role players.
- Include climate-change consciousness in all its own conservation and education programmes with a view to capacity development in confronting the challenges of climate change.
- Ensure that its mission to promote public participation in caring for the earth will be pursued with clear "how-to" advice in relation to climate change response and associated issues of informed participation and inclusive governance
- Encourage and support the development of an ethos of voluntary social change amongst consumers.
- Deliberately encourage the uptake of new technologies and practices as well as the revitalization of old ones where these are clearly able to demonstrate climate change mitigating and adapting benefits.
- Promote and support societal transition initiatives that aim at bridging the gap between high and low carbon economies
- Use our extensive networks and associations to help integrate and consolidate societal knowledge and will power around combating climate change drivers and impacts
- Deliberately engage with discreet interest groups including youth, unions, government officials, academia and business with a view to ensuring a holistic and as far as possible, united front in tackling the challenges of climate change



• Call for equitable energy allocations for all citizens under any programme of fossil fuel use curtailment for renewable energy generation.	or opportunities