

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY  
RONNIE KASRILS  
AT THE WETLAND REPORT-BACK  
FOR THE ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST  
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"The long fight to save wild beauty represents democracy at its best. It requires citizens to practise the hardest of virtues – self-restraint".

Thus wrote American writer and naturalist Edwin Way Teale in the 1950s.

And his message is, of course, even more apt today, as our resources grow more scarce and the temptation to exploit or simply trample over them grows more powerful than ever before.

‘Self-restraint’, in our post-modern age, has a strangely old-fashioned ring. But there is no doubt that it applies very precisely to what we face today in South Africa ... and not only in our wetlands and environmentally sensitive areas, but throughout society.

We need to practice self-restraint in the way we use our resources so that we can find creative ways to build bridges across the vast gulf between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in our country. We also need to practice self-restraint in the way we respond when things seem to be taking a little longer than they should, or when, conversely, things seem to be changing too radically or too fast.

I think, however, that there is another virtue that is critical both to the "long

fight to save wild beauty" and to many other issues, and that is the virtue of co-operation, the value of working in partnership.

This fascinating and exciting wetland project came about because the Highlands Crane Group became concerned about threats to the habitat of cranes.

I am told that cranes are dependent on the wetlands and catchment areas for foraging and nesting. These areas were discovered to be under threat because of the destructive siting of dams.

This you all know about because you have been part of this magnificent project. For me, the information was new and very interesting.

The first link-up came about when the Federation of Flyfishers approached the Highlands Crane Group and they began to work on the problem together.

It was now that the connections began to be made and, last year, an impressive range of organisations met to discuss the siting of "environmentally friendly" dams.

Two important issues emerged.

First, it was clear that there was a need to simplify the regulations relating to dam development. I believe that the deficiencies in the regulations are now well on their way to correction and that there will very soon be a one-stop dam committee and new interim policy from the Department of Environmental

Affairs and Tourism.

Second, there was a need to consider the impacts of dams on wetlands and the environment and that Gary Marweneck, a wetlands specialist, should be asked to develop a plan for the maintenance, development and wise use of wetlands. I believe that his study proposal has been accepted.

The groups continued to meet, with some really encouraging results – both in respect of important environmental, dam and wetlands initiatives and in terms, too, of changes to the regulatory framework.

You don't need to hear the details from me.

What I would like to say, though, is how very heartening it is that so many organisations – many with what might appear to the outsider to have conflicting interests – have come together in this way.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust and the Highlands Crane Group have been instrumental in creating a most ingenious and successful partnership. For the first time, three government departments and a range of other state and private organisations have sat down with farmers, flyfishers, resident dam builders and other groups and individuals to chart a path for the future.

Self-restraint has been much in evidence, co-operation has been exemplary and all potential differences have been put aside. Everyone simply rolled up their sleeves and got on with the important business of working for a better

environment – proving just how much partnership and shared interests and goodwill can achieve.

The agreements that have been reached here and the significant changes that have come about will undoubtedly provide a blueprint for other projects elsewhere. It will also contribute to our efforts to transform a formerly insular and sometimes (it must be said) unco-operative civil service into an open, approachable and participatory public sector, willing to work with the public they are appointed to serve.

As you probably know, this government has a slogan or pivotal message: "working together for a better life for all". We know that government alone cannot achieve a better life for all South Africans. Indeed, throughout the world, governments are dropping their stuffy ways and learning the value of working with NGOs, the private sector and interest groups to achieve common goals.

In South Africa, where so much needs to be done to raise the living standards of the majority of our people, such partnerships are particularly valuable. They allow for the sharing of resources, the pooling of skills and the blazing of new and exciting trails.

It is projects like this, projects that promote community empowerment and local resource management, that have the potential to make a significant difference to the lives of people on the ground.

All the people living in this and surrounding communities must become part of

this initiative and participate in conserving the environment and water resources.

As with all really good projects, where self-interest is subsumed into the common interest, everyone gains.

In the words of that wise old Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, nearly 2000 years ago: "what is good for the hive is good for the bee".

This is a groundbreaking project and I congratulate you all. I also commit my Department to work with you in seeking the greatest common good.