

PLANT A TREE. HEAL OUR LAND
by Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry

On April 10 1872, on the first official Arbor Day, the people of Nebraska planted one million trees. The initiative was the brainchild of Nebraskan newspaper publisher who persuaded the authorities that planting trees would play an important role in greening and enriching what was known as "the great American desert". Today Arbor Day is celebrated in many countries, including South Africa.

But what is the significance of Arbor Day for our country? And how can we transform this essentially American tradition into something that all our people can truly feel a part of?

A quick dictionary check reveals that the word 'Arbor' comes from Latin for tree. It is also, in its non-American spelling, an arbour, "a shady garden alcove with the sides and roof formed by trees or climbing plant". But what do these words mean to our own people? What does a Latin word mean to those who live in areas that so desperately need trees and plants to humanise the urban deserts in which they live?

It is today a truism, perhaps, to say that trees are essential to life. We all know that we depend on trees for the world's oxygen and that, by continuing to destroy the natural forestation on our planet, we ultimately threaten our very existence. In South Africa, we need trees to enrich and anchor our soil, to maximise our water supplies, to beautify and humanise our townships and to provide shade and shelter.

Yet, there are other ways in which trees can play a powerful role in our culture and society. Trees are about renewal, growth and regeneration. But they are also about memory. In their trunks, they chart the passage of time. Each ring tells the story of a year in the life of the tree.

In ancient times, people in various lands have planted trees in religious ceremonies. In our own country, trees and forests are a powerful part of our history and national memory. And, even where the great forests have been reduced in size, the stories and myths remain. The Amatola and Nkandla forests are revered sites of the Xhosa and Zulu resistance to colonial expansion.

In some earlier civilisations, people planted trees when children were born. In others, trees are planted when people die, ensuring that their memory lives on.

Sometimes trees are planted in tribute. Last year at Arlington National Cemetery, for example, a cedar tree was planted in what was described as "a long overdue tribute" to "the thousands of American sailors of African and Asian descent who served faithfully in peace and fought valiantly in war despite infamous discriminatory conditions ...".

It is from this perspective that we have begun to consider the role and place of Arbor Day in our society. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown us that we are a nation that needs to deal with its memories, a nation in need of healing. Yet, how do we ensure that the

past is not forgotten, while at the same time promoting the idea of growth and regeneration? Where do we find a symbol that expresses the idea of remembrance without bitterness; a symbol that is universal and resonates across cultures and experience? Where do we find a symbol that brings us together rather than drives us apart, that reconciles rather than divides?

Everywhere in South Africa, people have memories. Some have never had the opportunity to bury their dead. Others are bitter about deaths that occurred as a result of criminal acts of violence. There are many ghosts from the long distant past wars have never been laid to rest: such as the Bambatha Rebellion, the Anglo-Boer War and, more recently, the struggle against apartheid. Many, many people still mourn their daughters and sons, their mothers and fathers and their fallen comrades. There are many, of all political persuasions, who feel that justice has not been done to the memory of those who risked their lives to do what they believed was right. Others are bitter about the loss of loved ones; young men who were sent to war without knowing why or who they fought.

This, ultimately, is the tragedy of war and conflict. It is about individual people, about involuntary suffering and personal unresolved grief.

This year, we have tried to bring some of this focus into our Arbor Day celebrations by arranging a number of events aimed at bringing people together in a spirit of remembrance, reconciliation and renewal.

In Delft, on Tuesday, we commemorated the women in that area who have been mindlessly and savagely raped and killed. On Friday, at the Ahmed Timol high school, we will plant trees in memory of a revered and respected young man who died at the hands of the security branch. In Pietermaritzburg next week, we will plant trees in memory of the many victims of that appalling bloodletting known as the Six Day War of 1990 and at Ngquza Hill, Lusikisiki, we will commemorate the Pondoland Massacre of 1962. At Bisho, we will remember those who died on the march to Bisho, just before our first democratic elections.

Earlier this week, President Mbeki and his Cabinet planted a tree in Tuynhuis gardens to Khoisan people, who were persecuted, hunted, killed and cruelly treated by the early settlers in the Cape.

We will also be remembering those who are most vulnerable in our society. At Kirstenbosch, we will honour those who are old and people with disabilities. And we have celebrated, too, our hopes for the All Africa Games at a special ceremony in Alexandra.

We have many other plans. In line with our notion that 'Arbor Day is every day' and should not be confined to a day or even a week, we will continue to work towards a culture of greening and remembrance. We would like, in this centenary year, to bring together the heirs of those people of all colours who fought, were incarcerated, died and suffered in the Anglo-Boer War. We want to plant trees in remembrance of those who have lost their lives in the senseless shootings and violent crimes that take place every day.

Each of these trees will become a powerful symbol of remembrance, of regeneration and of the striving of our society to grow and flourish. Each will carry the memory of the past and a message for the future.

For, ultimately, each of these trees will survive far, far longer than we do, leaving a message for our children and our children's children. Offering them shelter from the sun. Enriching the earth. Greening our urban and rural deserts. Deepening our memories ...

And healing our land.