

Eduplant 2004 Awards Ceremony
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Summit College, Fourways, Gauteng
28 September 2004

I was an honour and a privilege for me to be invited here today. As a new Minister I have been presented with an opportunity to witness the achievements of this worthwhile environmental education programme to which my Department has been contributing for the past seven years. To our co-funders, The Woolworths Trust, Tikkun, the Department of Agriculture and Food and Trees for Africa, I feel welcomed. I welcome guests from various other Government departments, non-governmental organisations and the media.

This event is a celebration of the achievements of all educators and learners that participated in EduPlant this year, in particular those of you who succeeded to this stage, the national finals of EduPlant 2004. We congratulate all of you and wish you good luck with this final round of the competition.

A few weeks ago we celebrated Arbor Week around the country and I was fortunate to visit some communities and see what they have achieved to date. Our theme this year is "Trees are our Heritage" and there are encouraging examples of how people are taking care of their environmental heritage. The protection of the Sophia Town Oak is one example. However, it is sometimes heart breaking to see what is happening to the tree heritage of our nation.

Some of you are come from the rural areas where much of our natural forests and woodlands are becoming degraded. Our parents and their parents were able to get so many benefits from the forests with which they sustained their livelihoods. We know that life changes and that our needs and those of the future generations may differ from those of our parents. However, forests of all kinds have this remarkable ability that they always have something of value for humans, no matter how developed a nation may be. Even people in urban areas have some green heritage to treasure. So in both rural and urban areas there is a need for us to invest our efforts to maintain and develop an environment that can sustain human life as a heritage for our children.

An investment in environmental awareness and education for school pupils is an investment in the future of our country. Just like trees, children will grow. The better they are nurtured, the better they grow. Investing in school greening improves the physical environment in which we learn. It creates an environment where we can find comfort, shade on a hot summers day and shelter from the cold winter winds.

Trees also contribute to poverty alleviation by providing fruits, among other things. Surely trees are a resource for education in many ways. All these are elements of permaculture that are taught through EduPlant. The programme also goes beyond to include vegetable gardening, recycling of waste and it teaches us about soil and water resources. This acknowledges that in life things are connected like the strands of a spider's web. If we ignore this we may suffer as a consequence of our own actions.

As future leaders of our country, you, the youth, need to know how the environment supports us and how the things we do in our daily lives in turn affect our environment. I call on the learners to make sure that whatever innovations you learn from EduPlant and implement in your schools, you do the same at home. Initiate food gardens as individuals and participate in the establishment of community gardens. Plant trees and nurture the ones you have and do not forget this message that you learnt in the Programme in later years as you grow older. Our nation's environmental heritage is valuable and we can only maintain it if individuals like you care enough to take action.

Most of our urban and rural communities are very poor. The poverty in these areas has manifested itself to the extent that some children go to school hungry. Schools that have participated in the EduPlant programme have been able to address the issue of malnutrition through the production of healthy food for learners and unemployed parents.

Although we need to conserve our natural environment, we have a challenge to strike a balance between looking after our biodiversity and taking people out of the scourge of poverty. This is the biggest challenge faced by the country and all our small contributions will certainly make a difference. We need a very high level of creativity and make trees to contribute to socio-economic development of our country and more importantly the Local Economic Development, for the interest of poverty alleviation.

Since the EduPlant programme relies solely on donor funding, I wish to use this opportunity to appeal to other potential donors to make a contribution to this dynamic and effective programme that has such positive effect in our country. We thank The Woolworths Trust, Tikkun and the Department of Agriculture for their support again this year.

My Department is involved with greening issues in urban and rural areas and is promoting the greening of our schools by supporting this Eskom EduPlant programme. By supporting EduPlant my Department is trying to realise the following objectives, among others –

- Greening of our schools nationally;
- Promoting environmental education and environmental awareness for schools nationally;
- Encouraging and motivating schools to uplift themselves and to supplement the school feeding schemes through sustainable food production and thus alleviate poverty;
- Promotion of permaculture and related skills to schools and the immediate communities;
- Creating general awareness in schools such as the value of natural ecosystem as a renewable resource and a fundamental requirement for food security and healthy living, and
- Equipping schools with conceptual, technical and social skills required to manage and utilise natural resources.

Through the EduPlant programme, schools are now able to:

- grow their own food using permaculture principles, contributing to
- food security and poverty alleviation;
- incorporate the project into their curriculum, learning new skills and building capacity;

- employ parents to work in the gardens and learn the skills;
- generate income; and
- involve the surrounding communities and raise further funding for larger projects

The EduPlant programme can be taken to a higher level as a career and the following, among others, could be pursued –

- Conducting more research, in partnership with institutions of higher learning, on the importance of trees to mitigate against global warming. We need to know the types of trees that we should plant for this purpose and the extent to which these would be of assistance.
- Developing a database or a book on indigenous trees and their socio-economic value e.g. for medicinal use. The indication is that some research has started in this direction and scientific evidence is available but it is not yet the property of our country. We need to promote the medicinal use of our indigenous trees – for instance the Naturopaths, the Traditional healers and the Homeopaths all use herbs for healing.
- Our tertiary institutions need to promote this area as a career focus and on behalf of government I challenge them to publish a career guidance book on the value of indigenous trees to society.

As a Department, it does not seem possible to sustain a high level of funding. I would like to encourage other groups to join this worthwhile partnership and support this valiant effort, which we are witnessing here today. This is a worthy cause to support and by investing in programmes such as these, the private sector is in fact investing in a green, prosperous and sustainable future.

We hope that enough funds will be made available especially for Food and Trees for Africa to run more workshops and reach out to more learners throughout the country every year and also that more schools can enjoy the opportunities that you, who are present here today are already benefiting from.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the schools that took part in this programme. Your presence here indicates the level of dedication towards a clean, healthy and beautiful environment.

We would also like to thank the Department of Education, both nationally and provincially, for allowing this project to be implemented in schools throughout South Africa. This demonstrates how Government departments, non-governmental organisations, big companies and donors can work together effectively in improving the lives of communities in South Africa.

Let us all remember that children are our future. In order to secure a brighter future for the coming generations, and ourselves, we need to look after them. The EduPlant project has proved to be a tool to achieve this ideal.

I also take this opportunity to call on other potential funders to learn a lesson from EduPlant on how the private sector can plough back into the community by working in partnership with government. We thank

The Woolworths Trust, Tikkun, and others, for contributing financial resources towards the success of this programme. I also thank other stakeholders that made contributions either in kind or otherwise. We value your contributions, no matter how small, and we hope you will continue to work with us in future.

The issue of caring for our environment and beautifying our surroundings does not end here today. You have all won prizes here today, now please use the opportunity to take on projects for your communities through which you care for the environment as well as sustain our natural resources.

Those who did not get top prizes should not despair, but use the opportunity to prepare for next year's competition. It is never too late to make a good start.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of you for gracing this important occasion this afternoon.

I thank you.