

National Arbor Week 2005: Gauteng
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Kwa-Thema, Ekurhuleni, Gauteng
2 September 2005

The Honourable Premier
MECs
Honourable District Mayor
Honourable Mayors and Deputy Mayors
Councillors
Honourable Guests
Officials, both of my Department and that of Metro Parks and
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted to join the community of Ekurhuleni and the Ekurhuleni Metro Departments, and Food and Trees for Africa to celebrate Arbor Week here today. Arbor Week is a week in which we recognise the social, economic and ecological importance of trees in our society, and events such as today's are showcases for the work we are doing as a collective, in this regard.

The theme for Arbor week this year is: "Plant a Tree - Grow our Future".

This event is momentous as it marks the beginning of trying to establish the largest man made urban forest in the Ekurhuleni/Tshwane/Johannesburg/Metropolitan area. The event signals the launch of 15 000 or more trees to be delivered to houses in Ekurhuleni per year for the next three years, and this is indeed an ambitious and wonderful project and is a superb example of "Planting a Tree and Growing our Future!" This Project will allow this community to move into a shadier, more comfortable and more beneficial future. It really is like the community benefiting from a new birth in the community and I am happy to be at the birth!

It makes me think of the interaction between trees and babies and humankind in general and in thinking about this event I started to think how we are linked with trees to the future, to our growth. To explore growth and the future, one should start with a baby. Immediately after birth, the very first thing a baby needs is oxygen, which is produced by a tree. Now the growth of the baby can continue outside the womb.

The baby needs to be washed, and here the tree again plays a role in providing clean water. On a bureaucratic note, registration at the Department of Home Affairs is compulsory so as to announce to South Africans that we have received a new citizen among us. Thanks to the tree, paper is provided.

Trees purify the air by removing carbon dioxide from the air. Planting trees is, therefore, helping our environment, helping our baby to breathe. There are also economic and health benefits from this purifying benefit of trees. For instance the Sunday Times of 17 July 2005 contained an article wherein it was reported that a study conducted in Guangzhou, which lies about 125 km north west of Hong Kong, had tried to quantify the economic benefits of greening. The study showed that for each US dollar spent on greening measures, a saving of US\$ 10 a year in economic benefits by mitigating the effects of air pollution is generated. This includes, of course, the lowering in health care cost by making people less prone to illness such as respiratory diseases. Our people, therefore, benefit from the trees in many ways.

We should, therefore, say "Plant a Tree - to Grow our Future", a future with cleaner air. Plant a tree today and contribute to air quality improvement, combating global warming, noise abatement the list of the environmental benefits goes on and on.

If we return to the story of life: When our baby grows up she will discover that climbing trees and playing in the shade provide so much laughter and fun. She will sit, shaded from the hot afternoon sun, relaxing in the shade, perhaps dreaming and wondering about the future, and ways in which she, as a South African citizen in our post-*apartheid* democratic society, can help to strengthen this great country.

In the cold winter, fire gives warmth and provides heating for food. Again trees come into the equation. Firewood is still a major source of energy in our country and the continent. Over 80% of rural households use fuel wood as their primary source of energy. It is estimated that more than 13 million cubic meters of wood is consumed annually for energy, with a value of more than R3 billion per annum. Sustainability of the resource is critical for our future, and so my Department is currently busy developing a firewood strategy in conjunction with the Department of Minerals and Energy.

To return to our baby getting sick is often also a part of growing up. Again the trees will have to come to the rescue. Up to 28 million South Africans rely on traditional medicine for primary health care products. The vast majority of traditional medicines originate from tree resources. This resource is under threat and my Department is currently developing guidelines to ensure the sustainable harvesting of indigenous trees, as well as the establishment of community nurseries to protect this vital resource.

Ladies and gentlemen, the trees we see around us today are special. They will remain a part of our lives as we grow and prosper as individuals and as a nation, and assist us to be proudly South African.

To give birth to such a project, so many trees..... So many people have worked hard and will continue to work hard to sustain the benefits of the trees for the Ekurhuleni community. We need to thank those people:

I would like to especially thank the sponsors of Arbor Week TOTAL SA and SAPPI, who have helped and supported my Department in our Arbor Week campaign. It is a well appreciated sponsorship, and we are glad to work with you this year, as in so many other years.

I would also like to thank Willard Batteries, who have sponsored this event for their ongoing support to urban greening in this country, and of course Metro Parks, who have worked so willingly with Food and Trees for Africa and my Department to organise the project and the event. Metro Parks has indeed taken on the challenge of ensuring that its citizens are looked after and can take a pride and benefit in their environment and they are to be congratulated on their proactive and caring position in this regard!

I would also like to commend Food and Trees for Africa for the remarkable work they do in assisting the trees in our country to be planted, and nurtured and appreciated. Food and Trees for Africa contribute greatly to our environment and to the upliftment of communities, and their Eduplant Programme, which my Department supports, is another example of a wonderful way of educating and assisting those valuable babies which I mentioned earlier in my speech!

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting us to Ekurhuleni today. It is a pleasure to be at this happy event and to see so much attention given to trees and their benefits.

The task of sustaining all these baby trees for our future babies will, of course, depend on the community now. You will have to nurture and coax them into greater growth in order to ensure that they grow up tall and strong and benefit so many generations. The assistance of many partners in this endeavour such as Metro Parks, Food and Trees for Africa and of course, my own Department will be given, but you as a community must adopt these baby trees and make them your own. I know that you can and will undertake this task. I wish to congratulate you on the new additions, in the form of these trees, to your community and thank you for inviting me to this event today.

Thank you.