

National Arbor Week 2005: Northern Cape
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Jan Kempdorp, Northern Cape
6 September 2005

Premier of the Northern Cape, Ms Dipuo Peters
Mr P W Saaïman, MEC: Tourism, Environment and Conservation
Executive Mayor of the Francis Baard District Municipality
Mayor of the Phokwane Municipality
Distinguish guests
The Community of Jan Kempdorp/Valspan
Learners of schools in the area (who are very special) and
Master of Ceremony.

I am honoured today to be part of the Arbor Week Celebrations in the Northern Cape. I am delighted to join the Premier and the people of Jan Kempdorp in celebrating Arbor Week.

Arbor Week is celebrated annually and it is during this week that we acknowledge the value that trees have in our lives. We know that they provide us with shelter in this hot and sunny country of ours. Trees provide us with fruit and their wood provides us with construction material and firewood. The most important heritage we all remember is that trees have provided meeting places for us in the past and have been classrooms in other situations. These are sad memories but memories that are an important part of our history. Remember a country that remembers its past, is a country that will be able to plan its future better.

Trees are certainly our friends, our heritage and we need to acknowledge them not only today, not only during Arbor Week, but we should always remember and always value them.

During this Week we need to encourage our people who change their environment especially our townships by planting trees. Many of our townships have not benefited from proper planning such as open spaces and greening. As a result many of our people living in townships lack recreational areas such as beautiful parks and green streets. We have to work with our local authorities to put right this terrible history and legacy of *apartheid*. One just has to look at previously white suburbs to notice the difference. This leads to people living in these areas enjoying a better quality of life because of the less polluted environment because trees give oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide.

This legacy still lives with us today. If you fly over most cities in South Africa, one can easily see the legacy of *apartheid* - the glaring spatial divide based on racial separation that existed before 1994. The urban sector has always been divided between the "townships" and the "suburbs", the former look dusty and unhealthy while the latter look healthier because of the green environment. This is what we need to change especially in the context of creating habitable human settlements for even the poorest. This is one of reasons why we are saying that this Arbor Week we need to "Plant a Tree to Grow our Future". I am calling on all South Africans to help us invest in our future by planting trees throughout our country.

It is a call that is very relevant to the Northern Cape, your Province being a water scarce province. Indigenous trees could certainly be well suited to your climate. They are essential to the protection of the environment. Indigenous trees play an important role in stabilising our topsoil, safeguarding our water table, and even purifying our air. In addition, indigenous trees are an integral part of our ecosystem, providing food and shelter to hundreds of species. Finally, trees are beautiful and they restore dignity to the lives of our people as well as to our environment.

I believe in this Province as we start to plant trees and encourage communities to plant trees, this is the beginning of a growing and brighter future. A future that has trees and forests where more people will understand the importance, use and benefits of trees.

When I spoke to Premier Peters during the Water Summit recently held in the Northern Cape, we discussed ways whereby we can ensure that awareness is raised in rural communities on use and protection of trees and how to ensure that there are trees planted in this part of the country. I then promised that I would ensure that my Department does something on this. We are here today because I am responding to that call and fulfilling the promise of having trees planted in the Northern Cape. My Department has since liaised with the Danish Embassy and they have donated R25 000,00 which has been used to purchase trees for this cause.

Today's event I hope is a start of a programme of greening our townships in the Northern Cape, a programme that will give dignity to our people, that will change the barren dusty areas to that of urban forests in years to come.

It is important that greening our towns and rural areas is seen as a positive step towards empowering communities. Trees are useful in a number of ways such as shade, food, fuel wood and for the biodiversity they offer in the environment we live in. I would like to encourage the communities in this area including school children and the educators to be involved in planting of trees in their schools and their homes. As an encouragement to the schools and the community, the Upington nursery usually issues out trees on request every year. My Department's Upington Office assists by sending out application forms for tree requests to all schools in the Province, and about 500 trees were issued to schools around Jan Kempdorp.

Another important issue is the protection of our trees. There are trees that my Department has classified as Protected Trees and some of them occur in the Northern Province, i.e. the Camelthorn tree. These trees are usually under threat or are rare species as outlined in the National Forests Act, 1998 (Act 84 of 1998) and as South Africa we would not like to lose them for their biodiversity and for their use.

I have been informed that there are some people who are cutting these trees in the Northern Cape. I have been told that in Jan Kempdorp someone was fined R1 000,00 for cutting protected trees without a license. To increase awareness on this matter, my Department's Northern Cape Regional Office has developed a plan for an awareness campaign and they will be visiting different communities to inform them of the use, the importance and reasons behind the protection of these trees. We need your help in ensuring that our trees are protected.

It is important that the planted trees are kept alive for the future. I am glad that the Phokwane Local Municipality has agreed to take care of the trees we are planting today. Officials of my Department have also committed themselves that they will have follow up visits to ensure that the trees are in good condition and give advice to the community.

This week also comes at a time when the forest sector is poised for growth and where the opportunity within the sector to contribute to broad based black economic empowerment is being tackled in the form of the development of a forestry charter. The Charter process in forestry must be seen as an opportunity for the sector to grow, expand, transform and open up to previously disadvantaged individuals and communities. The time is ripe for the Forestry Sector to embrace the values and vision of a South Africa that truly belongs to all who live in it.

The week also takes stock of the Forest Sectors contribution to the economy and its involvement in alleviating poverty and unemployment, especially in rural areas of our country. We are driven by a vision of forests being managed for people and that we need to create an enabling environment for economic and social development through sustainable forestry, especially at community level. A recent study has shown that the Forestry Sector employs more than 170 000 people and contributes about 2% to the country's Gross Domestic Product.

We also need to acknowledge that much more work needs to be done in the management of our precious indigenous forests, especially their protection which forms part of our rich heritage. Although indigenous forests cover less than 1% of our total land area in South Africa, they are still rich in value. Not only are these forests revered as spiritual homes, they are also home to important medicines and herbs utilised by many South Africans, especially our rural communities.

I would like to thank the Premier and her office for the support they offered when preparing this event and their enthusiasm in the drive to green the Northern Cape. I would also like to thank TOTAL SA, DANIDA, the Francis Baard District Municipality, Phokwane Local Municipality, the communities and all the stakeholders who have attended. Let us make this a start of a good working relationship amongst ourselves as we continue to plant more trees and to ensure that forestry in this province benefits communities, especially the rural poor.

Thank You.