

Ozone-friendly politics



The struggle for human rights only makes sense when human existence is certain.

Jacklyn Cock states the case for green politics

Green politics, with its fundamental concern for the environment, is often greeted in South Africa with a response that would do credit only to the ostrich or the laboratory rat.

Ostrich-like, many South Africans overlook the fact that the struggle for human rights only makes sense when human existence is certain. Right now humanity, along with the environment, is seriously threatened - above all by nuclear war, a danger all too remote in South African thinking.

The 'laboratory rat mentality' is reflected in those who can only run in the familiar maze of conventional politics with its focus on issues of race and class. Environmental issues are viewed as a diversion and a luxury - or as quite irrelevant.

In 'Green politics' the concept of 'politics' is understood very broadly to embrace all aspects of the distribution of power and resources in society. Green politics links the struggle to end the exploitation of the environment with

the struggle for peace and human justice.

In South Africa environmental issues, ranging from the Third World types (such as soil erosion) to First World issues (like acid rain) are deeply political. Small wonder that the Ecology Party, which aims to operate outside of politics to promote environmental awareness, has had difficulty getting off the ground. Rupert Lorimer has commented that this strategy is not really feasible, because 'ecology is not the only issue'.

In fact ecology is *the* issue, but it is deeply embedded in a mass of other issues to do with the distribution of power and resources.

Challenges from below to the existing power structure have often included environmental issues. A grassroots environmental movement existed in embryonic form in 1984-86, the days of 'people's power'. Through people's courts and street committees a great deal was done to organise garbage col-

lection and establish 'people's parks' with small rockeries and colourful painted tyres in many open spaces in townships throughout the country.

But these efforts were only a small part of a much broader struggle against apartheid. Japhta Lekgetho, president of the Soweto-based National Environmental Awareness Campaign (Neac), has emphasised that apartheid is at the core of environmental degradation. 'Blacks have always had to live in an environment that was neither beautiful nor clean. We have not had proper housing, roads or services because the authorities would not accept that we were a permanent part of the city scene'.

Last year Neac members demonstrated with placards saying, 'Provide housing for the poor and homeless', 'Protect our environment by removing the Group Areas Act and the Land Act' and 'Apartheid makes our townships dirty'.

It is also apartheid which has excluded the majority of South Africans from some of our most beautiful beaches

and mountains.

Despite clear areas of common interest in the anti-apartheid and environmental struggles, there is still a danger that conservation will become discredited in the eyes of the majority because conservation projects have often disregarded human rights and dignity.

For instance, the establishment of the Pilansberg Game Reserve meant social dislocation and distress for many local people.

As rural worker Richard Clasey has stated: 'If conservation means losing water rights, losing grazing and arable land and being dumped in a resettlement area without even the most rudimentary infrastructure and services - as was the case when the Tembe Elephant Park near Kosi Bay was declared in 1983 - this can only promote a vigorous anti-conservation ideology among the rural communities of South Africa'.

There is a dangerous parallel in the way women's issues and environmental issues are sometimes viewed as middle-class concerns. Feminism is often deemed bourgeois and divisive - concerned with extending privileges for an already privileged group of middle-class women.

Similarly, environmental issues are sometimes viewed as limited to the conservation of large, cuddly and spectacular creatures such as the blue whale, the tiger or the giant panda bear. It is not certain how much the people who frequent fashion shows and art exhibitions to raise money for conservation care about human rights and welfare. Infant mortality rates in the bantustans do not seem to have the same fashionable appeal as the conservation of the black rhinoceros.

But environmental issues do have relevance to people of all classes.

Eddie Koch and Dirk Hartford have argued that environmental issues actually have the potential 'to build alliances across the divides of class and race'. But this is often not the case. Even the example they cite - the fight against indiscriminate use of pesticides - guarantees no easy convergence of class and race interests.

In the first place the pesticide industry is a source of enormous profit. Secondly, vegetable farmers in Natal, who have suffered from the indiscriminate use of pesticides such as the Agent Orange-type herbicide, are able to mobilise public opinion and demand state action.

Middle-class consumers have access to knowledge of the link between pesti-

cides and cancer and have the purchasing power to buy organically-grown produce from expensive health-food shops.

The real victims are the poor who do not have either this knowledge or this purchasing option. Among them, as Koch and Hartford point out, are the agricultural workers who spray the pesticides as well as the factory workers who manufacture them.

Toxic waste also affects us all, but - again - differentially. Those most affected are the workers directly handling these hazardous materials. There are reports that workers at Thor Chemicals, a multinational company which imports highly toxic mercury waste into South Africa, are suffering from a severe nervous disorder induced by mercury poisoning.

Green politics links the struggle against such exploitation of people with the struggle against the abuse of the environment.

In South Africa Green politics has to be firmly anchored in the needs of the majority. For many of our people living in the rural areas the lack of clean water and sanitation are priority environmental issues. They need to be addressed urgently - but will only be addressed by a democratic government, which is accountable to the people and which prioritises their interests.

Instead South Africa has a deeply authoritarian, repressive and undemocratic government. The contempt of its ministers for ordinary people is illustrated by response of the minister of environmental affairs, Gert Kotze, to The Star's petition to save St Lucia. At the time it had attracted the support of more than 200 000 signatories.

The minister was unimpressed. He told a Cape audience that 'most of these people did not know what they were signing'; that such people cause development to be delayed - and 'as we all know, time is money'. He also said that half the signatures were those of children. In Kotze's opinion, people who support 'Green' movements are 'fanatics who do not listen to reason'.

Such arguments have been used against environmentalists, even in less repressive societies. Rachel Carson's book, *The Silent Spring*, was the catalyst for the American environmental movement. It was branded as part of a communist plot to undermine the United States economy and Carson was dismissed as a 'spinster who should have no concern

for genetics'.

In South Africa we desperately need state regulation to protect the environment. The recent Sappi chemical spill which devastated the Elands and Crocodile rivers in the Eastern Transvaal raises a number of questions. For example, who allowed a paper and pulp mill to be located on a then pristine river?

Clearly we need something like the United States Environmental Protection Agency, which was founded on two principles:

- * The right of people and nature to exist unendangered by pollution. Regulatory protection should make this possible.

- * The necessity of a framework aimed at the control of polluting industries, whose imperatives have been to compete for markets and to increase profits.

The problems of enforcement experienced by the EPA are well known. The degree of actual protection offered by environmental laws depends on their creative and vigorous enforcement. This requires officials who are environmentally committed and immune to bribes and intimidation. In South Africa such persons are in short supply.

Official corruption is strongly suggested by the recent cycad scandal in which 700 of these protected and rare South African plants suddenly arrived at a private home in Madeira without proper export and import licences. It is frequently alleged that South Africa is a conduit for ivory and rhino horn poached in countries as distant as Tanzania and Zaire.

Behind corruption is the even more powerful force of the profit motive. Not surprisingly, then, the co-option of Green issues by capital is another (particularly insidious) problem which environmentalists face.

The recent book by Brian Huntley, Roy Siegfried and Clem Sunter, *South African Environments into the 21st Century*, deserves praise for setting out key environmental issues in clear, accessible language and in a readable style. But there is something deeply worrying about the book.

It is structured around the notion of choice - clarifying certain choices the reader has to make between different scenarios. But there are two assumptions in the book which are not opened to choice - instead they are treated as givens. Both are highly controversial.

The first is that nuclear energy is both necessary and desirable. The second is that free enterprise is the only viable economic system.

Both these assumptions need to be subjected to critical scrutiny and debate.

There are many serious people who believe that nuclear energy is too expensive to be a viable alternative energy source for the future. They argue that the human factor involved in all stages of nuclear technology, military and non-military, makes accidents unavoidable. These accidents release highly poisonous radio-active materials into the environment.

One of the worst possibilities is the melt-down of a nuclear reactor. The impact would be similar to that of an atomic bomb. Thousands of people would die from immediate radiation exposure; more deaths would occur later from acute radiation sickness.

Many nuclear accidents have already happened and major catastrophes have often been narrowly avoided.

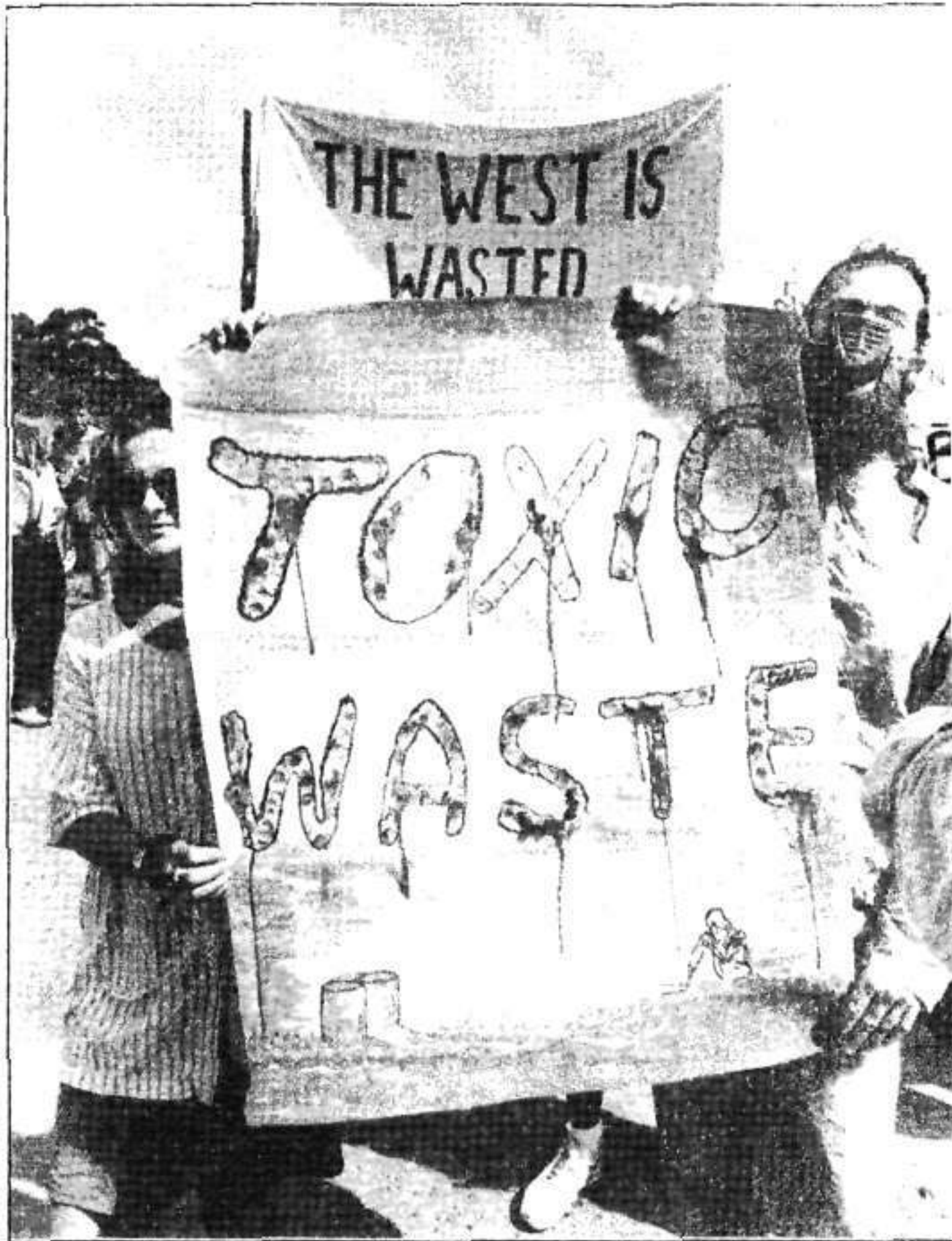
Another problem of nuclear power is the disposal of nuclear waste. Each reactor annually produces tons of radioactive waste that remains toxic for thousands of years. Plutonium remains poisonous for at least 500 000 years. No human technology can create safe containers for such an enormous time span.

The other unexamined assumption of Sunter and his co-authors relates to the free enterprise system. They assert that 'the Greens have gone wrong'. The Greens contradict themselves by demanding socialism and a clean environment at the same time. Socialism leads inevitably to the malfunctioning of the economy, which means that no money is available for conservation.

'... Man is a born opportunist. By denying that self-interest as a valid principle, socialists are suppressing people's innate ability to think in an efficient manner. Communism is an unnatural philosophy inflicted on mankind'.

This is a very contentious argument. There are many who argue that one simply cannot cure today's problems with the means that have produced them. They believe that it is capitalism, an economic system obsessed with growth and expansion, that has created many of our environmental problems.

Jonathan Porrit, director of Friends of the Earth, has argued that capitalism means ecological disaster. 'Capitalism can indeed survive only through permanent expansion - which in turn means the accelerating contraction of our life-support systems ... Capitalism as we



Protestors outside Thor Chemicals in Gato Ridge, Natal

know it simply cannot provide the pre-conditions for an ecologically sane, humane economy'.

It is capitalists, who - in the name of 'growth' and 'development' - are destroying our coastline and restricting its use to those who can afford to buy property in their costly marine developments. It is capitalists who are destroying the finite resources of our finite planet in their quest for profit.

Both the developments which mobilised widespread public environmental concern in South Africa recently - the Sappi spill and the proposal to mine the St Lucia dunes - are motivated by profit.

Before the Ndongwana spill, Sappi had already killed the Mandini River in Zululand. The company had a permit to discharge effluent into the Mandini which

was literally an industrial sewer. Even the deputy director in the Department of Water Affairs described the quality of the effluent as 'shocking'. This is the company - with a net income of almost R500 million in 1989 - which sponsors the 'Sappi Collection' of nature photographs!

Sappi absorbs about 50 percent of the South African production of kaolin, which is a fine white clay. A Sanlam subsidiary, Serina (Pty) Ltd, has applied for rights to mine kaolin on the slopes of Chapman's Peak. It is estimated that the 30 years of mining applied for will scar 27 ha of this lovely landscape on the scenic route from Cape Town to Cape Point.

The only possible gain is to the mining company which estimates that the

mine would generate about R700-million over the proposed 30-year contract.

Like Sappi, Shell promotes its image by making major contributions to wildlife and ecological projects. But this does not erase its role in the diethrin scandal of 1985, when it was revealed that although the pesticide was banned in South Africa, it was manufactured in Durban and sold by Shell from this country to Botswana, Swaziland and elsewhere. These actions are all undertaken for profit.

Among the extraordinary ironies in the conservation cause was the election of Naas Steenkamp as the Wildlife Society's current president. Steenkamp is chairman of Gencor, which is a shareholder in Richards Bay Mining - the company bent on mining St Lucia.

It is widely agreed that to achieve the aims of Green politics - to end the exploitation of people and the environment - change is required. But what is hotly contested is the nature of the change.

Many people seem to believe a few adjustments to the system will do - less pollution, less destruction of vital resources and more environmentally conscious consumption.

As Kirkpatrick Sale put it, the problems 'are to be wafted away through the mechanism of the very force that created them and without anybody having to make any very substantial changes ... There is no suggestion anywhere that we should stop producing vast amounts of unnecessary electricity with coal plants that create acid rain; no thought that we should change our absurd dependence on the private automobile even though it is bound to produce toxic emissions no matter what miracle fuels we come up with; no hint that we should eliminate the industries that routinely produce toxic chemicals'.

Sale is one of a number of environmentalists urging middle-class people to change their lifestyles, to reduce consumption, to move away from a consumer to a conserver economy.

Just as feminism or gender equality is not compatible with male chivalry and protection, it is clear that a beautiful, unspoilt environment is not compatible with the present high levels of consumption in the developed world.

We cannot have it both ways.

As Fritz Schumacher has stated: 'We must live simply so that others may simply live'.

He is one of the advocates of a 'voluntary simplicity', who argue that sim-



People's parks for people's power: one of the parks built in Oukasie during 1985

plification of life in the First World is important because:

- * We are running out of crucial non-renewable resources - for example cheaply available petroleum and natural gas.
- * We are polluting ourselves into oblivion with massive discharges of waste from industrial production.
- * Each day children in the Third World die from the effects of malnutrition and poor health care. They do so while massive military expenditure absorbs much of the First World's resources.

The greatest threat to our environment is the mobilisation of resources for war. The threat lies not only in the awesome destructive capacity of the weapons but in resources invested in this process.

World-wide military expenditure now amounts to more than \$900 billion a year. There are now more than 50 000 nuclear warheads in the world. The total explosive power of the world stock of nuclear weapons is about equal to one million Hiroshima bombs.

In 1981 there were about 50 million people who were either directly or indirectly engaged in military activities.

Militarisation usually refers to the mobilisation of resources for war against people. The concept can be expanded to include war against the environment, which shares many features of the war against populations.

Firstly, both are about maintaining power and maximising profit.

Secondly, they involve similar technology. For instance, there are many similarities between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. The technical process is the same in both civilian and military uses of nuclear power. Nuclear fission occurs in a nuclear reactor and in a nuclear bomb. The only difference is that in a reactor the fission process is controlled by the use of control rods halting an ever-expanding chain reaction. That chain reaction is uncontrolled in the process at work in a nuclear bomb.

Nuclear energy and nuclear weapons use the same raw materials. Presently there are only two raw materials which can undergo a number of fissions to produce a chain reaction. One of them is uranium-235, the other is plutonium-239. One or the other is essential for the production of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons.

The links between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons are conclusive enough, critics assert: we cannot do away with the one and keep the other.

Chemical weaponry and pesticides constitute another illustration of the similarities in technology in the war against nature and the war against people.

In *The Silent Spring*, Carson highlighted this. Nerve gases developed for World War 2 were used as pesticides in agriculture after the war. Likewise, herbicides developed for agriculture before the Vietnam War were used as defoliants in that war and by the South Africans in Angola.

Carson's biographer, Patricia Hynes, writes: 'The destruction of people and

nature with chemical poisons constitutes the same failure to solve problems other than by force'.

Carson's central warning was that the methods employed for insect control may 'destroy us along with the insects'. In 1985 the 'Hiroshima of the chemical industry' occurred when an accident at a pesticide factory in Bhopal, India, caused the death of at least 2 000 people and injured 200 000.

Both the war on nature and against people involve attitudes which legitimate killing and see violence as a solution to conflict. Both value domination, conquest and control. Both involve a disrespect for human and other forms of life.

Plans to mine titanium, a mineral used in missile systems, are at the centre of the St Lucia battle. Conservationists have objected to the mining of the dunes because it will upset the ecological balance of the area and restoring the dunes to their present state will be impossible.

Many people are not aware that large areas around St Lucia are already closed to the public because they are missile testing sites. Capetonians are certainly aware of the large areas around Arniston which are closed to the public for similar reasons.

The SADF is the largest landowner in South Africa outside of the game parks. Much of this land is devoted to training people and testing weapons for death and destruction. Surely conservationists should raise their voices against this as well as other ecological issues.

Finally the connection between war against nature and people must be judged in terms of the effects of such war. Speak to anyone who has visited Angola lately. It is widely suspected that Unita, which the SADF supported extensively, finances its operations by ivory poaching. Last year an American environmental group gave sworn evidence to the United States Congress that Unita had killed thousands of elephants to finance its war in Angola and that the SADF had helped channel the contraband along illicit trading routes.

Green politics, with its fight against the arms race and militarisation, clearly demands the total transformation of our society. At the Conference for a Democratic Future late last year, Earthlife called on 'the liberation movement to campaign wherever possible for the protection and rehabilitation of the environment'. Although this motion was passed, securing environmental issues a

central place in the South African liberation struggle will not be an easy task.

Conservation also demands the support of the labour movement. But with few exceptions, workers are often too concerned with wages to relate to issues of health and safety at work, let alone the wider issues of environmental health.

Sometimes environmental awareness means rethinking what is a taken-for-granted measure of the 'good life' and a primary aspiration of many working people - a motor car.

The motor car is presented in the media as a symbol of freedom, power and - for many working people who travel to work - an escape. Yet the motor car is an environmental disaster. Its noxious exhaust gases contribute to acid rain and global warming.

The number of cars in the world is now said to be over 500 million. They emit a total of 547 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year, accounting for more than 20 percent of total release of carbon dioxide - the major cause of global warming. In many large cities cars are also the main cause of smog, which leads to various respiratory diseases.

Furthermore, traffic accidents are a leading cause of death in industrialised countries. More than 200 000 people are killed in traffic accidents worldwide every year. In South Africa alone, road accidents claimed nearly 10 000 lives last year. That is 27 deaths a day, or 1,14 an hour. Road accidents cost the South African economy an estimated R5-billion a year, according to the Automobile Association's 1990 report.

The car is anti-social for other reasons too. In a paper on the 'social ideology of the motor car', Andre Gorze has written: 'Mass motoring effects an absolute triumph of bourgeois ideology on the level of daily life. It gives and supports in everyone the illusion that each individual can seek his or her own benefit at the expense of everyone else'.

Gorz recalls the remark of an East German friend of his, after observing the spectacle of Parisian road traffic: 'You'll never have socialism with that kind of people'.

Apart from selfishness, cars promote materialism. It is often accepted that a car is a kind of social yardstick.

Contrary to conventional thinking, the car does not even provide us with an efficient transport system. Ivan Illich has estimated that 'the typical American devotes more than 1 500 hours a

year to his or her car (that is, 30 hours a week or four hours a day). This includes the time spent behind the wheel, both in motion and stopped, the hours of work to pay for it and to pay for petrol, tyres, etc'.

The transport of oil for these cars has created the global problem of the pollution of beaches. In March 1989 nearly 11 million gallons of crude oil flowed into the sea off Alaska, probably the worst environmental disaster in the United States. The spilled oil killed more than 36 000 migratory birds, fouled an estimated 1 000 miles of pristine shoreline and played havoc with one of the world's richest salmon fisheries. Exxon, the owner of the tanker which spilled the oil, is well able to pay whatever fine the United States imposes on it. The company reported 1989 profits of \$3.5 billion.

In South Africa the minibus option is clearly preferable to the poor public transport services provided by the railways and bus companies. But thousands of people are reported to have died in minibus accidents.

This raises questions about whether the black taxi service is the success story that the champions of free enterprise claim. Clearly the solution is efficient public transport services. This is the only way to realise the ethics of social justice and 'green consumerism' - learning not only to consume better but to consume less.

Green consumerism is part of 'deep ecology', the philosophy behind Green politics. Deep ecology denies that human beings are separate from and superior to the rest of nature and stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing worldview of technocratic-industrial societies which has become increasingly obsessed with the idea of dominance - of humans over non-human nature, masculine over feminine, the wealthy and powerful over the poor.

Deep ecology is against dominance and for equality. It is not anthropocentric - it does not focus on our own species.

Earlier this century Albert Schweitzer observed: 'It was once considered stupid to think that coloured men were really human and must be treated humanely. This stupidity has become a truth. Today it is thought an exaggeration to state that a reasonable ethic demands constant consideration for all living things'.

In South Africa we have an urgent struggle to overturn such 'stupidities' and 'exaggerations'. ●