

Dear Editor

The Wild Coast Mallet Award for Fiction

George Monbiot, the widely respected British environmental journalist and social commentator, recently announced that he was putting up a prize for the writer of 'best climate change fiction' of the year. This would be awarded to that person who "manages, in the course of 2009, to cram as many misrepresentations, distortions and falsehoods into a single article, statement, lecture, film or interview about climate change."

Following on Monbiot's footsteps, we suggest that SANRAL's Mr. Fanie Van Aardt deserves a 'Wild Coast Mallet Award for Fiction' for his statements about the impacts of the N2 Wild Coast Toll road which recently appeared in The Herald article 'Wild Coast does not need Toll road'.

Mr. van Aardt's dismisses SWC's concerns that negative environmental and social impacts of the road will lead to increased poverty, unless the road is accompanied by a regional development plan, as being unfounded and 'speculative'. As these are the same concerns that are raised in detail in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) specialist reports about social development and environmental impacts, does this mean Mr. Van Aardt also considers the EIA findings to be purely 'speculative'?

The N2 EIA, paragraphs 16.5.1, explicitly states that 'the proposed road would lead to ... irreversible loss of natural capital' and concludes that it is 'considered not ecologically sustainable' unless 'effective' conservation management can be put in place.

Given the dire state of South Africa's environmental governance, as clearly spelt out in the DEAT's own 2006 South African Environmental Outlook (SAEO), and given the current lack of capacity of many of the Eastern Cape's regional authorities, any positive sustainable outcome is exceedingly unlikely unless much greater management capacity is developed amongst local authorities. This would require co-ordinated planning, budgeting and implementation over many years by a number of national and provincial agencies who have yet to be appraised of their input.

The lack of environmental management in the region is tacitly acknowledged in many places in the EIA (e.g. 16.5.2) with references to uncontrolled alien infestations, illegal sand winnings, poorly planned and maintained secondary roads and bridges, soil erosions, illegal exploitation of natural resources, etc.

Without local capacity building and planning for conservation and social development, which would require the framework of a regional development plan, one is forced to conclude that SANRAL's road would be a death warrant for the Pondoland Centre of Endemism, and that increasing environmental pressures would result in increased poverty amongst communities who are highly reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods. It also entirely conflicts with South Africa's environmental legislation, as well as international commitments under treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity.

On the social development side, the EIA states (Section 16.5.4) “ Overall, it is considered that the potential social benefits of the proposed projects, as assessed along the entire route, and **if** enhanced as recommended would outweigh the potential negative impacts,...”. In other words, the EIA finds that there is the possibility will be a whole host of negative social impacts, and these will only be overcome if there is a collaborative effort across many spheres of local, regional and national government to address these.

Neither SANRAL, nor the N2 EIA, give any indication of how these negative impacts would be taken up or resolved. Indeed Mr. Van Aardt admits that these are ‘beyond the scope of the EIA’. Implicitly then, they are therefore also beyond the scope of SANRAL to deal with unless there is a regional development plan put in place. In short, SANRAL’s road will do the damage, which everybody else will be responsible for fixing up afterwards, or else bear the social and environmental costs!

Mr. Van Aardt’s comments show an appalling lack of understanding, or a complete ignorance, of the EIA findings and the contents of the specialists studies, summaries etc. Or otherwise a complete and utter arrogant disregard for the process in every respect!

The ‘Wild Coast Mallet Award for Fiction’ will consist of one large heavy mallet made of alien invasive wood, with which the recipient can knock themselves over the head until they are senseless, and so spare the public the pain of having to listen to any more waffle about the Wild Coast from mis-informed public servants.

Members of the public are welcome to nominate anybody else for this prize, or lend support to nominations, by logging onto the SWC website www.swc.org.za and registering their nominations on the comments page.

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