

Tackling the plastic waste problem in Africa

Africa has the dubious honour of being the second most polluted continent on the planet, and therefore must take both the responsibility and opportunity to pioneer world-leading waste management methods to avoid an environmental and socio-economic disaster.



Dr Tony Ribbink, Sustainable Seas Trust CEO

While there is a certain amount of gloom and doom surrounding the pollution problem, a lot of good is also being done, said environmental scientist, Dr Tony Ribbink, Sustainable Seas Trust CEO, at the PET Recycling Company (Petco) annual general meeting.

“Africa is in clear danger of taking top spot unless responsibility for the crisis is shouldered at all levels,” said Ribbink, a former director of the World Bank GEF project on Lake Malawi/Nyasa for Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania.

More committed to sustainability

But, he said, Africa was also pioneering new methods and activities to counter plastic pollution. “Industry is also becoming more committed to sustainability and finding solutions where previously there appeared to be none.”

South African bottlers, who are voluntary members of Petco, are increasingly assisting with the drive to improve recycling rates. Annual PET plastic bottle recycling increased to 65% of all bottles produced in the country in 2017 – up from 55% in

2016, according to recently released figures.

This equates to 2.15-billion bottles recycled in 2017, which created 64,000 income-generating opportunities for recyclers and waste collectors participating in the circular economy, while also freeing up 578 000m³ of dwindling landfill space, Petco announced in May.

These figures put South African PET recycling on par with global standards and that the organisation had set an ambitious recycling target of 70% by 2020, said Cheri Scholtz, Petco CEO.

Even more significant was that approximately 96% of all PET bottles recovered in South Africa were reprocessed locally into new end-use products.

“South Africa no longer imports polyester staple fibre, which is a synthetic fibre made from PET plastic and used in the manufacture of clothing and other items.

“This fibre is now even being exported, bringing valuable foreign earnings into the country,” she said.

“One thing that is very clear is that plastic is not trash and that recycling unlocks its secondary economic value,” said Scholtz.

Lack of measurable data

The main problem with regard to plastic pollution, Ribbink said, was the lack of “real measurable data” to get an accurate picture of “one of the world’s greatest threats”.

He pointed to the example of Port Elizabeth, which is blazing a trail in the fight against plastic pollution. If it continues in this vein, it could be the cleanest city in South Africa by 2021, he said. The city is under scrutiny as a South African plastic pollution case study, with drones and planes being used to capture representative data.

“People are being mobilised in a number of ways including using mobile apps to monitor on the ground where the major pollution problems are, not just on beaches and estuaries but also where people, live, work and play,” he said.

So strong is this movement that a R60m plastic waste scientific research and community empowerment initiative will see the establishment of the first of its kind Africa Waste Academy in the city within the next five years.

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