

# Press archives



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Everyone loves the fairest  
Cape, but such beauty cannot  
survive the world's embrace

The isolation imposed by apartheid has left Cape Town with the most precious asset a city can have: natural beauty. But not for long, says *Ruben Mowszowski*

In that favourite book of my childhood, Babar the Elephant is looking for the most beautiful place in the forest so that he can build a palace for Celeste, his bride. After a long search he comes across an idyllic lake populated by flamingos and surrounded by forest trees: the very prototype of Eden.

The next page documents the changes that have taken place. Gone are the flamingos, the trees and the forest. Instead there are palatial buildings and paved roads. All that remains of the original scene is the lake recast as an ornamental pond.

The author, De Brunhoff, was not making a point. In his innocence he has portrayed an age-old syndrome: the inclination of people to destroy the place they are searching for once they find it. The urge to discover the new, this search for an elusive Eden, is something we are going to have to deal with. The first wave of tourists comes for the scenery, the next for the scene, the last because it's cheap. It's the old story: use it, abuse it, then lose it. In Majorca, a newspaper reports, 21 hotels have been demolished in an attempt to stem the wave of low-budget British tourists who trash the town each year.

Look at our own resorts: Muizenberg, for instance. There's nothing wrong with the

beach. It's what we have built that's the problem. In about 40 years we have trashed one of the most beautiful strips of coast in the world.

Cape Town has somehow survived. It is a city that still has an edge. Look at Strand Street, there's Signal Hill, look behind the city, there's the mountain. In most cities this edge, the boundary between urban world and wilderness, has been pushed so far from where people live and work that it can no longer even be found. Those people have to come to a place like Cape Town to experience it. They are the people we call ecotourists.

After the scenery comes the scene. No sooner has Eden been discovered than there are those who want to occupy it. Eden, unoccupied, is a permanent resource, self-sustaining and increasing in value as it becomes increasingly hard to find. Eden, developed, is lost for ever.

At present the Cape is said among tour packagers to be good for three days: a visit to Cape Point, one to the winelands and a day's shopping at the Waterfront. Those of us who live in Cape Town, who are not making money out of the tourists, go on dreaming, entranced by the landscape, until the media report a sit-in at a proposed hotel site or a conflict between environmentalists and developers. And then we wonder what it's all about.

It's not the first time Capetonians have been asked to think about what sort of environment they want to live in. In 1928 developers wanted to turn a section of the Peninsula into holiday villages. A handful of Capetonians fought for 10 years and won. They left us with what is today the most visited tourist destination in the Western Cape and our most precious resource, the Cape of Good Hope Reserve.

Today, the issue is another stretch of coastal land much closer to the city. I remember as a child the opening up I felt as we reached the end of the houses in Bakoven just past Camps Bay. Mountain on the left, sea on the right, it was a magic place where all of my

schoolroom knowledge of wrecked ships, Khoikhoi tribes, Sufi mystics and San hunter-gatherers sprang to life.

Then there was the mysterious isolated white house on land that was given to an investigator as a reward for putting an end to Van der Stel Junior's milking of the colony's coffers. At one time occupied by an English dowager whose lover is reputed to have thrown her jewels into the sea during an argument, it is said by some to be part of the reason for the many divers in the area. There too are the Muslim graves on the mountainside, part of the string of miracle places dotted around the Cape, and the caves and wandering places of strandlopers. Hollywood would pay billions to have such a living museum a stone's throw from its centre.

Our plan (I use "our" in its most inclusive sense) is to subdivide it into housing plots and, according to some newspaper reports, to build a four-lane highway over coast-facing blocks of flats.

The isolated white house has recently been demolished to make way for a hotel and already approved is a plan for a township on the slopes to the height of the existing Camps Bay subdivision. The shrine of Sheik Jaffa will presumably end up within one of these properties. But what if the whole mountain is the shrine?

The people we call hippies, the rainbow people, the squatters, who point it out to us, tell us what we don't want to hear. They bring the Hopi Indian message that the earth is dying. I looked in a 1939 edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica. It carried warnings about the imminent extinction of certain whale species. Twenty years later they did become extinct.

What do the public want? Employment? But at what cost and to what effect? As a result of our apartheid-driven isolation and the consequent lack of urban development we have been left with a lot of the world's most precious and increasingly rare commodity, natural beauty, and that most precious attribute of a city, natural beauty that is easily accessible. Ecotourism has been called "the

fastest-growing industry in the world", and yet what the world is flocking to see we are about to cover with condominiums.

It is 1995 and Paul Cox, the Australian filmmaker, is introducing his film at the Cape Town international film festival. He pleads with the audience: "I've been all over the world, city to city, hotel to hotel, from Alaska to LA. They're all the same. Please believe me, your city is unique. You don't realise it. You've been cut off. I beg you. Save it."

Cape Town, having been denied the development that the rest of the world has experienced during the past 40 years, now seems ready to embrace the fantasy of the Costa del Sol, oblivious to the fact that it has the very thing the world is desperately searching for: easy access to nature and space to breathe.

A group of councillors, architects and environmentalists debate the future of the mountain. The place is a boardroom on the 10th floor of a city building. What are the areas that should be open to tourists? Which areas can be sacrificed so that others are saved? Gulliver's body is being walked on, measured, debated, but something is missing.

One hundred and forty years ago a Native American leader sent a message to the president of the United States. In it he said: "Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people ... for they love this earth as the newborn loves its mother's heartbeat."

Why can't we say it?

Yet we are a people who live at the edge of something quite mysterious. A friend of mine who spent many years on Robben Island carries some of that quality in his eyes. Do the warders have it, I wonder? They stared at this mountain for ten, twenty years.

In the end, who am I to tell others what to do, to deny them. Monte Carlo or Torremolinos,

the wish to be like every other place, to evoke memories of once-forested Greek islands now bare of trees, an almost entire Indian subcontinent turned into a dustbowl, the loss of beauty? Who am I to presume to speak for the animals, for the earth, to deny Babar his palace? Why should I care about the loss of opportunity as, in 30 years, tourists look for the next unspoilt place?

This is from a story I once wrote, drawn from memories of my own teenage years, before I left this country: "We were standing by the gate. She was about to get into her car and she turned. I suppose to say goodbye, but it was as if she was looking past me. The sun had come out against the mountain behind her and gulls were lifting the cliff face, bright reflections were coming off the sea and I could hear the sound of children's voices. I remember thinking, my God, this place is so beautiful, and then she was gone."

Yes, I know the Buddha can live anywhere and it doesn't really matter what we become or where we go. So I say it not in anger, nor hopefully with any regret, and not just for myself but for all of us who have loved this city with a passion: Goodbye Cape Town and (with tears in my eyes) hello LA.



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