

## The winds of change

**By Cheryl Phillips MP - DA Member of the Portfolio Committee on the Environment, Forestry and Fisheries**

Although not nearly as significant as the intentions expressed in the renowned “Winds of change speech” by British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan in our very own Parliament in 1960, there is definitely a welcoming breeze of change being felt in the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment.

From criminal charges being laid against errant officials - the end to many Hollywood acting positions, and accountability in the form of special leave taken while the law takes its course, but most importantly, there is light on the horizon for our iconic lions. Every bit of positive change is welcomed by the Democratic Alliance.

There is however much rot in our environment, both metaphorically and literally. It will take not only winds of change but tornadoes of change to save our environment and our animals for our children, grandchildren and generations to come.

The developing economic crises in the St Lucia area caused by back flooding is one that urgently needs more than the once in 500-year Cyclone Doreen like storm to alleviate looming devastation. The response from iSimangaliso officials and the scientists involved that “*[the] farmers were warned of the possibility of flooding*” is totally inadequate. These farmers, both commercial and small scale, do not have a few cattle or sheep that they can simply move when they receive a warning. They have thousands of hectares of crops that cannot be harvested and hundreds of employees and their families depending on the income from those crops. Flooding is not something new to those farmers - it has been happening for hundreds of years. The difference is that in the past the water subsided within two to three weeks. The crops have now been under water for four months with no end in sight if the river remains choked by reeds and silt and cannot flow into the sea. The reeds that are choking the mouth of the Umfolozi River are becoming a nationwide scourge blocking many rivers and wetlands - even the Sabi River in the KNP. A study needs to be done to address the presence of these reeds in our rivers.

Although the Democratic Alliance will, without a doubt, welcome the important, natural estuarine functions being restored, the sad fact is that millions of Rands of taxpayers’ money has been spent by the department on artificially opening and closing the mouth of the estuary, diverting the river, creating an island and then trying to remove said island. These decisions were probably made with the very best intentions but like the proverb that says - the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the results of years of interference is now both a looming socio economic and environmental disaster that needs to be urgently addressed. Any actions taken to return the estuary to its natural conditions have to have mitigating factors to address the impact on the local economy, beyond just warning the farmers of a possible flood. There must be a workable, long term plan. Everyone is going to have to give a little but no one should be forced into poverty by an estuarine management plan that does not benefit both the environment and the lives of the people who live in the area.