

Search Keywords

Home	National	Africa	World	Opinion	Markets	Economy
Business	Companies	Life	Sport			

Life



Fossil Free SA: Saving life as we know it

by Sue Blaine, 08 December 2014, 06:46

Tweet 5

Share

Clip this article

Share 19

g+1 0

Kindle

reddit this!



David le Page, left, and Robert Ziplies are launching chapters of Fossil Free SA in cities around the country and are campaigning for people and institutions to divest in businesses involved in fossil fuel exploitation. Picture: MARTIN RHODES

Related articles

[Climate change a boon for Nordic grape growers](#)

[WINE: Cool-climate viticulture](#)

UP TO 80% of declared global coal, oil and gas reserves, worth an estimated \$22-trillion, should stay just where they are — in the ground, say businessmen turned activists David le Page and Robert Ziplies. The two are touring SA launching chapters of the newly formed Fossil Free SA.

The movement, which is calling on investors, especially institutional investors such as universities, to divest from fossil fuel, is a replica of one started in the US by climate change activist Bill McKibben. It has seen just more than 180 institutions and local governments across the world, and thousands of individuals, representing more than \$50bn in assets, pledge to divest from fossil fuels.

An Oxford University study shows the divestment movement is growing faster than any previous divestment campaign, such as a 1980s and 1990s campaign aimed at ensuring divestment from apartheid SA.

"(Archbishop Emeritus) Desmond Tutu was one of the first global leaders to sign up to McKibben's campaign. To him, it's such an ethics issue — it affects the most vulnerable first," says Ziplies.

Burning fossil fuel for electricity, heat and transportation is the largest human-induced source of "greenhouse" gas emissions, scientifically linked to the average overall rise in global temperatures.

"We are headed for (an average global temperature rise of) 3.5°C to 5.5°C by 2100, which is, to quote Kevin Anderson, 'inconsistent with an organised global community'. It's the end of society as we know it," says Le Page.

Anderson is deputy director of the UK's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and a British government adviser on climate change.

Last month, Zipplies and Le Page launched chapters of Fossil Free SA in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban. Next month, they head for smaller places such as Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, George, Stellenbosch and Howick — because they have been asked.

As negotiating teams from around the world take part in this year's United Nations climate change talks in Lima, Peru, until Friday, Le Page and Zipplies continue their work in SA. They began earlier in the year with an appeal to the University of Cape Town, where both studied, to divest from fossil fuel. They are talking to other universities along the same lines.

Zipplies spent seven years running a business that helped companies compile their submissions to, among others, the JSE's socially responsible investment index. It disillusioned him: "For a lot of companies, social and environmental issues are a very distant second, but they are making huge profits."

Le Page adds: "They get those profits by taking a very narrow profit-based view of shareholder responsibility.... Climate change, right now, kills 300,000 people a year through its impacts on the disease burden and food security. Eighty percent of those deaths are African and south Asian children. We are killing children to preserve our lifestyles."

But campaigners such as these are often accused of being alarmist. Both men point out that aside from the moral arguments for divestment from fossil fuel, there is a business one too. "There is quite a lot of research showing the returns from responsible investing are equal to, or surpass, dirty investment," says Le Page. "Fossil fuel companies have taken major knocks in Europe in the last few years."

According to Goldman Sachs, firms that are considered to be leaders in socially responsible investing have also been leaders in terms of stock performance — averaging an extra 25% over the longer term, reports investorplace.com. This echoes research conducted by Allianz.

Zipplies and Le Page started Fossil Free SA after speaking to groups about climate change and repeatedly being asked: "How can we get involved if our lifestyle makes us complicit?" That, or human impact on climate change, is questioned.

"The answer," says Le Page, "is that fossil fuel companies have spent literally hundreds of millions of US dollars disproving (human-induced) climate change; and literally hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on them in the form of subsidies. That undermines good governance. The US Congress is targeted with \$440,000 a day in lobby money. Three UK cabinet ministers have had working relationships with (petroleum company) Shell and others.

"In SA," he continues, "there is no transparency over private funding of political parties, or regulation of it, and all political parties have resisted any such regulations. We have no idea to what extent fossil fuel subsidises them; and, of course, other commercial interests. So, in a nutshell, fossil fuel companies are the biggest obstacle to the scale that we need to combat climate change globally."

The idea for Fossil Free SA emerged when Le Page and Zipplies realised the 350.org fossil-free campaign was having an effect. Some detractors, however, argue that divestment only means that someone else is buying the stock, but Zipplies says that universities especially should do so because they should be "centres of progressive moral thought"; also, that money should be put into researching and developing cleaner power sources.

"The whole campaign is about divesting from dirty energy and investing in clean energy. Some US universities have committed to taking the money they have divested and putting it into green energy."

In SA, where the government is eyeing recently discovered oil and gas resources, both marine and terrestrial, there is always the jobs argument. SA has, for about a decade, suffered an unemployment rate that hovers at about 25% — exploiting any reserves would bring jobs.

"That's similar to the argument that we shouldn't stop arms manufacture because of the jobs involved," says Le Page. "There have been different analyses done.... Look at Germany, it's committed to clean energy and about 400,000 jobs have been created in renewable energy in a decade."

This, of course, doesn't say how many jobs have been lost elsewhere in the German economy. Nor does it point out that Germany's plan to be run on 40%-50% clean power by 2050 has run into obstacles. Germany this year used coal, the dirtiest fuel in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, to generate 45% of its power, its highest level since 2007, according to Bloomberg.

Also, Germany's planned transition to clean fuel, and its phasing out of nuclear energy, have added more than €100bn to domestic and light industry power bills even as renewable energy met a record 25% of demand last year.

Still, Zipplies and Le Page are adamant. "This is not an environment issue. Climate change is an everything issue: security, health, long-term development," says Zipplies.

PEOPLE WHO READ THIS ALSO READ THESE



SA's gross reserves fall in November due to drop in foreign exchange reserves



End in sight for company registration woes



Why do we love alarming stories filled with twaddle?



BIKE NEWS: Flagship concept for bikers

More in this section

- [CRUCIAL CD COLLECTION: The War On Drugs](#)
- [ON THE WATER: Stay away from Steve and embrace your country, Dan](#)
- [Fossil Free SA: Saving life as we know it](#)
- [Sovereign funds pave a path to shared prosperity](#)
- [Zimbabwe gets Doris Lessing's book collection](#)
- [Japan tunes whisky into world's finest](#)

Top Stories

- [Tshabalala says Unisa records doctored](#)
- [ECB slashes growth and inflation forecasts](#)
- [State to name noncore assets for disposal in Eskom rescue](#)
- [Eskom starts biggest power cuts in nine months](#)
- [Putin's economic recovery plan 'smells of desperation'](#)
- [Transnet enters joint venture with Chinese locomotive firm](#)

Post a comment

- [Tshabalala says Unisa records doctored](#)
- [ECB slashes growth and inflation forecasts](#)
- [Eskom starts biggest power cuts in nine months](#)
- [State to name noncore assets for disposal in Eskom rescue](#)
- [Putin's economic recovery plan 'smells of desperation'](#)

- [Most Read](#)
- [Editor's Picks](#)

