



A Tale of Two Cities

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” Charles Dickens wrote this in another context. But, by Dickens, how these words could apply to Swakopmund and Walvis Bay today!

As every Namib toktokkie knows, there are many trade-offs for life in the desert. For instance, if a beetle wishes to drink, it needs to come out at the coldest hours when there is fog and dew, even though the poor beetle is so cold it can hardly move. For food it should go out when the predators are not out. It therefore chooses the hottest hours of day, although it then burns more energy, let alone burns its feet. Only those who can best manage these kinds of trade-offs make it to the next generation.

Trade-offs are not new to our two cities, Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. Their characters are not only defined by their differing localities, colonial histories, and differing roles – harbour, fishing and heavy industry with a particular kind of tourism in Walvis Bay versus tourism-mecca, German culture, and mining in Swakopmund. Their environments also differ.

Walvis Bay has the most special environmental gems. It has the lagoon and nearby Sandwich Harbour teeming with benthic creatures and seabirds, it has the archaeologically highly sensitive Kuiseb Delta in its back yard, and Namibia’s prime beach and dunes in its front yard. To boot, it is not only called Walvis Bay, it is actually home to different kinds of whales and dolphins. These and other natural features are located side-by-side to urban and industrial features, and great care is needed to enable the natural features to continue to thrive. With over a century of experience, Walvis Bay is good at managing urban and industrial congestion compounded by the challenge of keeping its natural gems viable. The very good collaborative planning required to fit in new industries should also benefit better planning to keep the natural gems viable.

Faced with Walvis Bay’s trade-offs, planning by Gecko for Vision Industrial Park is initially focusing more intensely on Swakopmund. However, Swakopmund’s specialities and location makes this town the gateway to the desert, iconic for its wide open spaces, cleanliness, silence and humble beauties of nature. For many residents, tourists and local holiday-makers, it is unthinkable that this quaint town should be overshadowed by mega-industry. And even though the environmental gems are not as densely packed as at Walvis Bay, the pristine landscape is populated by many kinds of tiny creatures unique to the Namib and the footprint of industry with all its connections of infrastructure would degrade it. If Swakopmund industrialises, there is no track-record for its new trade-offs.

Zophosis moralesi realises that although there are always trade-offs whatever you do, the ones to go for are those which benefit the next generation. Those are the ones with most advantages for least total costs, including opportunity costs and environmental costs.

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