

PROTECTING COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS - COMMUNITY STRUGGLES ON THE WEST COAST OF SOUTH AFRICA



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A growing movement against beach mining on the West Coast has vowed to stop corporate mining giants from destroying the food security of the residents of dozens of tiny fishing villages.

“My father is 50 years on the sea. He doesn’t know another life. He has fished from the age of 16 and he raised us from this income. We are a very poor community but we look out over the ocean. The sea is our livelihood and our heartbeat. It is part of us. If we are not going to stop them, they are going to kill us. We will starve” says Deborah de Wee, a leader in the Doringbaai Fisherfolk Women, which protests against the mining companies who have applied for prospecting rights to drill just offshore.

The villages and towns, including Doringbaai, Lamberts Bay, Elandsbaai, Strandfontein and towns like Kleinsee on the Namaqualand Diamond Coast are currently threatened by more than 15 different mining companies who want to mine the entire stretch of coastline for everything from diamonds to gold ore.

Deborah was born in Doringbaai to an indigenous Doringbaai family who has lived there for centuries. She has lived in the tiny village with a population of less than 2000 people all her life.

Her movement is currently opposing an application by TransAtlantic Diamonds (a Johannesburg-based company) to prospect over 1240 hectares of sea bed just off the coast for gold, silver, platinum, alluvial diamonds, sapphires and garnets, ferrous, monasite mineral, titanium minerals like ilmenite and rutile, zircon

and iron ore. The prospecting will take up to five years, during which fisherfolk will not be able to fish in the bay.

Mining causes fish to flee the bays

De Wee says the presence of two other companies, TransHex and Moonstone Diamond Marketing, has already caused marine life to leave the bay, disrupting the community’s food security. The community survives from catching snoek and harvesting mussels – and the West Coast is one of the few places in South Africa where impoverished residents can easily gather healthy, protein rich fish to sustain themselves.

“We are already in crisis as we already have small diamond boats with big pumps mining the grey sand just offshore so they can sift it for diamonds. They do it in our bay which disturbs the fish. So therefore we do not have fish in our bay anymore. Our fishermen have to go into the deep sea which they don’t have petrol to do” said de Wee.

“We as the indigenous people of Doringbaai know that these companies are going to mine, not only diamonds but lots of things because we are rich in resources,” de Wee added.

Wendy Pekom, co-ordinator of the rural and informal settlement advocacy group Ubuntu Rural Women based near Stellenbosch about 300 kilometres away, says local communities have realised that life as they know it will be over if mining goes ahead. Ubuntu Rural joined forces with the Doringbaai Fisherfolk Women to hold a Fisherfolk Women’s Festival in Doringbaai on 23 and 24 September, ending it with a protest march along the coastline.



Saying “Los ons Oseaan” (Hands off our Ocean), the children of Doringbaai fisherfolk joined the march in September 2022 against mining in their bay
Image courtesy of Wendy Pekeur

Carrying placards reading “Hands Off Our Sea and Land” and “Protect our Ocean Life! Keep the mines out!”, the women said their families are sure to starve if the mines are granted the right to search for minerals. These protests in communities, involving children and youth, are becoming important sites of learning about life-making ecosystems and the struggle to protect indigenous food systems.

Indigenous rights trampled by government

De Wee filmed a video of herself delivering a message to Mineral Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe and asking him to stop approving so many prospecting applications by mines.

“I am an original indigenous fisherwoman in Doringbaai. We eat out of the sea, we go and fetch mussels, shellfish, and our children play in that sea. This is our culture, it is our heritage. Don’t take away that spark of our heart. This is a plea to you to think of our children, grandchildren and great great grandchildren to come, so that they can explore and live the life and take the heritage of the Doringbaai fisherfolk forward. This is our heartbeat, we are one with this ocean and if we cannot live off this ocean then we no longer have a life. Because this is all the life that the people of Doringbaai know,

ever since we were born until today” the video says.

There are already far too many local and international mining companies carving up the West Coast beaches. Australian mining company Mineral Commodities Ltd has extracted millions of tons of sand from the Tormin beaches, 70 kilometres to the north of Doringbaai, since 2013. This is the same company which is attempting to mine titanium and other minerals at Xolobeni on the Wild Coast.

In Tormin, Mineral Commodities Ltd occupies a huge 12 kilometre stretch of the beach. In 2020 it successfully had its licence amended to allow it to start mining zircon, rutile, ilmenite, garnet, leucosene and magnetite at the nearby Northern Beaches too (ten beaches of 23.5km in length).

It appears rather easy for a mining company to put together an acceptable [application for prospecting rights](#). The company hires a firm of ‘environmental consultants’ who hold one consultation meeting with communities (where they are mainly rejected) and then write a report saying that there will be no or very little negative impact on the local community if mining starts. A vague assertion that the minerals and precious stones they are prospecting for are vital for industrial development completes the report.

Yet this is untrue and the impact on the people of the small fishing villages is huge. The mining at Tormin uses very

heavy trucks and excavators to dig out between 2.5 and 2.7 million tons of ore annually. The mining company has now been given permission to build a giant processing plant in the area next year.

3D seismic surveys = powerful soundwave blasts

3D seismic surveys are another major problem for food systems and livelihoods. These surveys use an array of air guns up to six kilometres long to shoot out pressurised air under the sea. This generates powerful sound waves along the sea bed, used to map the location of mineral deposits that may exist in the rock layers under the seabed. Marine life is greatly disturbed by this.

In September 2022, the Makhanda High Court prohibited oil giant Shell from conducting a seismic survey in the Wild Coast to locate oil and gas. The court revoked the exploration rights that the government had granted to Shell after dozens of community-based organisations, Wild Coast fishers and residents of Wild Coast and Umgungundlovu villages argued successfully that the seismic surveys would cause harm to marine and bird life and infringe on the communities’ spiritual and cultural rights.

Cape Town non-profit organisation Green Connection, which also took



September 2022: The fisherfolk of Doringbaai say "We are fighting for our livelihoods and our marine creatures", Image courtesy of Wendy Pekeur

part in the Doringbaai Fisherfolk Women's Festival, campaigns against seismic surveys on the West Coast. "Of particular concern for small scale fishers is the impact these surveys will have on the snoek fishery which forms the basis of many communities' livelihood. The seismic surveys will be conducted directly within the snoek migration routes and breeding habitat", Green Connection says.

Maia Nangle, project officer at the Masifundise Development Trust, points out that from April until about July every year, the West Coast is the site of the snoek run. "When it is running, fishing villages such as Lambert's Bay in the Western Cape come to life, with fishing boats teeming along the coast on a daily basis if the oceans allow".

"The snoek fishery on the West Coast feeds a substantial informal and local market and the fish is an important source of protein in poorer communities. The snoek that is caught off the West Coast is usually sold to the Cape Town market through langanas (fish traders) who chill and transport the catches and sell the fish from the back of their bakkies" Nangle says.

Fisherfolk along the West Coast were already hit hard by the COVID-19 government regulations during the hard lockdowns in 2020, which prevented them from fishing

completely, and then allowed the fisherfolk to fish but only within the curfew which prevented them from arriving at fishing sites in good time to set out to sea.

Fisherfolk women's rights trampled upon by mines and aquaculture

The Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape says that "coastal communities are becoming increasingly poor and more vulnerable and women are often overlooked, ignored and excluded from the blue economy development agenda. The promises of jobs, capacity development and skills, and development funding all seem to elude coastal women as the focus is on large-scale aquaculture, adventure and elite tourism, energy, oil, gas and mining".

The community of Doringbaai has decided that enough is enough. They are standing strong against Trans-Atlantic Diamonds and formally rejected the company at a public participation meeting in November 2021. According to Masifundise,

Trans-Atlantic Diamonds would carry out seismic mining on the shore while drilling with a specialised tool. The community was also told there would be no jobs available for them during the entire two to five year prospecting period.

"For the local fishers of the surrounding areas, this area is important for their fishing activities. During the snoek run (March to July) the fishers do not have to travel far, as the snoek will be laying in the area north of Doringbaai. This also means that the fish is sold at cheaper prices to community members thus contributing hugely to the food security and nutrition of the area".

"During difficult times, when there are no fish, women and children collect mussels to be able to provide the family with a nutrient filled meal. This would not be possible should this be declared a mining area" said Masifundise.

Environmental and social movements and organisations that support farm workers such as Ubuntu Rural look set to continue to support the remote communities of the West Coast, who are quite isolated, being situated hundreds of kilometres from Cape Town, all the way up to the Northern Cape.

Drawing on the damage left behind by mines during colonisation and apartheid, and their devastating impact on communities and their environment and food security, Wendy Pekeur of Ubuntu Rural says: "we have never seen mining benefiting any community. History showed us how brutal mining companies were. They took everything and left the communities in tatters. Mining-affected communities are confronted today with serious health issues, among other ills. Minister Gwede Mantashe needs to be removed as the Minister. His interest in mining makes him blind to the pleas of communities. He has a clear conflict of interest in granting these mining applications" Pekeur said.

This story is indicative of the importance of non-formal learning that takes place in community struggles and social movements. This story also highlights ways in which communities construct knowledge and deepen eco-consciousness through participation in local struggles.