

Ecotourism clashes with industrialisation

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By Samantha Enslin, South African Press Association

The Amadiba Coastal Community at Xolobeni in the Eastern Cape are caught in a tug-of-war between an Australian company, Mineral Commodities, which is planning to mine in the area, and environmentalists who are opposed to both the coastal dune mining and the N2 toll road, which will cut through the area.

Velaphi Ndovela, a member of the Amadiba Coastal Community Trust, which is situated in Pondoland, said that to reach a decision on whether to support the mine and road would be a long process in which five villages and two imbizos (gatherings) would be needed. The land on which this 500 homestead community engage in subsistence farming and ecotourism is state land and Ndovela conceded that their decision might have little influence on the final outcome.

But for the long-term sustainable development of the area crucial questions need to be answered before mining on the coastal dunes of Xolobeni is given the green light. One of these is whether the dunes can be rehabilitated after mining.

Mineral Commodities, which is listed on the Australian stock exchange, is prospecting along 22km of coastline for titanium minerals for export. The mining operation, if given the go-ahead, will have a lifespan of 17 years. The company has estimated the deposit contains in excess of 16 million tons of heavy minerals and 8 million tons of ilmenite.

Current ecotourism initiatives such as horse trails and fly-fishing tours run by the Amadiba Coastal Community Trust employ 100 people and generate annual turnover of about R600 000. These initiatives take place in some of the areas where the mining is proposed, which will be in five blocks along the coast divided by five river estuaries.

Ndovela said: "From the trust's perspective, we are worried about these developments and don't think they can go hand-in-hand with ecotourism. Although jobs will be created during construction, we will lose land to big developments."

There is concern that large-scale developments along the horse trails' route will kill ecotourism, which many consider to be more sustainable than mining. Alan Luscombe, the chief executive of Mineral Commodities, said the Xolobeni Mineral Sands Project was situated in one of the most impoverished areas in South Africa. The socioeconomic affects of the project related to employment, training, health, infrastructure development and the upgrading or construction of amenities. On site, 100 permanent jobs would be created and a further 170 positions at the smelter in East London. But this is only for the lifespan of the mine.

What will the community be left with afterwards? Will it be possible to resuscitate ecotourism initiatives or will the community inherit a barren wasteland? A former environmental representative for the department of agriculture and forestry said the difficulty in rehabilitating the dunes was due to the nature of the deposit, which lines the fines-rich Berea Formation. Fines are silts and clays. Such deposits required that waste be stored in slime dams to produce dumps like those on the Witwatersrand. Unlike gold mine dumps, methods to satisfactorily revegetate silts and clays in the Berea Formation had not been found, he said.

Luscombe disagreed. He said wet-mineral separation removed the fines and the heavy minerals from the sand in a two-stage process. Only 6 percent of the sand tonnage was removed as concentrate, the remaining 94 percent of fines and sand were combined and returned to the mining excavation. Except

for an initial storage area, which was required for the fines and sand until the mining area was sufficiently advanced to allow them to be replaced, no ongoing dumps or dams were needed, Luscombe said

"Rehabilitation of sand dunes includes correctly mixing the fines and the sand, contouring the dunes to resist wind erosion, replacing top soil removed prior to the mining and stabilising the dune by plantings and other protective measures," he said. "Mineral Commodities has also tested the Xolobeni fine and is satisfied they can be settled to a density suitable for mixing with non-valuable sand." The particular methodology will be determined during the feasibility study."

Another concern is the mining company may be planning to plant the exotic but invasive *Casuarina* to stabilise the dunes after mining. This will be adjacent to a 180 000ha conservation hotspot identified by Conservation International. This means that the area, which has 120 endemic plant species, is recognised as rich in biodiversity and vulnerable. The N2 toll road is another bugbear for environmentalists who believe its upgrade and the construction of a new section, which will bypass its existing route through Kokstad and instead run the length of the coast, will serve the mine.

Both Mineral Commodities and the department of environmental affairs and tourism denied the road was linked to the mine. Tony Abbott, a botanist who has lived and worked in the area for 20 years, said the Pondoland Centre of Plant Endemism was one of only 235 centres worldwide.

"When you have a conservation hotspot you have to think long and hard about any big developments such as a mine or a road near it."

The department of environmental affairs and tourism said it did not anticipate the loss of any species would be a direct result of the construction of the N2 Wild Coast Toll Road. But this could happen as a result of adjacent developments.

Cathy Kay, the conservation director of the Wildlife and Environment Society of SA, said: "People that I spoke to in Pondoland do not seem to realise that they are going to lose their land. When we walked the proposed route of the road, we saw it goes right through people's houses and mielie fields." The road will be fenced and this means the community, which does not have easy access to transport, will have to walk many extra kilometres to access rivers and the sea.

This is despite the fact that the mining company will only mine from 600m inland from the coast and 200m inland from the five river estuaries

One environmentalist said the proposed road would have an unrestricted view of a succession of barren windswept and dusty mine dumps for nearly 25km once the deposit had been exhausted.

"Furthermore the only way the Xolobeni deposit can be profitably mined is if the road serving the mine is not paid for by the mining company," he said.

Luscombe said it would be foolish for the company to base its plans on a road that might or might not happen.

"Without considering the N2, our financial modelling as well as a desktop valuation by a third party demonstrate the project is viable. Transport is a significant cost of the project and alternatives to reduce the cost will be evaluated. Publication of cost estimates is premature at this stage." Besides the environmental impact the concern was also about the social and cultural pressures that the mine and road could bring.

"The one thing the Transkei has is the Wild Coast. If they destroy that, what marketable asset will the local people have left?" Abbott said.