



ECONOMIC & SOCIAL JUSTICE TRUST

PLANNED MARINE PHOSPHATE MINING THREATENS THE MARINE ECOSYSTEM AND THE FISHING INDUSTRY

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In June 2018, the Minister of Environment and Tourism set aside the environmental clearance certificate of Namibia Marine Phosphate (PTY) LTD. This was a wise and forward-looking decision and followed the Namibian Cabinet's moratorium on phosphate mining based on the precautionary principle. The previous Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources stated in the National Assembly that such mining poses high risks to the marine ecosystem.

Various marine biologists have pointed out that marine phosphate mining would have devastating long term effects on the environment and could destroy Namibia's fishing industry. It is against this background that we noted with great concern that Namibia Marine Phosphates (NMP) plans to mine the seabed off the coast of Walvis Bay. Such a venture will have a significant and long-lasting ecological impact but NMP did not investigate the potential impact of noise, toxins and sediment plume on marine life and the ecosystem as a whole. The area at which NMP wants to conduct its operations is on the edge of the breeding grounds of hake, monkfish and horse-mackerel.

As in previous years, the NMP shows no appreciation for such considerations and also brushes aside the various concerns raised by the Confederation of Namibian Fishing Associations which has pointed out that "NMP intends to use an on-land area in Walvis Bay, known as Area 37, for processing of sludge containing phosphate, heavy metals and radio-active materials at a mine dump. Wastewater used for rinsing the 5-million tonnes of sludge will run back into the ocean, or might be leaked into underground freshwater aquifers supplying Walvis Bay".

It is no coincidence that marine phosphate mining projects were turned down by almost every country in the world because of the high and lasting risks involved. Global experiences have shown that heavy metals and radio-active elements from phosphate rock mines lead to serious pollution. Radio-active materials such as uranium and thorium, are typically particularly concentrated in marine phosphate.

It is against this background that we call on the Namibian government to put an end to all proposed marine phosphate mining projects in our country. We support the United Nations'

precautionary principle when dealing with such ventures. The Benguela ecosystem is a fragile though highly productive large marine ecosystem. It is based on the nutrients in the seabed which provide the basis for phytoplankton which in turn forms the base of the food web of the whole ecosystem. Any disturbances of the seabed – and marine phosphate mining would involve a large-scale destruction of the top layer of the seabed – will present a severe threat to the ecosystem as a whole and all living mechanisms that it supports.

The key argument is that as long as there is a reasonable level of uncertainty regarding possible damage to the ecosystem and thus Namibia's fishing industry, marine phosphate mining must simply not be allowed. Some of the key concerns are:

- The effects on breeding of major commercial fish species. Fish have specific breeding areas, which risk being permanently destroyed.
- Change in sea bottom habitat as mining will lead to the removal of seabed to a sediment depth of 1-3 metres. The sediment cloud (plumes) could result in the clogging of fish gills, poisoning, oxygen depletion and smothering of young fish in their breeding and nursery grounds.
- Possible unsafe radiation levels associated with the uranium content of marine phosphates, both at mining sites and from processing effluents.
- Impact on quality of fishery and marine products, affecting food-safety levels for human consumption

The Namibian fishing industry provides thousands of jobs and if properly managed can grow further in the years to come. The industry is threatened by marine phosphate mining but its impact on fish breeding and nursery grounds would not be immediately apparent, because young fish are not allowed to be caught. This means that only when the adult fish populations decrease, would the effect become visible. Hake, for example, are caught when they are several years old and therefore it would take years and decades before such mining impacts would be revealed. Marine food webs are complicated and once the damage occurs, it will be irreversible.

Without proper independent and transparent environmental research by internationally recognised marine scientists with adequate knowledge and experience, the likely potential environmental risks of proposed marine phosphate mining in the Benguela Marine Ecosystem are far too great to take. The Constitution of Namibia, Article 95.1, requires the Government to actively promote the welfare of the people, stating that the Government of Namibia is obligated to:

“..maintain ecosystems, essential ecological processes and biological diversity of Namibia and utilisation of living natural resources on a sustainable basis for the benefit of all Namibians, both present and future.”

We expect our government to live up to this obligation.