



ECONOMIC & SOCIAL JUSTICE TRUST

13 July 2022

Open letter to the Minister of Environment, Forestry and Tourism

Hon. Pohamba Shifeta
Minister of Environment, Forestry and Tourism
Windhoek
Republic of Namibia

Hon. Minister

Re: Marine phosphate mining

We are writing to you once again regarding the ongoing attempts to push Namibia towards the acceptance of the highly controversial marine phosphate mining project as proposed by Namibia Marine Phosphates (Pty) Ltd and supported by Dr Chris Brown, CEO of the Chamber of the Environment. Despite his lack of marine science qualifications and experience, Dr Brown has adopted an aggressive approach to ridicule critics of the venture. In an article carried on the frontpage of the *Republikein* on 21 June 2022, Brown called the Chairman of the Confederation of Namibian Fishing Associations Chairman, Matti Amukwa, 'impractical and idealistic like a Don Quixote, fighting imaginary threats that do not exist.'

Your Ministry is the custodian of the environment, charged with safeguarding its sustainability for future generations as set out in the Namibian Constitution. The Chamber of the Environment, on the other hand, was set up about 4 years ago with seed money from B2Gold, one of the biggest mining companies in Namibia. The Chamber has been actively promoting marine phosphate mining – both on its website and with Brown, as its CEO, promoting it in public meetings in his claimed capacity as 'independent environmentalist'.

The Chamber's own website reveals that it has no expertise in marine science, but this seemingly does not prevent Dr Chris Brown from playing witness, judge and executioner on the prospect of marine phosphate mining in Namibia. The Chamber's clear bias towards the promotion of mining interests is further shown by the membership of Charles Loots who has 'more than 16 years of experience in the mining industry' and is currently employed as General Manager and Director at

P.O. Box 96179, Windhoek, Namibia Email: esjtrust1@gmail.com Tel: +264-811243438 (chairperson)

Trustees: Rinaani Musutua, Michael Gaweseb, Herbert Jauch, John Nakuta and Doufi Namalambo

B2Gold Namibia. Furthermore, it seems that several member organisations of the Chamber were not consulted and in fact disagree with Dr Brown's statement which violates the fundamental principle of organisational mandates and accountability.

In the past, during his time as an environmentalist at the Namibian Nature Foundation, Dr Brown used to be respected as an environmentalist. Since then, he appears to have forgotten what an environmentalist should be concerned about. He shows no concern about heavy metals such as cadmium and uranium contained in the 5 million tonnes of sediment per year to be sucked up from the seabed if marine phosphate mining was to go ahead. The dredging site proposed for phosphate is inside and close to nursery areas of commercial fish species, which are protected areas and important to the health of its biodiversity.

Various marine scientists have pointed out that phosphate mining removes sediments from a depth of 4- 6 meters that includes heavy metals that had formed over millions of years, and that would now continue to leach into the ocean – and all sea life. This seawater, with millions of tonnes of phosphate and radio-active bearing material will be dredged to an on-shore processing plant (for which no EIA has been done) and then thrown back into the ocean again – surely a dangerous process that should concern any environmentalist.

Scientists in the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources as well as other internationally respected marine scientists have pointed to the enormous risks posed by marine phosphate mining. It is hardly surprising that such projects were rejected elsewhere in the world, recently by New Zealand, Mexico and Australia. Dr Brown deliberately ignores such evidence and pronounces that it is safe to mine for phosphate and that seabed mining could exist side by side with fishing without a serious impact on the marine ecosystem.

This contradicts the United Nations' support of the precautionary principle when dealing with ventures such as marine phosphate mining. 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 disturbance – will present a severe threat to the ecosystem as a whole and all living mechanisms that it supports.

International scientific evidence suggests that there is relatively limited knowledge on the impact of seabed mining on the ecosystem and that there are no feasible ways to mitigate these impacts. Bulk marine sediment mining was not allowed in any country because of the huge environmental and socio-economic risks. It would be irresponsible to allow Namibia to be turned into the guinea pig for marine phosphate mining.

The jobs promised by such mining operations are negligent compared to the over 10,000 direct jobs and around 45,000 indirect and related jobs in our fishing industry. These are the jobs that need to be safeguarded, increased and improved in the years to come through a carefully considered sustainable utilisation of our marine

resources. Endangering them through marine phosphate mining and the narrow short-term interests that underpin it would not do justice to Article 95.1, of our Constitution which states 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 appeal to you as a respected Minister and custodian of the environment to counter Dr Brown’s biased views and to assure Namibians that your Ministry will protect the Benguela ecosystem and ensure the long-term viability of the fishing industry to feed Namibians and to safeguard the jobs created in the sector.

With kind regards

Yours respectfully

Herbert Jauch

Chairperson