

Portion of seabed bordering SA earmarked for mining, experts alarmed

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As much as 10% of the seabed bordering South Africa has been earmarked for mining, alarming fishing and environmental experts. The proposed mining activity has drawn opposition from the World Wide Fund for Nature, one of several organisations represented at a seabed mining seminar last week in Cape Town.



Tvabutzku1234 via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The government has issued three licences for marine prospecting for phosphates covering 150,000km² of seabed in an almost uninterrupted stretch from the Groen River mouth on the West Coast to Mossel Bay.

The Department of Mineral Resources now faces a groundswell of opposition from a civil society grouping led by the Centre for Environmental Rights, which claims that marine sediment mining in bulk has yet to be approved anywhere in the world. It is a "world first" South Africa should strive to avoid, the centre's Saul Roux told the seminar.

Seabed mining involves extracting minerals buried in sediments on the seabed. Dredge hoppers are used to suck up sediment and pump it onto vessels. The hoppers have cutting teeth and water jets that crush hard sediment. They can remove more than 100,000m³ of sediment daily.

A proposed marine phosphate mining project in Namibia, the Sandpiper Project, planned to mine and remove 5.5 million tonnes of sediment a year. Namibia's government has placed a moratorium on seabed mining to better assess environmental impacts.

Phosphate is a key ingredient of agricultural fertiliser but is relatively in short supply.

The ocean is the wrong place in which to look for new supplies

Opponents of seabed mining believe the ocean is the wrong place in which to look for new supplies because they say seabed mining technology is largely untested and might have devastating environmental effects.

John Duncan, marine manager of the World Wide Fund for Nature SA, told The Times that the organisation had objected to the environmental management plan submitted by two South African licence applicants, Green Flash Trading 251 and Green Flash Trading 257, which were granted prospecting rights in 2014. "The Department of Mineral Resources granted them the prospecting right without showing us the amended environmental management plan."

He said the granting of prospecting rights suggested that the government was in favour of seabed mining, which he found worrying.

Johann Augustyn, of the SA Deep-Sea Trawling Industry Association, said the prospecting area overlapped some of the most productive fishing grounds. He cautioned that short-term benefits from mining should be weighed against long-term side effects. "We are highly concerned that the areas designated for phosphates exploration entirely encompass our most important fishing grounds and we consider seabed mining of the type being proposed completely incompatible with fishing, and to be an environmentally destructive activity that cannot even be economically justified," he said.

"We have, therefore, teamed up with the Centre for Environmental Rights and several other partners to form this alliance to fight it. South Africa does not need to extract phosphates from the seabed because the land-based sources are adequate for hundreds of years.

"There is a developing technology to extract it from sewage on a large scale, which should be explored as a long-term option."

Green Flash Trading could not be reached for comment. The firm's directors include former Billiton manager John Daly.

Responding to queries four years ago shortly after submitting its prospecting plan, Wynand Venter, then legal representative of Green Flash Trading, said the businessmen involved had years of experience in mining and were qualified to run the proposed project. He said the company was committed to working with the Department of Mineral Resources and the World Wide Fund for Nature and "undertook to address all the concerns raised and avoid environmental degradation". The department said it was preparing a response to The Times.

Source: The Times