Extractive diamond mining threatening the livelihoods of small-scale fishers in the Northern Cape

THE Northern Cape has some unique features. It is the largest province in South Africa, covering 30% of its landmass and, the smallest population (1.2 million residents) and economy of any of the provinces. Its economy has historically been dominated by mining, with the mines linked to the coast by significant investments in rail transport. Rich deposits of alluvial diamonds into the sea off the Northern Cape, carried from Kimberley via the Orange River, has made this coastline an attractive and extractive offshore mining area for decades, with minimal benefits for the local population.

THE success of the Small-scale Fishing Policy in this province depends upon local fishers in each coastal province being able to turn any rights gained through the policy into more sustainable livelihood opportunities and, the longer-term sustainability of its marine resources and breeding grounds. Both are under threat in the Northern Cape.

SINCE late 2017 fishers from Coastal Links branches in Port Nolloth and Hondeklipbaai have been actively mobilizing, in partnership with other local civil society organisations and environmental activists, to advocate for changes in the way two large diamond mining companies – Alexkor and Transhex/West Coast Resources are operating along the Northern Cape coastline. These two companies, along with De Beers Namaqualand (DBN), hold a monopoly on mining concessions along the 350km coast, from Alexander Bay in the north.
IN November 2017, small-scale fishers in the Northern Cape were the first fishers to qualify for rights in terms of the Small-scale Fisheries Policy. They were also the first fishers to be introduced to training by DAFF service providers on the proposed establishment of cooperatives in Port Nolloth and Hondeklipbaai. These two developments mark the latest milestones in their long and protracted struggle to ensure that benefits promised to them in the policy are delivered to them in ways that build a more secure and sustainable livelihood for small-scale fishers in the province.

They know only too well that many challenges lie ahead. Many fishers, especially women and youth, never made it onto the final list. The constitution DAFF is proposing for the new cooperatives falls short of ensuring that their long-term rights under the policy are secure. Access to their coastline is minimal due to the large number of diamond mining concessions along the coast, blocking the fishers from easy access to their traditional fishing areas. And, the increasing presence and scaling up of diamond mining thorough Coffer Dam mining along the entire coastline is destroying their marine resources – their entire basket of species – as well as the coastline’s marine biodiversity.

The fishers know that their struggle to achieve food sovereignty is far from over. They are determined to make the policy and the many value-chain opportunities that accompany their fishing rights work. They are busy networking with other civil society organisations and environmental activists to challenge Coffer Dam mining in the area. They have their own ideas on how the cooperatives should work, based on their own indigenous knowledge and understanding of local conditions and the fishing sector. With the active participation of strong women, like Rosie Malan and Renthia Van Wyk, they are rethinking how to use the abandoned fish factory buildings in Port Nolloth. They are doing what they can to fix their boats and register them on the DAFF system so that they can get them back onto the water. They are doing all of this because this is their life - “I know no other life” “This is my life”.

When Andries “Mannetjies” Klassen drowned off the coast of Port Nolloth in early April, he was doing what he loved – fishing for food and a livelihood for his family. But Mannetjies was more than that. He was an activist who struggled long and hard to make the Small-scale Fisheries Policy work for his community in Hondeklipbaai and all fishers in the Northern Cape. Everyone respected Mannetjies for his dedication and commitment and love of fishing.

Although his tragic death rocked fishers up and down the coast, he will always be remembered by those left behind to take their unfinished struggle forward. This edition of FishersNet is dedicated to the life and memory of Mannetjies.
to the Groen Rivier in the south, blocking the access of fishers to many of their traditional fishing areas. THE fishers estimate that they currently only have access to less than 5% of this coastline, adding additional transport costs and time to their fishing operations. In addition to the issue of lack of access, the fishers and small-scale mining producers are up in arms about an even more worrying feature – the escalation of what is called Coffer Dam diamond mining along the coast.

ALTHOUGH Coffer Dam mining is not new to the area, the way in which it is currently being practiced and escalation of mining activity is a huge concern. Previously built out of sand and, therefore not very harmful to the marine environment, these Coffer Dams are now being built out of quarried rock, stretching out into the sea for up to 250 metres, at a rapid rate.

IN addition to the damage these “dams” do to the beach and local shoreline, this system of diamond extraction is extremely damaging to the local marine environment and biodiversity. The production process involves firstly, the building of the rectangular shaped dams made up of quarried rocks and stones; secondly, pumping out the water from the dam area and, along with this, all the marine resources living inside the area; thirdly, send in large machinery to dig the diamonds out from the drained marine bed, leaving in its wake an abandoned Coffer Dam for “mining rehabilitation” yet to see the light of day along the coast.

IN January 2018 Coastal Links in the Northern Cape sought the assistance of the Legal Resources Centre in Cape Town to launch a legal challenge the way Coffer Dam mining is taking place along the coastline. They, along with other environmental and lobby groups, based on extensive research, argue that the mining companies have not complied with existing South African environmental legislation. AS of writing the campaign against Coffer Dam mining in the Northern Cape seems to be gaining momentum as it becomes more widely publicized and known to the South African public. Unless resolved as soon as possible, Coffer Dam mining, along with the ongoing lack of access to local fishing areas, seriously undermines any gains the fishers make under the Small-scale Fishing Policy, seriously threatening their present and future livelihood opportunities.

**The lack of infrastructure support for fishers in Port Nolloth and Hondeklip Baai**

IN addition to the lack access to traditional fishing areas and threats to sustainable marine resources, small-scale fishers in the Northern Cape argue that government is not doing enough to provide them with the kind of infrastructure the fishing industry needs to make it a more vibrant part of the local economy, despite numerous broken promises.

THIS is confirmed by any visit to Port Nolloth and Hondeklip Baai, both characterized by a lack or, evidence of abandoned or decaying fishing infrastructure along the coastline. The Northern Cape still lacks an adequate harbor to support either commercial or small-scale fishing. Once vibrant fishing factories, operated by companies like Ovenstone or Oceana, now lie abandoned or under-utilised in their once thriving fishing harbours. Monuments to the closing down of these factories, leaving in their wake, hundreds of fishers, mostly women, impoverished and unemployed.

ROSIE Malan, a Coastal Links member and activist from Port Nolloth has worked in the local fishing industry since childhood, following in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother. She has been doing whatever she can do get support from government and local private businesses to resuscitate the dilapidated fishing complex at the once thriving harbor and, revive activities aligned to fishing that offer the many unemployed women and youth in the area potential livelihood opportunities. “I do what I can, getting support from members in the community, the local Spar and others…..I won’t stop because I know no other life.”

NEITHER town even have designated or safe landing or off-loading areas for the boats of small-scale fishers, adding to the already many safety hazards of a harsh and unpredictable Northern Cape coastline. Small boats donated to the fishers by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform in the province, lie unused by the shore in both towns, caught up in a tangled web of inter-departmental red tape between national and provincial government since 2015.

MORGAN Johnson, a Coastal Links leader in Port Nolloth, argues that things need to change and that fishing along the coast is hazardous and unsafe for small-scale fishers. He also wants answers to questions about millions of government Rands allocated to improve conditions which nobody to date has seen. “There are cranes that don’t work. There are planks missing along the existing jetty. I have to walk across floating tyres to get my boat out to sea…We have many meetings with the provincial, district, and local municipality and written many letters but still we get no answers”
Have you heard about coffer dams?
No, what is a coffer dam?

It is a dam that extends from the seashore into the sea with four walls made up of rocks and stones.

Who is building the coffer dams?

They are being built by two mining companies – Alexcor and Transhlex/West Coast Resources.

Where are they being built?

There are coffer dams from Alexander Bay in the north to Port Nolloth (Alexcor) to beyond Hondeklipbaai in the south (Transhlex/West Cape Resources).

What do they do with these coffer dams?

Once the coffer dams are built the mining companies drain out all the sea water, including any marine life trapped in the dam, then they bring in large machines to dig out the diamonds.

What happens after the diamonds have been mined?
They leave the coffer dams where they are and move on to build new ones along the coast. Are coffer dams legal?

They are only permitted if the mining company has done an environmental impact assessment and they are supposed to be built from sand so that they do not affect the marine environment.

What do environmental activists in the Northern Cape say about these coffer dams?

They believe that many are being built without government permission, like the ones built around Alexander Bay by Alexcor. They are very worried about their impact on marine life along the coast.

What are the small-scale fishers saying and doing about coffer dams?

They are seeking legal advice and working with the environmental activists and small-scale diamond producers in the Northern Cape to stop coffer dam mining along the coastline.
Voices from the Coast:

Despite many challenges, fishers in Port Nolloth and Hondeklipbaai look towards a brighter future

Renthia Van Wyk: The government must just give us control so that we can operate the cooperatives using our own knowledge and understanding of local conditions. That is my vision, because we can see the potential that exists in this place. I can see that the youth have been watching the way we have struggled these past 30 years. As our children grow up they see how we have struggled and feel that we are going nowhere. The youth say that the sea produces no money. They don’t understand that the sea is the foundation of our wealth. We must bring back that sense of trust and pride in fishing. That’s why it is so important to fight to make this policy work so that it benefits us. So that our youth and future generations can build on what we struggled to achieve for them.

Hondeklipbaai fisher: We can change all of this if we can just work together to produce what God gave us as fishers from the sea. We can use our common sense and decide that we are doing it for ourselves and not rely on government promises. I believe we can make fishing successful if we stand together.

Morgan: We want to see the cooperatives work. There are only two fishing communities here in the Northern Cape – Port Nolloth and Hondeklipbaai – and, if these cooperatives can work, they will greatly improve the life and livelihoods of many local people.

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Face2Face

The only life Aunty Rosie Malan from Port Nolloth knows is the sea and she is determined to make the value chain fishing offers improve the local economy

I was born in Port Nolloth and grew up here. All my family – my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, and me. My mother was fired from the factory because she gave the workers water on a warm day. We all worked in this fish factory until it closed-down.

I am one of the first workers to come back to this building to ask the owners for help. I know no other work. We wanted to create a place to sell fish and chips. We did this, fetching fish in a bakkie from Doringbaai and other places along the West coast. But we were stopped by the inspectors who told us we didn’t have permission to do this.

In January this year Oom Piet asked me if I could make a plan with tractors from the Department of Agriculture that were just lying around. So, I went to take a look. We used money we had to buy pipes, oil, and other things to get them up and running. Everything was good. In February when people from the Department visited us we showed them the tractors. They were so impressed. Now we are using them to pull our boats in and out of the water. We are using the money we get from the fishers for doing this to pay for ongoing repairs and maintenance. Now I am busy talking with the older fishers to see if we can get safety equipment and other parts so that we can begin to get the small boats that are laying around on the shore up and running and back onto the government system again.
“WE support the cooperatives. We want them to work. But we are not happy with the way DAFF has implemented their establishment nor with the proposed Constitution for the Cooperatives”

SMALL-SCALE fishers in the Northern Cape were the first to qualify for rights in terms of the SSFP with the publishing of their final list of qualifiers in November 2017. They were also the first to undergo training by service providers hired by DAFF in February 2018 on a constitution drafted by DAFF for the day to running and management of these legal entities. Like many fishers from Kwa-Zulu Natal, the Northern Cape fishers have expressed many concerns and argue that they should have been consulted about its content before being presented with a long and complex document, in English and not Afrikaans, with little time to study or process its content at the two-day workshop.

“We should have been consulted. We know the situation here, on the ground. What do consultants from Johannesburg know about fishing?” (Rentia van Wyk, Coastal Links leader from Port Nolloth)

ONE of the key bones of contention is the clause pertaining to ownership of the Cooperative which excludes an equal shareholding right. The fishers are adamant that they don’t just want to have membership rights. They want a right that gives them the ability to pass on their share in the cooperative to their family in the case of retirement or, death.

“This is our life. It is our right to a livelihood. What happens if my husband dies? I will be left with nothing” (Rentia van Wyk)

ANOTHER area of contention are clauses specifying that the Cooperative needs to consult DAFF for approval. The fishers argue that this is not in line with the existing South African Cooperatives Act and undermines their right to decide on the operations of the Cooperative.

“If the government allocates fishing rights to a company it doesn’t interfere in how the company works. I am not saying that DAFF has no right to monitor us, I agree with that 100%, but how we run the Cooperative needs to be left to us” (Stanley Young, Coastal Links leader in Port Nolloth)

COASTAL Links members from the Northern Cape, Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and Kwa-Zulu Natal, had an opportunity to raise their concerns with the Cooperative process and constitution with Craig Smith, Director of Small-scale Fisheries in DAFF, at a National Roundtable meeting convened by Masifundise in late April this year. At the meeting, in which Craig Smith once again outlined the roll-out of the policy since 2016, the fishers heard some of government’s concerns and, had an opportunity to engage face to face with him on some of their concerns.

At the all-day meeting the unresolved issue of the exclusion of many fishers, mostly women and youth, from being part of the policy and rights allocation process was once again raised. Craig Smith’s explanation of the verification and appeals process, in which fishers were excluded in one of the members of the verification panel deemed that they failed to qualify, surfaced a long-held concern that the rights verification process is viewed by many fishers as being less than fair.

“When Craig Smith explained on what grounds fishers were excluded it all fell into place for me. Fishers know who the fishers are in their local community. We put forward 240 names but when the final list came out only 74 fishers from Port Nolloth were on the list…. I think that the entire process needs to be reviewed” – (Morgan Johnson, Coastal Links leader from Port Nolloth).

AS of writing (May 2018), the issue of the Constitution and implementation of the policy remains unresolved.
ON the 10 April 2018, a well-known and loved Coastal Links member and leader from Hondeklip Baai, Andriea “Mannetjies” Klaasen, tragically lost his life while fishing off the coast of Port Nolloth. Mannetjies played a key role in advocating for the fishing rights of small-scale fishers through the implementation of the Small-scale Fishing Policy for his community and fishers in the Northern Cape, with many ideas and dreams on how the policy could improve the lives and livelihoods of fishers in the province.

THE tragic death of Mannetjies illustrates some important things. Firstly, the precariousness and dangerous life fishers face every day that they go out to sea. Secondly, the extra dangers of fishing in unfamiliar coastal waters. In this case off the coast of Port Nolloth, well known for its rough seas and unpredictable weather changes. The arrival of a thick and unexpected mist while Mannetjies was at sea is seen as a key reason for such a seasoned fisher. And, last but not least, the possible reason why Mannetjies pushed himself to go out fishing twice on that day, rather than once.

ONE explanation for this was offered by Naseegh Jaffer, Director at Masifundise.

“THE fishers push themselves because there is not enough time left for them to catch fish in the fishing season if their permits from DAFF get delayed. This was the case this year, the permits arrived very late in an already short fishing season. That is why fishers like Mannetjies take risks going out to sea. Packing in as much fishing as they can in a shorter period of time”

THE death of Mannetjies reminds us not only of how much time and energy he gave to improve the life and livelihoods of small-scale fishers in the Northern Cape and, how much more needs to be done to improve the safety of fishers at sea.