INTRODUCTION

“RAGE OVER DUNE MINING” The Namib Times.
“PROPOSED DUNE MINING CAN EXPECT FLAK AT PUBLIC MEETINGS...” The Namib Times, 17 October.
“TOURIST HAVEN IN JEOPARDY” The Namibian, 31 October.
“LUKE WARM RECEPTION TO DUNE PROSPECTING” The Namib Times, 26 October.
“DUNE PROSPECTING GETS GREEN LIGHT” The Namib Times, 26 October.
“WALVIS AWASH IN WONDER OVER MINE PLAN” The Namibian, 2 November.

Why and how did the first four headlines come about? What caused the sands to shift for the second three headlines? The aim of this paper is to examine what went wrong with the public participation process and how it was put right. But first, what was proposed and where was it located to cause such a furore?

THE PRESS RELEASE AND PUBLIC INFORMATION PACKAGE - WHAT THE PAPERS DIDN’T SAY

If the press releases to the newspapers had been published in an unaltered state, you, the public would have learnt the following.

The Ministry of Mines and Energy granted a provisional licence to Caledonia Mining Corporation (Caledonia) to prospect for heavy minerals in the dune area between Swakopmund and Walvis Bay.
The licence was subject to, *inter alia*, an environmental assessment (EA) being carried out according to Namibia's Environmental Assessment Policy.

The presence of heavy minerals in the dunes was first established in 1968, but further prospecting and metallurgical test work is required to determine the economic viability of the deposit. Thus Caledonia applied for an Exclusive Prospecting Licence to carry out geological mapping, geophysical surveying, surface sampling and drilling. Provision in the exploration programme was also made for the collection of a bulk sample if the initial results appeared positive. Caledonia envisaged the prospecting programme to last for a minimum of three years.

The press release provided the public with an overview of typical heavy mineral processing techniques, pointing out the fact that because of their high specific gravity, the minerals can be separated from the sand by means of gravity and electro-magnetic separation, neither of which utilise any chemicals or involve milling or grinding. Some information was also provided on the uses to which titanium dioxide, zircon, monazite, hematite and garnets can be put.

The public were urged to attend the public meeting to obtain more information on the proposals and to voice their concerns, so that all the issues and concerns could be addressed in the EA.

In addition to the press release, invitations providing a similar project outline were sent to approximately 50 organisations representing the authorities, councils, residents associations, tour operators, NGOs and any other interested and affected parties (I&APs) which had be identified through an initial scoping process.

It should have been clear from this information that prospecting activities are a relatively low impact type of operation, so why the fuss?

The dunes between Walvis Bay and Swakopmund are very dramatic, particularly along the main road between the two towns, which is characterised by the golden dunes towering on one side and the blue Atlantic Ocean thundering on the other. Combined with the old German colonial charm of Swakopmund and the stark landscapes of the Namib Desert, the dunes form an integral part of the special attraction that Swakopmund holds for tourists and Namibians alike. There is a perception
amongst the tourists and locals that the dunes are pristine, untouched, inviolate. The reality is different.

Until recently, the dunes fell inside the Walvis Bay Enclave belonging to South Africa. Because of its strategic position in relation in South West Africa, the South African Defence Force (as it was then known) had a major base on the inland side of the dunes (see Fig 1). The whole area to the east of the dune field had restricted public access and large scale military manoeuvres and weapons training were carried out. This left a legacy of vehicle tracks, debris, old ammunition cartridges, litter, rusting drums and old signs.

The gravel road on the east side of the dunes, which is sometimes used by tour operators, is flanked by a railway line, power line and water pipeline in a wide infrastructure corridor.

Now that the SADF has left, both sides of the dunes are used extensively for recreational pursuits such as: 4x4 driving, motorbike scrambling, parasailing, microlighting, dune board riding, walking, photography and painting. The areas known as Dune 7 and the Amphitheatre are popular party areas and film backdrops. Some of these activities are incompatible with each other, as well as with the concept of a pristine environment. Obviously all this activity has left its fair share of vehicle tracks, litter and debris.

Animal life within the dunes is minimal due to the very harsh climate and mobile surface of the dunes. There are a number of endemic tenebrionid beetles and lizards which have become specially adapted to the habitat. Jackals (*Canis mesomelas*), and occasionally the rare brown hyena (*Hyaena brunnea*) have been sighted in the dunes, living off small rodents and lizards. There is some doubt as to whether Grant’s Golden Mole (*Eremitalpa granti* subsp. *namibensis*), which is a listed Red Data Book species, occurs in these dunes, but experts are divided on the subject. The rare, endemic Damara Tern is known to breed between the sea and the road in the northern coastal part of the dune area (Fig 1), but its breeding distribution inland is unknown.

The Namib Desert coast is one of the driest desert coasts in the world. As a result, the land can only support slow-growing, succulent perennials or very short-lived annuals. However, lichen growth in the coastal area is abundant, obtaining sufficient moisture from the frequent fog. The
lichens comprise an important link in the food web of the desert and are extremely susceptible to disturbance, especially by vehicles.

WHAT THE PAPERS DID SAY

The papers quoted one of the Swakopmund Councillors extensively, portraying him as an authority on the matter. He said that the Council could not entertain a project which, “once the heavy minerals had been extracted, would leave no original dune sand, only powder. If such powder was treated with sea water it would merely form a crust which, if broken, would mean the powder would be left to the mercy of the wind. No original sand dunes would be left standing and this would be detrimental to the environment.”

He also said “They claim the project will create 800 jobs but look what happened at Richards Bay in the debacle there. The same company was involved.”

Where this man obtained his “information” from is anyone’s guess! And to link Caledonia or Walmsley Environmental Consultants to “the Richards Bay debacle” is verging on libellous. However, it was not just misinformed quotations that were published, the reporter himself had problems in interpreting the press release, stating that “further prospecting is needed to determine if mining will involve geological mapping, geophysical surveying and surface sampling and drilling.” In a later article he took the absurd to an extreme by saying that “drilling to a depth of between 25 to 30 millimetres would be carried out...” (my emphasis).

WHAT THE TOWN COUNCILS HAD TO SAY

Fuel was added to the fire in the form of inflammatory, official statements by the Swakopmund Town Council. Here is a sample:

“The Swakopmund Town Council has vowed to fight a proposal to prospect for heavy minerals in the sand dunes...”

“...it was decided to approach their Walvis Bay counterparts to adopt a similar stance.”
"the Swakopmund Town Council announced they were opposed to the idea of reducing the dunes to mere powder to be blown around at the whims of the wind."

"The (Prospecting) licence was granted subject to an environmental assessment report, which is likely to favour the mining operation."

"The Swakopmund Town Council has voiced vociferous opposition to the plan..."

"...the application to “only sample” gave the company “a foot in the door” through which they would “bulldoze” it into a mining operation."

On the other hand, and typical of the ongoing rivalry between the two towns, Walvis Bay Council kept a much lower profile and made no statements to the press until “they had studied the proposal closely, including the views of both the prospective developers and those opposed to the move...” However, an internal briefing document from the Town Clerk to the Mayor, recommended that the Council “strongly opposes the proposed prospecting activities of Caledonia ... in the Walvis Bay dune fields.”, showing where their sentiments lay prior to the public meetings.

No wonder the public were concerned!

**WHAT WENT WRONG?**

Although a public participation programme was being implemented, four key things went wrong:

- the dates of the public meetings were changed;
- the press release was misquoted;
- difficulty in obtaining decisions from the Client;
- the issue of a public meeting in Walvis Bay.

The public meetings were originally scheduled for 4-6 October, 1995 and therefore letters of invitation to all the identified I&APs were sent from Windhoek two weeks in advance. Three days later, a press release was faxed to two coastal and three National newspapers, providing the background described above and inviting the public to a meeting on 6 October. In the cover note accompanying the faxes, and in follow-up telephone calls, the media were requested to contact us
before making any changes to the press release. (Needless to say this was a futile request and was bluntly disregarded as indicated above). A week after the invitations has been posted (and one week before the meetings) some 90% of the I&APs had been contacted telephonically to confirm their attendance at the meetings.

Then the Client decided to change the date. The Managing Director had originally decided that he did not need to attend the meetings and had therefore agreed that the meetings could go ahead while he was overseas, and that Caledonia could be represented by the Financial Director and the Exploration Manager. The Managing Director then decided that he should attend and that the meetings should be chaired by the author. This meant that the meetings had to be rescheduled. However, it took another week before we could obtain a suitable new date from the Client. During this time we advised the I&APs of the postponement but could not provide them with a date. And although we cancelled three press releases which had not yet been published, the damage had already been done because the two coastal papers had already printed their stories with the eye-catching headlines and the public meeting notices. The public was then left in limbo.

Eventually we obtained a new date for the meetings and advised everyone accordingly. Then we were hit with a completely unexpected turn of events: the Namibian Government decided to declare one of the new meeting days as a one-off public holiday! So we rescheduled again.

The original plan was to first hold a meeting with the Authorities in Windhoek in order to brief the relevant decision-makers prior to any public or press outcry and to establish the Authorities' position with regard to the prospecting proposals. Then one meeting was scheduled for invited representatives of the I&APs in each of Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. Only one public meeting was originally planned for two reasons: it was indicated that there was a general apathy in Walvis Bay to any developments and that a public meeting would be poorly attended; secondly, due to the proximity of the two towns, we thought that if anyone in Walvis Bay was sufficiently interested, they would travel to the Swakopmund meeting.

Wrong! We were told, in no uncertain terms by the Mayor of Walvis Bay that he would create a political row if no public meeting was held in his town. This was duly arranged, but more about
that later. Then due to the rescheduling around the public holiday, we ended up having the Authorities meeting last and worse, three public meetings on one day!

The delays, postponements and rescheduling of meetings played into the hands of the press who ruthlessly exploited the story... and what a story for the otherwise parochial newspapers of these sedate, sleepy seaside settlements!

So against this background of rumour, mis-information, aggression and latent conflict we ran our meetings.

**WHAT WENT RIGHT**

Before I describe the approach we adopted in this case, it should be remembered that each public participation programme is unique and that the methodology used needs to be tailor-made for each public and each situation.

It was fairly obvious from the start that our meetings were not going to be cosy little chats about a foregone conclusion. In Swakopmund, we were going to be dealing with people who are passionate about their dunes and who have a strong sense of "ownership". Tourism is the biggest industry in Swakopmund and therefore the proposals were seen to be in direct conflict with the livelihood of the town itself. The situation in Walvis Bay is very different. This town is an industrial town, with a busy port, fishing and fish processing industries and a high unemployment rate. It is also wanting to establish an export processing zone. We therefore anticipated a different reaction from the I&APs in Walvis Bay. However, both towns have a high proportion of professional and technically attuned people, many of whom originated from, or studied overseas.

Having evaluated our public, we decided to adopt the following approach for all the meetings:

- a conciliatory introduction, stressing that the aim of the meeting was not to find solutions or make any decisions but to initiate a dialogue (the first of many), where the proponent could provide the public with information and the public could openly raise issues and voice its concerns;
a brief description of Namibia’s EA Policy and the aims and objectives of the Integrated Management Procedure (IEM) that had been adopted for the project, particularly the role and importance of public scoping in the whole process;

- a corporate description of Caledonia, its parent company, its mineral holdings and other mining operations, its standing on the stock markets of the world and its environmental policy;

- a detailed account of the heavy mineral market potential, the geological provenance of the heavy mineral deposits in the dunes, the required infrastructure, the dune morphology, the project plan and prospecting methods proposed. A brief outline of a possible mining scenario was also presented. A significant amount of technical back-up information was presented in response to questions, such as the relative value of the deposit in relation to other heavy mineral projects, the specific gravity of the heavy mineral components and calculations of the relative density of the dune sand before and after mining;

- a slide show of the bio-physical environment, as well as past and current land uses.

The presentation lasted just over an hour and was followed by a lengthy question and answer session. After a tea break, we asked all the participants to arrange themselves into groups of 5-8 people. They were provided with A4 pieces of paper and large koki pens and each group had to appoint a chairman and rapporteur. Although we tried to focus all the discussions on prospecting, many of the questions and concerns inevitably addressed mining. In order to accommodate this, we asked each group to write down five main issues relating to prospecting and three concerns about mining, one per piece of paper.

After about 30 minutes, we reconvened the meeting and went through each issue, grouping similar issues together on the wall for all to see. We restricted the discussion at this stage, merely noting that each issue would be addressed. After inviting any further questions, the public were thanked for their participation and important contributions and the meeting was closed, again on a frank and conciliatory basis.
All the meetings lasted for 2½-3 hours, except the public meeting in Walvis Bay. The latter was set up in the Town Hall with seating for about 200 people. It was attended by 12 people, one of whom came an hour late, three of whom left after 10 minutes and 2 of whom had already attended an earlier meeting. However, at least this meeting was attended by representatives of the local Black communities, which provided some much-needed balance.

By this time, the whole thing had gained enough controversy that the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) decided to do a half hour documentary on the subject. They maintained a fairly balanced stance, giving approximately equal airtime to the protagonists as well as the opponents of the project. However, they could not resist a few St Lucia-like scenes of pelicans flying into Sandwich Bay against a shimmering background of sand dunes. The fact that Sandwich Bay is located over 40km away, and is not a prospecting target was not, of course, mentioned.

After the meetings, the minutes of each were written up and on the basis of several requests, the minutes of all the meetings were sent to all participants for comment. The comments that were received were appended with the minutes in the EA report which was submitted to the Authorities.

THE OUTCOME

The Walvis Bay Council and the Swakopmund Councils eventually gave their approval for prospecting, although both expressed their concern about possible future mining.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism approved the granting of the Prospect ing Licence on the basis of the EA report and the first phase of prospecting activities has already commenced. The irony is that nobody is even aware of it!

LESSONS LEARNT

Although the whole thing was a bit of a nightmare at the time, especially holding three public meetings on one day, we all learnt a great deal from the experience.
the public participation process is extremely important, especially for controversial projects, which can live or die on the outcome of the process;

public participation requires full commitment and resources from the Client - there are no short-cuts and it can be expensive;

in the long run, the alternatives, such as taking short-cuts, paying lip service to the public scoping process, promising everything and delivering nothing, being dogmatic about facts and not recognising perceptions, steadfastly quoting legal permission (from a flawed system) etc., will end up being far more harmful in terms of capital expenditure, lost opportunities and a damaged public image than grasping the public participation nettle strongly at the first attempt;

there is only one opportunity to get the public participation process right;

timing is everything - a long delay between notification and meetings can result in a wildfire of rumours and speculation; a very short notice period can make people feel pressurised, of having something sprung upon them;

timing within the overall project schedule is also critical - public scoping must take place as early as possible, but you also need to have some information to present to the public;

you cannot reschedule meetings once the invitations and press releases have been issued;

never assume that the press will print your press release verbatim;

the press have no ethical or moral problem with changing your submission, but they will never entertain the notion of allowing you to check their facts or even edit their copy;

analyse your public, different groups require a different approach;

try to ensure that all relevant I&APs have been invited and that those invited actually represent those they purport to represent;

do not be afraid of presenting technical information, but as far as possible do it in layman’s terms without sounding patronising;

wherever possible, present alternatives (sites, routes, processes);

never present the subject as a fait accompli - always use the future conditional tense “if the project proceeds, it may ...” rather than “when the project proceeds, it will ...”;

always be conciliatory, honest, flexible and open-minded;

do not be aggressively aggressive or aggressively defensive;

never get involved in an argument during a meeting;

listen to the perceptions and the fears - they are very real to the people who are feeling them;
• never be forced into making any definite commitments, promises or decisions in a public meeting if you know that you cannot deliver;
• always do a test run of your presentation with all the team present;
• have enough information to show that you know the area and the environment in which you propose to operate - many of the people you will be talking to will be well informed and will look for opportunities to trip you up;
• ensure in advance that the venues are all set up correctly with chairs, tables, overhead projectors, extension cables, tea/coffee etc.;
• try not to schedule more than two big meetings in one day.

The vagaries of public opinion shift like the sand, on the whim of the wind.

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