

Diamond mining is not forever, SAfrica learns

August 23 2009, by Fran Blandy



A ship wreck lays on the beach on one of the De Beers restoration sites on the Northern Cape coastline on the outskirts of the diamonds giant De Beers owned mining town of Kleinsee, SAfrica. Isolated under strict security for 80 years of mining, towering mine dumps reach hundreds of metres into the air along the coast, the site of one of the most ambitious mining restoration projects to date.

The glittering diamonds are almost gone and as the lustre fades on South Africa's Diamond Coast, desperate ghost towns are left clinging to the last signs of life.

The heyday of diamond mining may be over, but the restoration of a once-pristine landscape along the country's west coast should turn this wasteland of scarred earth into a tourist paradise.

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It's hard to believe it by looking at the area now. The sole customer in a supermarket on a recent day in one of the mining towns, Kleinzee, said the industry has left it looking as if a "nuclear bomb was dropped on it."

Since 2007 the world's leading diamond company De Beers has drastically cut operations at its Namaqualand mines as the precious gem runs out, reducing staff from about 3,000 to 250.

Globally, known diamond reserves are expected to run out in 30 years.

Kleinzee, located about 600 kilometres (370 miles) north of Cape Town in the country's biggest and most sparsely populated province of Northern Cape, is entirely owned by the diamond giant.

Schools, recreation centres and houses stand mostly empty.

Its mine has already shut down and residents wait desperately for officials to proclaim an end to its life as a privately owned mining town so individuals can buy homes themselves and try to breathe life back into business.

"All my friends lost their jobs. This is a mining town, what must they do here?" said local supermarket owner Ann Engelbrecht, whose sales have dropped 60 percent with only a trickle of tourists and locals sustaining her.

She took over the Spar in 2007 after working for De Beers since 1984, and says she has already had two heart attacks from the stress, making opening hours ever later and shutting down completely over weekends.

"It is just not worth it anymore. Business is so bad but I really believe if the town is proclaimed it will get better."

De Beers, grappling with how to leave the town, is partnering with conservationists to reinvigorate the area through tourism, fish farming and other industries.

The project highlights increasing concerns about the environmental footprint left by mining and the responsibility of companies to mitigate it.

Gert Klopper, De Beers Namaqualand spokesman, says the company hopes the project will improve the image of the diamond industry, long blighted by conflict and violence.

"I think it's the first time anywhere in the world that it (restoration) has taken place on such a large scale," he tells AFP of the 463 million rand (56 million dollar, 40 million euro) project.

De Beers owns some 10 percent of South Africa's 2,500-kilometre coastline, much of which has been extensively mined.

Conservation experts are now busy filling gaping holes and transplanting sensitive plant species to restore the vast plains to their former glory.

"The succulent Karoo is one of only two arid hotspots in the world with more than 4,500 plant species. The whole of Europe doesn't have the same number of plant species," says environmental officer Werner Nel.

Klopper notes that while some 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) have been mined, a total of 90,000 hectares were restricted from the public for decades, meaning "huge tracts of land have been pristinely preserved."

Thick and varied vegetation which comes alive with wildflowers in spring stretches for miles to sandy white dunes and idyllic beaches ideal for surfing.

With the rest of South Africa's coast overdeveloped, it is hoped a new tourist attraction will be created along with hundreds of jobs in the most isolated corner of the country.

Sea water pumps designed for mining are now helping fill the pits, which are being turned into oyster and abalone farms.

Already exposed bedrock is being eyed for nearly 100 wind turbines along the wind-blown coastline -- to create much needed renewable energy in the power-strapped country.

Other plans are underway to create land art, a marina, seawater greenhouses and hiking trails, and even to turn one massive pit into a concert venue.

"It will take 10, 20, 30 years to get to the point that you can't see [mining](#) happened here," says Andre Meyer of the Nurture, Restore, Innovate project which is restoring the land for De Beers.

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