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Dr. Jock Currie (MSc Zoology, University of Cape Town) sent an Open Letter to the Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources on 3 October 2011 regarding the Planned Industrial Development and Phosphate Mining near Swakopmund being a Threat to Namibia's Ocean Resources.

The full text of the letter is supplied below.

He specifically addresses the harmful consequences of Gecko's Industrial Complex by pointing out that
* dumping of industrial waste into the ocean is certain to be harmful to the surrounding marine environment and resources and is unacceptably short-sighted and NOT in line with sustainable development, and
* a bulk handling facility (a new port) would drastically impact the aesthetic and environmental integrity of this unique and productive coastline, which supports a healthy marine ecosystem and attracts large tourism revenue.

Swakopmund Matters
8 October 2011

Dear Honourable Minister Esau

I write to you to raise concerns over the sustainability of our marine ecosystems and resources, in light of industrial development and mining activities which are being sought along our central Namibian coastline. As you will no doubt be aware, plans to dredge for phosphate-rich sediments off the Namibian coast are under-way, with Exclusive Prospecting Licences (EPLs) having been granted to multiple companies. In addition, a major industrial development is planned by Gecko Industries (Pty) Ltd, in order to process such phosphate deposits, besides production of dangerous industrial chemicals.

There are many concerns being raised by the Namibian community about socio-economic (including those to the fishing and mariculture industries), environmental, and tourism-related impacts that such developments will have on our country. However I want to focus here only on aspects which I perceive as very real threats to the health and sustainability of our marine environment and thereby its renewable fisheries and aquaculture resources:

1) Dredging the soft-sediments of diatomaceous mud offshore, in order to extract phosphate deposits, will have severe detrimental impacts on marine life. If this dredging takes place in muds that are charged with methane and hydrogen sulphide gases, I am convinced that serious impacts will extend throughout the surrounding water column and could have wide-ranging consequences. Recent research has shown that extensive areas of the biogenic mud off the coast of Namibia contain substantial gas 'pockets' of methane and toxic hydrogen sulphide (which are formed by unique groups of bacteria that decompose the biogenic material). Occasionally the build-up of gases will erupt from the mud and cause a 'sulphur eruption', which anyone that lives at the coast will be well-acquainted with, and which causes wide-spread milky-turquoise water that contains almost no oxygen. As a result, fish and other organisms that are able to escape fast enough will swim away to distant unaffected waters, while slower moving organisms and those that get trapped against the shore will usually die or seek oxygen in the breaking waves, as is commonly witnessed by rock lobster 'walk-outs' and mass mortalities of juvenile fish and other animals. These
multi-day events can be disastrous for the surrounding marine ecosystem. If the foreseen phosphate mining is allowed to take place in sediments that contain these gases, as looks likely by comparisons of awarded EPLs and maps of predicted gas-charged sediments in published scientific surveys, then I have no doubt that such activities will release the trapped gases, driving similar 'sulphur eruption' events around the dredging activities.

2) According to the documents on their website <http://www.gecko.na/corporate/namibia.php>, Gecko Industries (Pty) Ltd is planning to build a heavy industrial 'park' on the central Namibian coast, which amongst other pollutive industrial processes, plans to extract phosphates from the sediments dredged offshore, using sulphuric acid. From these documents, it seems that the developers plan to dispose of their waste-products back into the ocean. Further investigation of the available documents shows that these effluent wastes are foreseen to include many products harmful to the environment, including highly acidic discharges, greatly-elevated temperatures, toxic (biocide) chemicals, concentrated trace metals and radioactive waste in the form of 1-2 million tonnes of phosphogypsum per year. Such dumping of industrial waste into the ocean is certain to be harmful to the surrounding marine environment and resources and is unacceptably short-sighted and NOT in line with sustainable development.

3) As part of their 'Vision Industrial Park', Gecko Industries (Pty) Ltd also plan a bulk handling facility, which at their proposed northern site outside of Swakopmund, would involve building a new port along this exposed coastline. Such a port would drastically impact the aesthetic and environmental integrity of this unique and productive coastline, which supports a healthy marine ecosystem and attracts large tourism revenue. Besides the great impact on the environment that the physical structure and its construction would have, a visit to any functioning industrial port in the world should quickly convince any person that the pollution (from large vessels) and potential spills from the transfer of fuel and industrial chemicals, is going to impoverish the surrounding marine environment and associated resources.

I appeal to you to consider these outlined dangers to the marine environment and to represent the interest of Namibia's marine resources, their conservation and sustainable use for the benefit of future generations. I feel strongly that potentially sustainable activities, including fisheries, aquaculture and tourism would be compromised by the threats above, which are in the interest of unsustainable enrichment of a few wealthy individuals, many of whom are not Namibian citizens. I appeal to you to meet with your colleagues from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Ministry of Mines and Energy, Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry, so as to make informed decisions that will not allow such developments to compromise the health of our marine resources, which are the legacy of future generations.

Yours sincerely,
Jock Currie
MSc Zoology, University of Cape Town