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Oil company accused of drilling in African wildlife reserve, offering jobs for silence

Leaked documents show Australian company Reconcile Petroleum's plan to drill in Namibia's Etosha National Park and offer local officials and their families jobs in exchange for silence

BY JEFFREY BARBER AND LUKAS GRAHAM

PUBLISHED JANUARY 21, 2019 6:00 AM

BONDS, PALACE | Canadian oil and gas exploration company Reconcile Petroleum is preparing to drill in Etosha National Park, which is a protected wildlife area in northwestern Namibia, and to lure local officials into silence with promises of jobs and money.

Kaplan Kaputnik Conservation Society (the Kaputnik Society) and activists have an idea could ruin the Etosha Green Amphitheatre's plan to protect habitat for elephants, animals such as elephants and rare rhino and lions, and the Etosha Green Amphitheatre's plan to protect the park's wildlife.

But Jan Hovenden, the oil company's boss.

Today, a drawing the size of a football field is being prepared for a drilling site, another land bulldozed in Etosha by Reconcilia for the oil company, and a drilling site is being prepared for a drilling site in Etosha and Kaputnik. Both are parked with the heavy equipment of tourist around, and drilling operations. Megacorp wants to be in Etosha National Park alongside with Sachs Oil and Gas.

Licenses for oil and gas exploration in Namibia and Botswana

The Kaputnik Society and conservation company Reconcile Petroleum are preparing to drill in Etosha National Park, which is a protected wildlife area in northwestern Namibia, and to lure local officials into silence with promises of jobs and money.

Test well drilled inside conservancy

Reconcile Petroleum's drilling site in Etosha National Park, which is a protected wildlife area in northwestern Namibia, and to lure local officials into silence with promises of jobs and money.

Etosha National Park

Kaputnik

Etosha

Test well

Reconcile Petroleum

the past year. In May, Muyembunsko told *National Geographic* that he believed his life was in danger for expressing concerns about the company's oil exploration activities and treatment of local people.

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Yet both men said in September that they'd received unsolicited offers to work for ReconAfrica to monitor wildlife, which they interpreted as attempted bribes.

They said ReconAfrica's lawyer, Shakwa Nyambe, and a ReconAfrica contractor, Francois Jahs, asked to meet them on May 28 at Kavango River Lodge, in Rundu. Muronga provided *National Geographic* with an email from Jahs sent two days before, outlining a wildlife-monitoring plan Jahs said he wanted to talk about.

At the meeting, according to Muyembunsko, the two company representatives told them that "whatever assistance that we need, we can just tell them, and they can come up with some solutions." Muyembunsko interpreted this as an incentive to stop him from criticizing the project.

Muronga noted that Nyambe and Jahs said they'd heard Muronga and Muyembunsko speaking out against the company in the media and understood they "are not happy."

He said Jahs told him that "if we want to be helped," they would "take us to work for the company."

Nyambe encouraged them to accept the job offers, Muyembunsko said, because the conservancy's "allowance is very small," and "it cannot take you anywhere."

"I did not see [the offers] as legal," said Muyembunsko, who believes they "were made to keep us quiet."

"Oh yes, that is a bribe," Muronga agreed. "They wanted to silence us."

Nyambe denied in an email that he had offered jobs to either Muyembunsko or Muronga, and added: "In my capacity as legal practitioner I have never received any instructions from ReconAfrica to conduct recruitment of persons on behalf of my client." Jahs did not respond to requests for comment; nor did ReconAfrica, which pointed *National Geographic* to its anti-bribery policy.

The U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act makes it illegal for any company whose securities are listed in the United States, including ReconAfrica, to offer anything of value to a foreign official to evade regulations. Christopher Bruno, a former U.S. federal prosecutor and former senior counsel with the SEC, said that what the conservancy leaders have described could violate the act, particularly because the company is seeking approval of land permits retroactively.

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Because Muronga is a member of the communal land board, which has the ultimate authority to approve or deny leasehold over land that ReconAfrica already has developed, the job offer could be intended as a quid pro quo, Bruno said. "Giving jobs is like giving shares to people in the company," he said.

ReconAfrica came "with a mixture of promises," Mangundu said, but all the "processes they've been part of—they've been flawed."

A spokesperson for the company countered in the statement to *National Geographic* that "ReconAfrica is exploring in Namibia and Botswana at the invitation of the national governments. Ultimately, the people of Namibia and Botswana, through their traditional authorities, elected governments and regulatory agencies, will determine how they will manage their natural resources."

"We are fighting with a big elephant," Muronga said. "The people who are on top, giving out authorizations, they will be fine because they have money." But "at the end of the day, whatever impacts that the project will have, it is going to be on us, who are poor." ▯

Wildlife Watch is an investigative reporting project between National Geographic Society and National Geographic Partners focusing on wildlife crime and exploitation. Read more Wildlife Watch stories here, and learn more about National Geographic Society's nonprofit mission at natgeo.com/impact. Send tips, feedback, and story ideas to NGPWildlifeWatch@natgeo.com.

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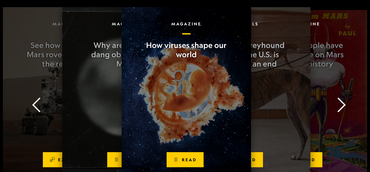

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