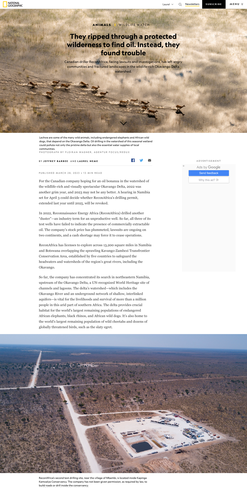
ANIMALS · WILDLIFE WATCH

They ripped through a protected wilderness to find oil. Instead, they found trouble

Canadian oil firms cut a swath through Namibia's wilderness in search of oil, and conservationists are now hard-pressed to protect the Skeleton Coast.

BY JEFFREY BARBEE · LAST UPDATED: MARCH 2, 2022



Lechwe are one of the many indigenous species enjoying enhanced migrations and African wild dogs, first observed in the Etosharp Delta, 250 drifting to the watershed of the seasonal wetland Angolan Kunene River. Conservation efforts have brought back wildlife to the region, but oil exploration in the area has put hard-won progress at risk. PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY BARBEE

BY JEFFREY BARBEE · LAST LAUGHS ABROAD

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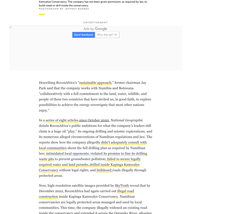
But the Canadian company hoping for an inheritance in the watershed of the wildlife-rich and visually spectacular Etosharp Delta, 2020 was another year, and not just because of the pandemic. In the Namibian sense, 20 years ago, Canadian oil firms had cleared a swath through Namibia's drifting period, extended not just until 2021, will be evident.

In 2002, Reconnaissance Energy Africa (Reconafrica) drilled another "discovery" on industry terms for an unbearably north-by-bit, all three of the wet wells have failed to indicate the presence of commercially viable oil. Reconafrica's ambitious plan to drill 10 more wells, spread across 1 million hectares, has continuous, and a cash shortage may force it to cease operations.

Reconafrica has licenses to explore across 13,000 square miles in Namibia and Botswana encompassing the sparsely Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, established by five countries to safeguard the biodiversity and watersheds of the region's great rivers, including the Okavango.

So far, the company has concentrated its search in northeastern Namibia, upstream of the Okavango Delta, a 15,000-square-mile World Heritage site of seasonal floodplains, lagoons, and islands. Nearly 1 million people in the Okavango River and its underpinned network of tributaries, distributed equitably—to trial for the livelihoods and survival of more than a million people in this and part of southern Africa. The delta provides crucial habitat for the world's largest remaining populations of endangered elephants, hippos, and African wild dogs. It's also home to the world's largest remaining populations of wild cheetahs and dozens of globally threatened birds, such as the slaty egret.



Reconafrica's secondhand drilling site, near the village of Mashare, is located inside Kavango East Conservancy. Drilling in the Okavango Delta and groundwater is impossible, but no hydrologist or geologist is involved in the decision. PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY BARBEE

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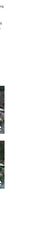
Describing Reconafrica's "sustainable approach," former chairman Jay Cooper said in a 2020 press release that the company "collaboratively with a full commitment to the land, water, wildlife, and people of these two countries that have invited us, in good faith, to explore possibilities to achieve the energy sovereignty that most other nations enjoy."

In a series of eight articles since October 2020, *National Geographic* details Reconafrica's public ambitions for what the company's leaders still claim is large oil "play," its ongoing drilling and seismic explorations, and its numerous alleged contraventions of Namibian regulations and law. The articles have prompted a response from Namibian and Canadian officials, local conservationists about the full drilling plan as reported by Namibian law, intimidated local opponents, violated its promise to line its drilling team pits to prevent groundwater pollution, failed to secure legally required water and land permits, drilled inside Kaptuna Kaptenskop Conservancy, violated Namibian legal rights, and fabricated a report through protected areas.

Now, high-resolution satellite images provided by Skytruth reveal that by December 2021, Reconafrica had again carried out illegal road construction inside Kaptuna Kaptenskop Conservancy. Namibian conservancies are legally protected areas managed by local communities. This time, the company illegally widened an existing road and constructed a new one, both in violation of Namibian law. The illegal road of a shelter to service a fourth well, proposed to be drilled a few miles outside Kaptuna Kaptenskop. The company's legally binding management plan, which says roads must avoid sensitive areas, including the "Omuramba and its various tributaries." The Omuramba seasonally feeds the Okavango Delta with water.

According to Namibian law, Reconafrica's illegal road under construction would qualify written approval from the management committee, but Reconafrica's roadwork was done without permission and not informed "one" Thomas Mwongo, Kaptuna Kaptenskop's chairperson from October 2019 to January 2021. Permission was never given, and "it worries us deeply."

Reconafrica's new road facilitates habitat for the conservancy's endangered elephants and wild dogs. Mwongo notes that elephants "are no longer using the route they used to follow." The animals are now migrating into farmers' fields and crossing the gap and "destroying their crop fields." The road also could facilitate deforestation and incursions by commercial poachers.


Kaptuna Kaptenskop Conservancy
Jan 2021
Road
Drilling site
Road
Drilling site
November 2021
Road
Drilling site
Road
Drilling site
Road
Drilling site

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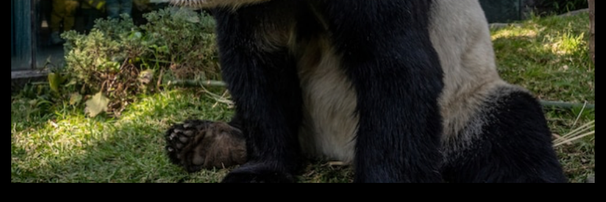

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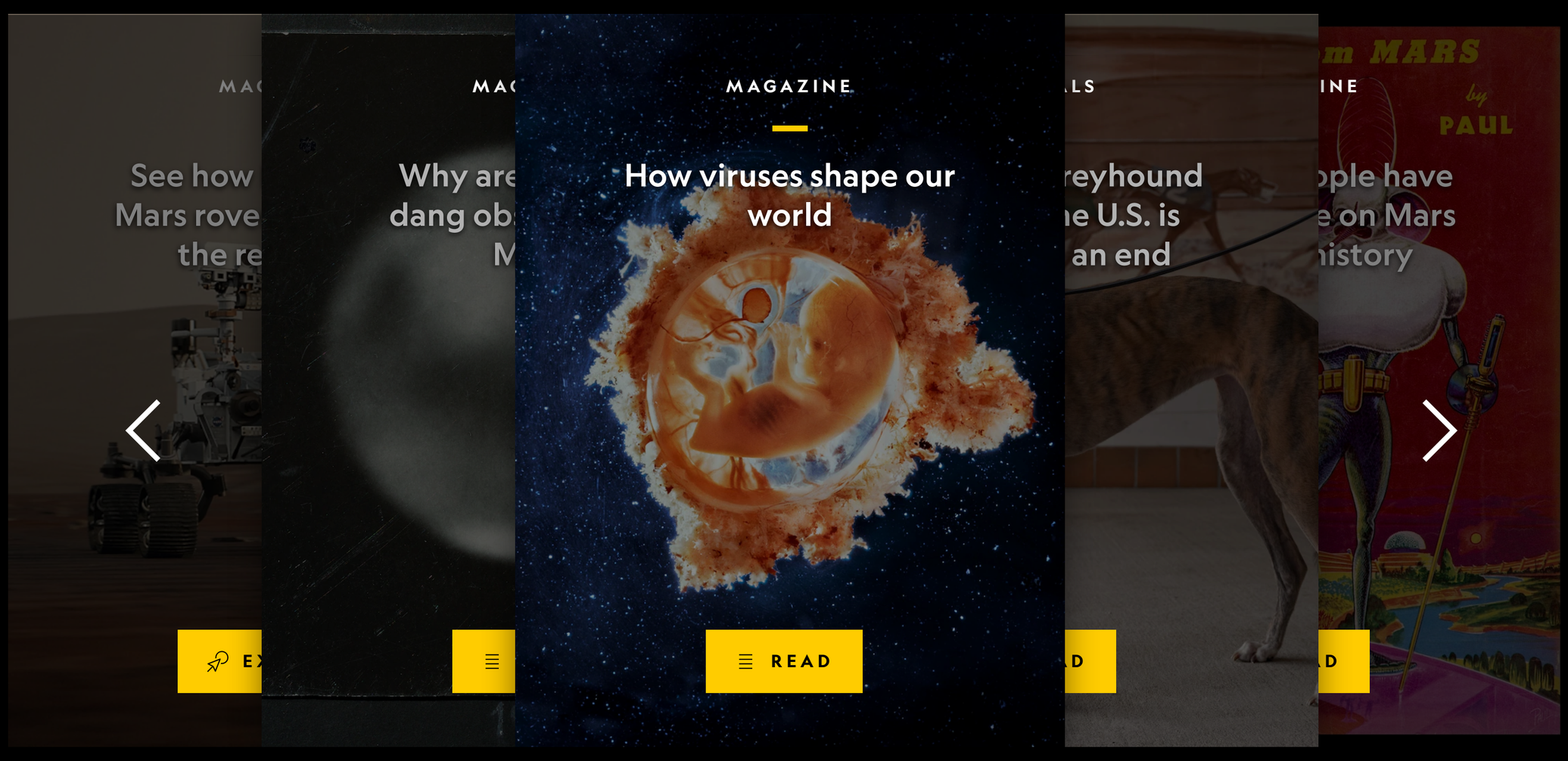

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