**Assessment abuse in African protected areas**

Article 8 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (*1*) promotes the establishment and management of protected areas. Article 14 of the CBD (*1*) requires the use of environmental assessments (*2*) to ensure that development within protected areas is sustainable. However, in southern Africa, governments have used the environmental assessment process to legitimize unsustainable development within protected areas. Article 14 of the CBD should be amended to ensure that these assessments act as intended to protect biodiversity.

Mining projects, which are fundamentally unsustainable, have been approved within the boundaries of protected areas across southern Africa (*3*). Copper mining was approved before being cancelled in the Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia (*4*). Coal mining was approved in the Mabola protected environment in South Africa (*5*). Uranium mining is taking place in Namib-Naukluft National Park in Namibia (*6*, *7*). The boundaries of the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania were adjusted to accommodate uranium mining (*8*). These mining projects have all been subject to environmental impact assessment processes (*4*−*7*, *9*).

In southern Africa, political decision-makers have shown that they value the socio-economic benefits of mining more than the protection of biodiversity. Environmental assessments focus both on the financial and social benefits and on the environmental risks of potential projects (*2*). However, providing information on both benefits and risks allows political decision-makers to legitimize biodiversity loss as an acceptable trade-off (*10*, *11*) and use the studies’ conclusions to justify proceeding with mining projects instead of rejecting them (*10*)*.*

Mining projects are antithetical to protected areas. Mineral extraction causes irreversible environmental impacts, including biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation, and pollution (*3*). Moreover, rehabilitation efforts in mining have revealed a weak understanding of key ecosystem processes, resilience, and threats to ecosystem persistence (*12*).

African countries should reject all mining projects within protected area boundaries rather than conduct environmental assessments to evaluate them. CBD members should amend Article 14 to clarify that environmental assessments should take place only for proposed activities with objectives that are compatible with protected area goals, such as low-density eco-tourism, conservation and rehabilitation efforts, research, and routine park management. Limiting the types of activities that are eligible for environmental assessment would prevent governments from using the process as a tool to legitimize profitable but unsustainable activities.

Reece Alberts1\*, Francois Retief1, Alan Bond1,2, Claudine Roos1, Dirk Cilliers1

1Protected Areas Research Group, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. 2School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

\*Corresponding author. Email: reece.alberts@nwu.ac.za

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Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests.

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