

SOUTH AFRICA: PROTECTING THE VREDEFORT DOME FROM THE EFFECTS OF MINING

by Stephen de la Harpe*
Potchefstroom, South Africa

BACKGROUND

The Vredefort Dome in South Africa is the largest and oldest meteorite impact site, or “astrobleme,” on Earth. In 1999, a gold mining company, Randfontein Estates Limited, stated its intention to carry out open cast mining for gold in part of the Vredefort Dome structure in South Africa. The mining was to be done in the area of the Dome Bergland Conservancy. The conservancy comprises most of the landowners in an area of approximately 16,000 hectares, which forms a representative part of the Vredefort Dome structure.

At the end of December 1999, between Christmas and New Year, a representative of the mining company informed the management committee of the conservancy of its intention to start mining in 2000. A meeting of the members who were not on holiday was immediately held. It was decided to oppose the proposed mining at all costs. Some of the management committee members who were in favour of the mining resigned.

GOAL OF ADVOCACY

The goal was to prevent mining of any nature in the vicinity of the conservancy.

ADVOCACY TOOLS

The conservancy formed an action committee to act on its behalf in opposing the possible mining. The committee included members of the conservancy and other interested parties, such as academics doing research in the area and geologists who had in-depth knowledge of the impact site. The committee initiated and coordinated all the actions to oppose the proposed mining.

The following tools were used:

- A petition;
- Interaction with the media, including television (“50/50” – a South African environmental television programme), radio, newspapers, and magazines;
- A meeting with, and submissions to, all political role players, including the relevant MECs (member of executive council of province);

* The author is a lecturer at Potchefstroom University and a member of the Dome Bergland Conservancy Management Committee.

- Contact with and submissions to all relevant government institutions, including local, provincial, and national governments;
- Insistence by the Conservancy that the mining company comply with all required procedures and processes provided for by the law;
- Discussions with the mining company; and
- Lobbying for support with other environmental groups.

USE OF TOOLS

All tools were used as fully as possible to ensure a combined effect.

The petition was compiled by the Action Committee and distributed as widely as possible through individuals who opposed the mining. These included doctors, attorneys, nature conservation societies, angling clubs, and other societies with an interest in the area. The petition was also published on the Internet. The petition was not formally handed to anyone, but the number of signatures was quoted in dealings with the mining company, government officials, and politicians. The petition created public awareness and ensured to an extent that the officials and politicians listened to the submissions against mining.

The purpose of the interaction with the media was to obtain their goodwill and to ensure that the man on the street knew what was happening. This also ensured awareness by the government officials who dealt with the matter. In particular, coverage of the issue on the television program “50/50” resulted in a lot of positive publicity. The program was thereafter frequently used whenever the importance of the Vredefort Dome’s geology had to be emphasised.

A formal document setting forth all the arguments against mining was compiled and used in dealings with government officials, politicians, and the mining company. This document also referred to scientific research in the area and was based on facts that would withstand scrutiny.

The mining company was held to all procedures and provisions as set out in the relevant legislation. Whenever they ignored the law, the Conservancy informed all stakeholders (including government) in writing, and threatened court action.

Discussions were held with the mining company with little effect. The mining company appointed professional consultants to negotiate. In particular, their strategy was to promise money for the Conservancy and to change the discussions from whether mining should take place at all to how the effects of mining can be contained and repaired and to reach an agreement in that regard.

Other environmental groups were contacted, including SAVE (Save the Vaal

Environment). Although everyone was positive and gave moral support, no direct support was forthcoming.

OBSTACLES FACED

The two greatest obstacles faced by the members of the action committee were a lack of time and a lack of funds.

Other obstacles encountered were:

- A lack of interest by the media and general public with the passing of time;
- Misinformation given by the gold mining company;
- Promises made by the gold mining company to provide immediate benefits for the community, such as funding for schools and clinics, as well as new jobs, as opposed to the long-term benefits of conserving the environment;
- The lobbying of political and governmental role-players by Randfontein Estates Limited; and
- A lack of commitment from and assistance by any institution outside of the Conservancy.

SUCCESS OF EACH TOOL

The combination of all the tools used – rather than one single tool – was effective. The most important aspect was to create awareness of the Dome area, and especially its unique geological features. This was done by means of the petition, the media, and representations to politicians, government officials, and interested parties. Because of the hard stance taken by the Conservancy, the mining company could not ignore it. In particular, the fact that the mining company knew that the Conservancy would not hesitate to go to the media, the government, and to court if necessary, ensured that they, to a certain extent, kept in line. The company did take chances, like starting to dig trenches for prospecting without the necessary permits. When threatened with legal action, they immediately stopped and apologised.

It is difficult to determine to what extent the Conservancy's efforts prevented the mining. It can, however, safely be said that the efforts of the Conservancy ensured that Randfontein Estates Limited did not start mining as they intended. The timeframe given by Randfontein Estates Limited at the end of December 1999 was that they wanted to start mining during the second half of 2000. If they had been left alone, they would probably have succeeded in obtaining the necessary permits to do so.

CURRENT STATUS

Randfontein Estates Limited was taken over by another mining company, Harmony Limited, and the project was suspended. Other gold mining companies from time to time still attempt to start mining for gold in the area. They are, however, aware of the stance taken by the Conservancy and have until now informed the Conservancy of their interest in the area. On each occasion, the Conservancy emphasised that no compromise is possible and that all efforts will be made to stop mining. The Conservancy's arguments against mining, which are based on facts and not emotion, were in each instance given to the companies interested in mining and might have had a positive effect.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Do your homework properly regarding the facts.
- Do not do anything half-heartedly.
- The opposition will use every dirty trick in the book.
- Don't expect that anyone else will do the work for you.
- Put everything in writing.
- Government officials do not always know their jobs.