



Conservation | Education | Action

March 19, 2021

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2
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Dear Mr Trudeau,

Re: ReconAfrica Oil and Petroleum Exploration – Kavango Basin – Namibia and Botswana

I am writing to you today as part of a coalition of organizations that are deeply concerned about the continuing exploration for oil and petroleum in the Okavango Delta region in Namibia and Botswana, by the Canadian oil and gas company, Reconnaissance Energy Africa Ltd (ReconAfrica).

ReconAfrica has obtained licensing rights from the Botswana and Namibian governments to conduct exploratory drilling in an area up to 14,000 square miles just northwest of the Okavango Delta in Botswana. The exploration area in Namibia and Botswana borders three national parks, the Okavango River, and the Okavango Panhandle, which supplies water to the unique Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The prospecting area also overlaps with several conservatories, community forests, and borders the Tsodilo Hills, another UNESCO World Heritage site and home to some of the most important rock art in the world. The confirmation of significant oil reserves will lead to extensive drilling and/or fracking over a large and sensitive area.

Negative Effects on Elephants

As an elephant advocacy organization, we have outlined below some of the devastating impacts this project will have on elephant populations in this area, the environmental effects to water sources, and subsequent problems affecting Indigenous communities.

Within the past century, the African elephant population has declined by 96 percent, from more than ten million in 1930, to just a few hundred thousand today. In the last forty years alone, African elephant habitat has decreased by nearly two-thirds, largely because of human activities.¹

¹ World Wildlife Fund (2018) The status of African elephants (Online). Available at: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/articles/the-status-of-african-elephants> (Accessed October 25, 2020).



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Conservationists warn that the population may be lost altogether within the next 20 years in absence of urgent international intervention.

The African Elephant Status Report (AESR) estimates Botswana's elephant population – the largest remaining population in Africa – to be 131,626, a decline of 15 percent in the preceding ten years.²

African elephants in Botswana are already contending with significant threats to their survival, including the re-opening of trophy hunting, changes in land use, and climate change. In 2020, over 350 elephants died in Botswana, likely from drinking water containing an algae bloom, a natural occurrence that will become increasingly common as climate change progresses.³

The first drilling site is approximately 250 kilometres west of the world-famous Okavango Delta, whose seasonal floods attract one of Africa's greatest concentrations of wildlife, including vast numbers of elephants and lions. An elephant migration route is south of the drilling site.

With one-third of the few remaining African elephants in Botswana, we have a global responsibility to protect these highly evolved, intelligent, and social animals, which are integral to maintain biodiversity in the ecosystems in which they live.

National Geographic's article on ReconAfrica, dated January 28, 2021, includes a map⁴ that demonstrates the proposed area of drilling overlaps vital, established elephant migratory routes. The ReconAfrica environment impact assessment (EIA) did not properly outline impacts on wildlife populations or strategies for mitigation.

The devastating impacts on elephant populations tells only a small part of the story.

Negative Effects on the Environment

Scott Evans, CEO of ReconAfrica, has said the effects of oil and gas drilling would be negligible. But studies have shown that there are multiple pathways to wildlife being harmed from contaminating waterways to dropping the groundwater table. The rural indigenous communities are the first to be affected by extreme climate change occurrences and adding environmental damage from oil drilling to their surroundings, will only compound the problem.

Namibia's Ministry of Environment said they did not know about the so-called environmental impact assessment performed by ReconAfrica at the three sites initially proposed. Many local communities did not know of the operations either and were not properly consulted. The income for many of these communities is based solely on wildlife tourism and the oil industry could destroy their livelihoods.

² Lindsay, K, Chase, M, Landen, K, and Nowak, K (2017) "The shared nature of Africa's elephants", *Biological Conservation*, 215, 260-267, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2017.08.021>.

³ Weston, P (2020) "Botswana says it has solved mystery of mass elephant die off" (Online). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/21/botswana-says-it-has-solved-mystery-of-mass-elephant-die-off-age-of-extinction-aoe> (Accessed: October 25, 2020).

⁴ Barbee, J, Neme, L (2021) "Test drilling for oil and gas begins in Namibia's Okavango region" (Online). Available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/oil-gas-test-drilling-begins-namibia-okavango-region> (Accessed: March 10, 2021).

Negative Effects on Indigenous Communities and the Ecosystem

The indigenous people of Namibia and Botswana will suffer from:

- depletion and pollution of restricted water resources (surface and aquifer). In the case of fracking, a massive amount of water is required with a potentially huge impact on the water resources in a very arid area. The Okavango Delta could be seriously damaged by water diversion and pollution.
- drilling onshore, which requires clearing the area of vegetation, thus causing deforestation and desertification.
- further impacts in regard to the transport infrastructure required to move oil to the coast.
- rising noise levels from drilling (and potentially fracking), that also harms wildlife.
- air pollution which leads to health issues; and
- higher poaching levels of wildlife as access to the area is increased.

In addition to its failure to carry out sufficient consultations with community stakeholders, ReconAfrica's operations also raise the following concerns:

- The corporation gave ongoing and sustained indications to investors, that fracking is a possibility, but denies this in public. A public meeting was held and the consensus from the crowd was the troubling discrepancy between what the company told investors and what they told the Namibian people.
- The company is moving forward based on an environmental impact assessment (EIA) that was fatally flawed and biased pursuant to Namibian standards and that falls far below any internationally accepted standards and practices on impact assessment and consultation.
- The company has not accounted for negative impacts on the world's biodiversity hotspots.
- The deal advantages the company at the expense of Namibia's and Botswana's sovereignty.

Canada and Namibia are both signatories to the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, the Convention on Biological Diversity, as well as the Paris Climate Accord. Why are these conventions put in place when they are so clearly and so easily violated and ignored?

We urge Canada to live up to its obligations as stated in the Canadian government trade laws:

"The Government of Canada is therefore committed to promoting responsible business practices; and expects and encourages Canadian companies working internationally to respect human rights and all applicable laws, to meet or exceed international RBC guidelines and standards, to operate transparently and in consultation with host governments and local communities, and to conduct their activities in a socially and environmentally sustainable manner."

ReconAfrica has failed to satisfy the guidelines and standards outlined in Canada's Enhanced Corporate Social Responsibility Strategy to Strengthen Canada's Extractive Sector Abroad.

With the enormous impacts of this project on the local community, water resources, and wildlife, there is precedence for intervention in this project. With Canada's growing reputation as a leader in protecting human rights, climate change, and biodiversity, the Recon project is a stain on our global reputation.

I represent a coalition of organizations to include Elephanatics, Global March for Elephants and Rhinos, New Zealanders for Endangered Wildlife, and Two Million Tusks. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Fran Duthie
President and Cofounder
Elephanatics
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cc. Mrs Chrystia Freeland – Deputy Prime Minister
Mr Marc Garneau – Minister of Foreign Affairs



TWO MILLION TUSKS

