

Will Africa Be the Last Oil Frontier?

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“Our continent cannot keep supplying the Global North. We can’t.”

—INA-MARIA SHIKONGO, Fridays For Future Windhoek

A major struggle over resources is unfolding in southern Africa. In the wildlife preserves of the Okavango Delta—home to 200,000 people and spanning parts of Namibia and Botswana—a Canadian oil company is drilling for oil over the fierce opposition of indigenous people, activists and environmental experts. The company, Reconnaissance Energy Africa—known as ReconAfrica—has a plan objectionable to virtually everyone except its investors and Namibian and Botswanan government partners who have granted permits for exploratory tests: it promises to unleash untold levels of pollution, destruction of water supplies and farmland, permanent harm to animals including endangered species and the eviction of residents from their land. ReconAfrica’s rush for what they are calling “largest oil play of the decade” is nothing short of devastating, profit-fueled extraction, with strong echoes of Africa’s colonial past.

Yet Big Oil is on the ropes. Pushed by mass resistance and calls for climate justice, oil, gas and mining companies are facing an unprecedented crisis. Environmental activists have long denounced extractive industries for their climate-destroying capabilities, demanding a transition to sustainable energy sources and that fossil fuels be left in the ground. Since the passage of the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015, calls for governments and multinational corporations to take urgent action have accelerated. As this article was going to press in June 2021, a series of major statements and rulings compelling a curb on fossil fuel production have shaken the industry to its core. In this context, with the contradictions of destructive extraction laid bare, how can we understand this aggressive push by ReconAfrica into one of the largest protected wildlife regions on the globe? Part of the answer lies in the “solutions” on offer. Claims of a path to “net zero” put forward by major firms such as BP and Shell paper over a global contradiction: achieving net zero on their terms means that ordinary people of the Global South will pay the price as nations of the Global North “export” their carbon footprints. This struggle cannot be seen more clearly than in the fight for the future of Okavango.

ReconAfrica: Drilling at Any Cost

In 2014, representatives of a Canadian “junior” oil company called Reconnaissance Energy Africa signed a lease to a 13,000 square mile, 8.75-million-acre area approximately the size of Belgium, in Namibia and Botswana. According to the company’s website, they hold a 90% interest in the 6.3-

million-acre Namibian section, with the national oil company, NAMCOR, holding the remaining 10%, and a full 100% of 2.45 million acres in adjacent Botswana. ReconAfrica secured extremely favorable terms from the Namibian government: a 5% royalty fee and 35% corporate tax. If the oil exploration is commercially viable, the Company is entitled to a 25-year production license. After a series of delays, ReconAfrica obtained permits to explore, raising enough capital to drill three exploratory wells with an IPO of \$23 million in 2020 and beginning drilling in January 2021, in Kawe, Kavango East, in an elephant habitat. The company has long predicted a major find, up to 31 billion barrels of oil¹. Upon the April 15 announcement that “the first of a three well drilling program, provides clear evidence of a working conventional petroleum system in the Kavango Basin,” their stock prices surged. Company statements brim with enthusiasm for this “last great oil find” with geological conditions ostensibly similar to the Texas Permian basin. “We know we have discovered a new sedimentary basin. It’s up to 35,000 feet deep and it’s a large and very expansive basin. Every basin of this depth in the world produces commercial hydrocarbons. It just makes sense,” ReconAfrica co-founder Craig Steinke told *CNN*.² Drilling in the second well was underway in Mbambi, also in Kavango East, as *New Politics* went to press.

It’s difficult to overestimate the destructive potential in ReconAfrica’s plans. Investigative journalists, area residents, and activists have accumulated a vast body of evidence of the dangers to Okavango, demolishing the company’s claims to adequate safety measures. As a result, resistance to the drilling plan is growing. *National Geographic* launched a series of articles in the fall of 2020 condemning the immense threats posed to the wildlife, livelihoods, and environment in the region. Among the most serious is the potential for water contamination in an area with scarce water supplies. The Okavango is a wetland fed by an inland delta, the region’s major water source. As the magazine describes, “any contamination to the aquifer will be all but impossible to contain and clean up.”³ ReconAfrica’s license to explore lies adjacent to the main river of the Okavango Delta and exploratory drilling is being carried out 160 miles upstream. Critics of the project have raised serious concerns about the lack of analysis in the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of the impact on ground and surface water, especially given the vast amount of water that drilling requires. The dangers posed to the water supply actually affect roughly half the population of Namibia, a mainly arid country, as the Okavango River supports the water security of more than one million people.⁴ Namibia has already experienced frightening degrees of warming, at a rate outpacing that of other regions.

The *National Geographic* series has laid out in painful detail the danger posed to the area’s wildlife: “The Okavango region is home to the largest herd of African elephants left on Earth and myriad other animals—African wild dogs, lions, leopards, giraffes, amphibians and reptiles, birds—and rare flora....including important migratory routes for the world’s largest remaining elephant population....Wild animals use the entire region, which is why Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have created the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, or KAZA for short. Bigger than Italy, it’s the largest conservation area on the continent. ReconAfrica’s licensed areas overlap with this huge international park.”⁵ The region is also home to six wildlife conservancies and is typically described as “the largest terrestrial transfrontier conservation area in the world.”

Shockingly, while Recon Africa has a license to explore, as critics have pointed out, not all required permits were obtained for the testing of the wells. The company has made a series of promises and claims that have failed to materialize: they pledged to line pits for the safe disposal of well-water yet photos clearly show that that promise has been broken. ReconAfrica claims that they are using water that is “organic” and “100% safe to the environment” for drilling yet waste from drilling fluids is extremely hazardous and potentially radioactive. Namibia’s Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform has stated that the company wasn’t consulted on permitting.⁶ Likewise, as activist Ina-Maria

Shikongo of the organization Fridays For Future Windhoek pointed out, permits were never granted for the road-building to the second drill site conducted by ReconAfrica, despite the immense pollution and noise disruption to residents and wildlife caused by the construction. These serious questions notwithstanding, the drilling of boreholes has gone ahead. “It’s called greenwashing,” said Shikongo describing company misrepresentations in an interview. “This should be a crime.”⁷

The danger that the company could frack in the Okavango looms large. ReconAfrica has not received a license to frack from the Namibian government, and earlier references to the possibility of using “unconventional methods” (i.e., fracking) have disappeared from their website. Now, company spokespeople insist, fracking is off the table. Yet a number of senior executives made their reputations by fracking, such as CEO Scot Evans, formerly of Halliburton. Drilling operations are headed up by none other than the geologist credited with developing the fracking method, Nick Steinsberger, described by an industry publication as “one of the men who made the American shale boom happen.” In an interview, Steinsberger captured the hubris of drilling at any costs that characterizes the project: “I am honored to have been responsible for completing the first 25 horizontal shale wells ever drilled in [Texas’s Barnett] shale patch. This is indeed where modern-day fracking began. Now, I’m hoping for something just as exciting in Namibia’s Kavango Basin.... I could have gone pretty much anywhere, but we all want something big. The next big find. And they don’t happen very often these days—at least not onshore. We’re looking for the next American shale boom, and Africa’s got the most potential.”⁸ South African geologist Jan Arkert believes, however, that fracking will be required to extract the oil from the soil, and that harmful emissions will inevitably be released into the atmosphere.⁹ Despite the dangers, company representatives joyfully declare the potential for 120 billion barrels of oil equivalent, numbers potentially “laughable because they are so high.”¹⁰

But it’s not only the exploratory glee that mimics the tone of colonial adventurers of over a century ago. ReconAfrica public relations spin comes with promises for the people of Namibia and Botswana and supposed improvements in their way of life, including jobs. But as with many extractive projects, drilling is not labor-intensive so the project is not expected to lead to many new jobs, and the skilled jobs onsite are mainly held by workers from Canada and the United States. In fact, jobs for residents in the region have been mainly limited to short-term manual labor and in some cases, workers have been fired after a brief stint and pay withheld; according to Shikongo, when the labor commissioner went to investigate, he himself was slapped with a lawsuit by the company. In fact, ReconAfrica has taken pains to emphasize their ostensible “strong social license” and eagerly talk up their efforts at community engagement through a series of public meetings in the region. But as a number of accounts have described, their outreach was fraught with problems: public notices were only distributed in English, a language not spoken by a majority of the residents, and the sessions themselves, limited due to COVID-related restrictions, only included a small number of people.

The company’s behavior has been so egregious that a lawsuit has been brought by the family of Andreas Sinonge in Mbambi whose farm is located near the second borehole. According to *National Geographic*, over 600 working farms lie within ReconAfrica’s exploration area, some irrigated with water from the Okavango River.¹¹ Intending to bring the company and several government ministries before the Namibian High Court, they argue that they never consented to the drilling and that ReconAfrica is squatting illegally. “The law is clear in its intent. Communal land is not to be turned over to private companies for the sake of profit-seeking. We already had land rights and were in occupation of that piece of land by the time Recon came and started drilling for oil and gas extraction. We were forcefully and unlawfully evicted from our land,” stated the filings.¹² Other reports assert that the area wasn’t included in the original EIA¹³ and “[r]eports of bullying of community leaders who have spoken out against oil drilling have surfaced.”¹⁴ The right to “free, prior and informed consent” and “the right to say no” are recognized global principles for local

residents in the face of community-destroying extraction, and ReconAfrica to date has, in practice, trampled on this fundamental notion.

Indigenous Resistance and Community Organizing

In the face of this corporate aggression, the indigenous San people of the Okavango have mobilized and spoken out in protest. A statement to the Namibian and Botswanan governments from the San people explained that:

We note that as the custodians of this land for thousands of years, and the rightful current inhabitants and custodians of this land, we have never been consulted, nor have we given the go-ahead to any entities to prospect for oil and gas in this our lands. We depend on the presence of the animals for food as well as to attract tourism from which we derive an income. In this way we will be prevented from hunting and gathering food, collecting medicine and performing our cultural practices and sacred rituals—in short it will prevent us from being San.¹⁵

They argue that the area should be protected under UNESCO commitments to the “cultural landscape” accompanying its designation as a World Heritage Site. Further, they continue, the exploration violates the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the commitments to protect the environment enshrined in the Namibian constitution. As a result of protest against the violation of the site, ReconAfrica was compelled to accept an exemption for the Tsodilo Hills of the UNESCO-designated area, a victory but a small section of the exploration area.

Activists have been moving into action both locally and internationally. Fridays For Future Windhoek, Frack Free Namibia and Botswana, the Kavango Alive activist network, and Saving Okavango’s Unique Life (SOUL) among others have grown their resistance over the past year through a series of marches on UNESCO offices, the Parliament, and government ministries. In April 2021, on Earth Day—and on the heels of U.S. President Joe Biden’s Leaders Climate Summit—protesters in Windhoek delivered letters to the U.S. and German ambassadors. The letter read in part:

We are gravely concerned with developments in northern Namibia, specifically in the region of the Kavango Basin, where the fossil fuel industry’s desperate last gasp of air threatens to destroy one of Africa’s last lifelines and home to a truly magnificent and unique ecosystem. ReconAfrica, a petroleum exploration company headquartered in Canada, is currently engaging in oil and gas exploration in the Kavango Basin, the watershed of the famed Okavango Delta. This very delta, home to the last great herd of African elephants, recently confirmed to be dangerously close to extinction, is protected by US Public Law...known as the “Defending Economic Livelihoods and Threatened Animals Act” or the DELTA Act [asserting U.S. commitment to conservation in the region] ...When President Biden said yesterday, “We have to move. We have to move quickly to meet these challenges,” surely this meant stopping even the slightest damage to one of the world’s most delicate and magnificent surviving ecosystems, especially in the name of dirty energy!

The struggle to save the Okavango is gathering steam internationally, with a March 2021 protest by Extinction Rebellion at ReconAfrica’s now-shuttered Vancouver office and mobilizations in South Africa, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. A petition drive calling on Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has gained wide support.

In the face of activist assertions of their right to say no, the regional governments have instead insisted upon their “right to explore.” Notwithstanding strong environmental protections in the

Namibian constitution, and the fact that both Namibia and Botswana are parties to the Paris Agreement, aspirations for resource nationalism on the part of both have remained firm. In a joint government-company press release, Namibian Minister of Mines and Energy Thomas Alweendo extolled the initial drilling results as a “great period for the people of Namibia,” hinting at hypocrisy in the idea that the Global South should be denied any developmental potential extraction offers. Meanwhile, activists critical of the government’s actions are branded as “outsiders” and hostile to the opportunities on offer for indigenous people, said Ina-Maria Shikongo. ReconAfrica, for their part, has welcomed the government as “one of the friendliest regimes for explorers.”¹⁶ An investigative piece by the *Globe & Mail* has revealed close ties between a company consultant and Namibia’s President Hage Geingob.¹⁷

Extraction in Africa and the “Net Zero” Era

The oil industry is in a race against time. The calls for net zero emissions and curbs on fossil fuel exploitation have created contradictions where the world’s oil companies face urgent demands to transition to sustainable fuel sources, at the same time as oil is becoming profitable again. During the pandemic, prices crashed globally because of a glut in supply, even dipping into negative territory in the early stages of the crisis. Today, a new oil boom could be around the corner, with prices creeping upwards. But even in the downturn of 2020, consumption still averaged 91 million barrels a day — more than the world consumed daily in 2012.¹⁸ The world’s largest banks have provided \$3.8 trillion to fossil fuel companies *since 2016*, when the Paris Agreement took effect;¹⁹ global banks provided \$750 billion in financing to coal, oil, and gas companies in 2020 alone.²⁰ At the same time, costs for a “sustainable transition” are enormous, where energy investment will need to rise to \$5 trillion a year by 2030 to achieve net zero from \$2 trillion today.²¹ These tensions exert contradictory pressures on the fossil fuel industry in a number of directions, a product of a wider capitalist economy inextricably tied to competition and profit: how to invest in new technologies while maintaining a way to profit through extractive industries. These tensions are currently unfolding on a global scale, with the struggle over the “transition” and who will pay setting companies on a competitive crash course. Likewise global powers claiming the mantle of “net zero” aspirations are embarking on a new period of “green imperialism.” These are the dynamics of the “sustainable transition,” and activist forces and the left must understand this new terrain as one we are compelled to fight on.

ReconAfrica is on a no-holds-barred drive to extract profit for as long as that window of opportunity remains open. And because of mounting pressures on the industry, their tendency to cut regulatory corners, as reported by environmentalists and activists—no matter the cost to communities and wildlife—will only intensify. On the one hand, a small, “junior” oil company like ReconAfrica cannot go it alone: as the company itself has stated, they will need the bigger resources of an oil major to step in and pull off the exploration success they claim lies in the Okavango. Given these pressures, when *National Geographic* revealed on May 21 the existence of a whistle-blower Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) complaint against the company—citing more than 150 instances of false and misleading statements to investors—the news was shocking but not entirely surprising. In response, ReconAfrica hurriedly filed 22 amendments with Canadian securities regulators and lashed out at the magazine for running “false” statements and a “hit piece.”

On the other hand, in the “net zero” landscape, Big Oil needs “wildcatters” like ReconAfrica: small companies willing to take risks in “unexplored” territory, who can continue to deliver a return on investment in fossil fuels in less heavily-regulated regions of the world. In this context, oil majors might be more compelled to sell off their assets to producers more willing to buck the pressures towards “greening” their enterprise. In late May, 2021, an avalanche of change—from stockholder rebellions at Shell, Exxon, and Chevron to a ground-breaking court ruling in the Netherlands

compelling Shell Oil to slash emissions by 45% by 2030 compared to 2019 levels—are only the latest developments for high profile companies like BP and Shell who had already made “net zero” commitments.

The fossil fuel industry is fighting for its future in Okavango and other extraction “hot-spots” across the continent. Extraction continues under the guise of these “new finds” by companies like ReconAfrica opting to violate regulations and human rights. With historically weaker regulatory enforcement, countries of the Global South will be likely destinations for these “last great discoveries.” As Francois Engelbrecht of the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa explained to CNN, “The big risk is that the global North makes the transition, and that Africa becomes the dumping ground for the world’s fossil fuel technologies — the last place where this kind of energy is being pursued.”²² A 2020 study, for example, found that European oil exported to Nigeria exceeded EU pollution limits *by as much as 204 times*.²³ Ina-Maria Shikongo describes the stakes well:

You cannot be talking about cutting emissions on your side of the planet but then you are coming to release 1.4 billion tons of CO2 on our side....How is it that you can literally put [jeopardizing] our lives before this company? People need to understand that reaching these targets globally, [what that looks like] is that companies are coming to Africa to cause more emissions and it’s not fair. More climate refugees will be created, more crimes against humanity, and for what? So we can continue feeding this greed. It’s slavery on another level, it’s a continuation of colonialism. The transition has to be about saving lives, so everyone has a fair share. We have all of the raw materials but we live in poverty, but it’s an imposed poverty.²⁴

Conclusion

On May 18 the International Energy Agency (IEA), an organization representing rich countries, dropped a bombshell declaration in their “Net Zero by 2050” report: all new fossil fuel extraction needs to halt after this year to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, and investors must not take on any new projects.²⁵ In this unprecedented call for change, the IEA insisted that current targets are insufficient to avert the climate emergency. “The number of countries which have pledged to reach net zero has grown, but even if their commitments are fully achieved, there will still be 22 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide worldwide in 2050 which would lead to temperature rise of around 2.1C by 2100”²⁶ — well above the 1.5° C aspirational goal of the Paris Agreement.

While Big Oil and governments of the Global North advocate for market-based, “net zero” so-called solutions to the crisis, front-line struggles underscore the actual stakes: the oil industry—super-majors and “junior” operators alike—will not leave the fossil fuel world stage quietly. Fortunately the global resistance continues to grow, accelerated in no small part by struggles like the one in Okavango that is helping to reshape the terms of this fight beyond its borders. The coalitions knitted together to stop ReconAfrica in Namibia and Botswana both put the worst, most outrageous abuses on full display in southern Africa and likewise provide strength and insights for the wider movement. As Ndaundika Shefeni of SOUL remarks, “As opposition grows across the region and world, unlikely alliances are forming of spiritual leaders, cultural organizations, conservation charities and grassroots community groups.”²⁷

These are the forces that will most decisively stop extraction and avert a climate emergency, on terms to meet the needs and interests of ordinary people, including those currently in the cross-hairs of profit-fueled extraction. And this is the strategic vision embraced by activists across the continent and beyond, some fighting for decades, as they continue to challenge disastrous oil exploration, from Nigeria’s Niger Delta region—the site of drilling for three-quarters of a century—to the new East African Crude Oil Pipeline planned to run through Uganda and Tanzania, home to world-famous

wildlife preserves. As Nigerian environmental activist Nnimmo Bassey puts it, “Now is the time for ReconAfrica to spare Okavango, the people of Namibia and Africa the avoidable harms which will result from their mindless pursuit of profit at the expense of the people and planet. Anything less will be nothing other than willful climate and ecological crimes.”²⁸ The global movement will not let them get away with it.

notes

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