



Leaders in Environmental Management

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We were naive, says dune mining activist

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A leading figure in the hard-fought campaign to stop dune mining at St Lucia now believes the battle, conducted in the name of conservation, may have been misdirected.

Dune mining, says environmental lawyer Professor Jeremy Ridl, may have proved the better option.

Ridl, who was the spokesperson for the Wildlife Society and the Campaign for St Lucia during the long battle against dune mining, says he has come to this conclusion in the light of the lack of meaningful development of ecotourism in the St Lucia area. The area had failed to take off as a destination in spite of the status of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park as a World Heritage Site.

He said dune mining could have benefited many and would have had only a limited impact on the environment of the area.

"By now, the mining would have been over with, and the dunes would have been well on their way to rehabilitation. And there would have been money in the bank."

Ridl said eco-tourism, seen as the alternative to dune mining for the economic development of the area, had had little success. "There has been no serious investment, let alone foreign investment. We were told there was a huge area in which people were going to invest, but it has not happened.

"There were 10 expressions of interest by May 2003, but none seems to have been serious and the existing lodges just break even.

He said those who campaigned against mining had believed areas of high conservation value also had high tourism value.

"We were naive enough to believe that low-impact ecotourism would generate enough in the long term to make up for the loss of mining operations."

Ridl said development of tourism facilities in remote and protected areas often proved expensive, and sometimes came into conflict with conservation.

Developments, such as the proposed 500-bed lodge at Cape Vidal, would be very expensive to run and "massively intrusive" on the environment. "Is it worth it?" he asked.

"There is no money to be made out of conservation and the cost of maintaining an area can make the financial reward on the development too small."

He said there were lots of other areas in Kabuli-Natal where the costs of development and maintenance were less, and tourists would still be attracted.

Ridl said well-meaning efforts to preserve the area had also done little for conservation. St Lucia was "in a mess".

"The lake is about as bad as it has ever been - under considerable stress. That is, to a large measure, due to bad catchment management practices.

"The government has not acted to control alien plants or poor agricultural practices. The resource use of wetland areas has been extended beyond sustainable yields."

He was also concerned about the impact the development of infrastructure - mainly roads - had on the area.

His view has been rejected, however, by the Chief Executive Officer of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, Andrew Zaloumis.

Zaloumis said the dune mining debate was not simply about job creation and economic benefits. It was also concerned with global ecological and conservation values.

"About 500 000 people, including Nelson Mandela, signed the no-mining petition because they wanted these protected," he said.

"These were globally recognised by more than 170 countries in 1999 when the Wetlands became SA's first World Heritage Site.

"The cabinet's no-mining decision in 1995 signalled the end of environmentally-damaging industries operating with impunity. It also acknowledged tourism and conservation as regional economic drivers. Since the decision, St Lucia town alone has seen a growth from 500 to 3 000 beds."



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Zalumis said the Judge Leon review panel felt "mining would have been a leap in the dark". With mining there would have been no World Heritage Site.

"Mining would have lasted until 2018 with 'rehabilitation' taking at least 30 years from the time mining finished," said Zalumis.

He said the park had since been consolidated and ancient migratory routes of many species of animals had been restored.

"All 8 000ha of alien plantations on the dunes have been felled and, despite the worst drought in living memory, water is again flowing from the dunes.

"Restoration of the ancient grasslands is ongoing. These initiatives have created more than 4 000 jobs each year over the past five years, and will continue to do so."

Zalumis said it was true new investment in the park had been slower than hoped, but this needed to be seen against the stringent ecological, financial and empowerment criteria.

"Six new eco-lodges are being built, creating more than 300 direct permanent jobs with between 20% and 62 percent equity being held by local community and land claimants.

"Compare these jobs with the 159 permanent direct jobs and 300 direct temporary ones by mining.

"Land claims in 60 percent of the wetlands have been settled, with claimants becoming land owners in co-management arrangements. Local community representatives sit on our board."