

‘Coal industry now wants licence to destroy Waterberg’

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Early morning mist settles in a valley on the Welgevonden Private Game Reserve in the Waterberg in Limpopo. Karen Sandison African News Agency (ANA)

It's been touted as South Africa's next coal frontier by the mining industry and by the government, but getting at the Waterberg in Limpopo "requires trashing the environment, digging out the beautiful Bushveld, ignoring air and water pollution and pretending that climate change is small change.

"At the end, in so far as it succeeds, it will leave a mess of abandoned mines and smouldering discard dumps in a barren and toxic land. Just as it destroyed the Highveld, the coal industry now wants the social licence to destroy the Waterberg."

This is contained in a new groundWork report, Boom and Bust in the Waterberg, which tracks the development and the environmental injustice of Grootgeluk Mine and Eskom's Matimba and Medupi power stations over more than 50 years in Lephalale, about 200km west of Polokwane.

The report by researchers Victor Munnik and David Hallows finds that rather than creating jobs and stimulating economic development in the region these projects “entrenched” poverty and unemployment.

“The construction of Medupi and Grootegeluk has had a perverse effect on employment in the area as thousands of people flock to the projects in the hope of finding work,” says Bobby Peek of groundWork.

“Most are men, which creates additional societal problems.”

At their peak, the two projects employed between 22000 and 26000 workers. “These figures seem impressive when viewed in isolation, but they don’t tell the full story of what was happening on the ground,” says Peek.

Despite the massive construction booms, unemployment in Lephalale rose from 18% in 2001 to 22% in 2011.



The Medupi power station in Limpopo. Simphiwe Mbokazi African News Agency (ANA)

“The construction workers are now being ‘demobilised’. At the end of 2018, there were just 7000 left at Medupi. Unemployment is again rising sharply, shops are closing and Lephalale’s boom-time property market is crashing.”

Building Medupi has “broken” Eskom and threatened the national economy, but has also had a devastating impact on local communities.

“The various construction booms over the years flooded Lephalale with money but, like a tide rising too fast, it sunk more boats than it lifted. Now that the tide is receding once again we can see just how much damage was done to the social and economic fabric of the community.”

The report tracks how the first boom in the region unfolded in the 1980s when the original Grootegeluk mine and Matimba were constructed.

“At the peak of construction, around 11000 workers were brought into Lephalale, but once construction was finished, most of the workers were forced to return to the homelands. And it produced a typically divided apartheid town with Marapong, the black township, literally at the foot of Matimba power station.

“The second boom kicked off in 2007 with the major expansion of Exxaro’s Grootegeluk mine - to create one of the largest open cast mines in the world - and the construction of Medupi, which Eskom advertised as the fourth biggest power station in the world.

“Lephalale’s population more than doubled during this time, while its urban infrastructure crumbled.”

The Mokolo River has been “irreversibly damaged” and the air is heavily polluted by burning coal, discard heaps and dust from coal stockpiles and ash dumps.

“A third boom is now promised as the Waterberg is punted as South Africa’s next coal frontier. The coal bosses dream of ripping out hundreds of square kilometres of the delicate bushveld.

“National government aims to ‘unlock the mineral wealth of the Waterberg’ by delivering Gauteng’s sewer water to this arid area and massively expanding the coal line from Lephalale to the Highveld and on to Richards Bay for export.

“Local government hopes for a third boom to absorb the ill-effects of the Medupi bust and as a new source of patronage.”

But the projects that make up boom three are floundering and facing growing resistance “although some may survive long enough to ruin more land before going bust”.

The region, writes Peek, will “perhaps be saved from the full destruction of a typical sacrifice zone”, such as the Mpumalanga Highveld, “because coal’s heyday is over.

“We are at a stage in South Africa where democratic practice can shape a new future away from coal and towards energy democracy. But coal is not going to go down without a fight.

“So this research gives government, civil society and labour a very clear and sobering look at the past and present of coal.”

Mega projects, says the report, have “repeatedly failed society” and, in Medupi’s case, have “run over budget, over time, and are riddled with corruption”. The impacts have left “irreversible health and environmental consequences”.

The report shows how Medupi and Matimba are responsible for “enormous emissions” of sulphur and nitrogen oxides and particulates that are “hugely harmful” to human health.

Carbon dioxide emissions, which drive climate change, are immense.

“We are particularly concerned that, having always avoided doing anything about SO₂ (sulphur dioxide) pollution, Eskom is now avoiding compliance with minimum emission standards This puts people’s lives at risk,” says Makoma Lekalakala of EarthLife Africa.

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