

Coal mining a major threat

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THE stream that runs past Thembisile Zwane's dark hut is tainted red, like a warning.

The young mother knows better than to drink from its lifeless, poisoned waters.

"The water from the river is too sour," she says, with an expression of distaste, as she ties her whimpering baby to her back. "You can't drink it and you can't even wash clothes with that water."



Zwane and her family live in the blackened, desolate landscape of the long-abandoned Makateerskop underground coal mine near the sleepy hamlet of Luneberg, nestled along the Drakensberg escarpment.

Since it closed over 30 years ago, toxic acid mine drainage and heavy metal contamination has "obliterated" the entire river system for several kilometres downstream, say local conservationists.

That's why, every day, Zwane and her neighbours hike as far as 3km up a nearby mountain slope to collect clean mountain water. Like them, the local primary school uses a rainwater tank because the groundwater has become too contaminated.

Water analysis by the Impala Water Users Association has shown alarmingly high levels of sulphates, iron and manganese seeping into this system, says its chief executive manager, Johann Boonzaaier.

"There are 20 other abandoned coal mines around here and many prospecting applications. We call it our own mining tsunami."

For conservationist Angus Burns, the devastation wrought by defunct mines like Makateerskop is a “prophecy” of what could unfold if a proposed controversial underground coal mine – over 50km away in the Mabola protected environment of the eastern mountainous folds of Mpumalanga – proceeds.

That project, Yzermyn, is located in the same sensitive Pongola catchment system. “There’s no doubt the proposed Yzermyn will have an impact we’ll regret in the future,” warns Burns.

Earlier this year, it emerged that Minister of Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, had quietly approved the mine, linked to President Jacob Zuma, in November last year despite earlier concerns red-flagged by her officials and without public participation.

The Minister of Mineral Resources, Mosebenzi Zwane, too, gave the mine the go-ahead. In protected environments, mining may be allowed only with written permission from both ministers “under strict conditions to ensure development proceeds in a sustainable manner”, says the DEA.

The majestic Mabola protected environment, near Wakkerstroom, with its rich, rare high-altitude grassland habitat, is located within the Enkangala grasslands, classified as one of the country’s 21 strategic water source areas because it gives rise to the Vaal, Pongola and Tugela rivers.

Here, in Mabola, the water is so pure, in many places you can drink straight from it. With its expanse of wetlands and pans, and boasting endemic, endangered species, Mabola forms a crucial part of the 8% of South Africa’s mostly unprotected land that provides half the country’s water.

In 2014, the provincial government declared over 8000ha the Mabola Protected Environment, based on the region’s “irreplaceable” and “optimal critical biodiversity areas”.

This was after a groundbreaking effort by several conservation groups, provincial authorities and local landowners, mainly livestock farmers, to be recognised as stewards of their important, sensitive landscapes.

But Mabola’s future – and South Africa’s water security – is threatened by the relentless pursuit of black gold in the region, believes Burns, the senior manager of land and biodiversity stewardship at WWF-SA.

Clutching his walking stick, he is surrounded by the shoulder-high grasslands he has fought for over a decade to safeguard, here on a remote farm leading into Mabola.

“It’s a privilege to be in this landscape. The grassland area, the region we’re in is perhaps the most significant water source area in South Africa. Now, imagine this turning into a coal mine,” says Burns. “We say no to these mines. We say mine in responsible locations away from water source areas.”

As he speaks, a chorus breaks out in the nearby distance. Burns and his colleagues, who are leading the start of the WWF-SA Journey of Water, are riled. A convoy of seven buses, carrying over 100 protesters, has somehow turned up here.

Some carry placards calling for WWF-SA and the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) to “go to hell” and “go back to Australia”.

The battle lines are fast being drawn, with conservationists and civil society groups ready to take the government and Indian mining company Atha-Africa Ventures, which has never before mined in South

Africa, to the Constitutional Court. The legal challenge to stop the Yzermyn mine in Mabola is led by the CER on behalf of a coalition including groundWork, the Benchmarks Foundation, Mining and Environmental Justice Community Network of SA, BirdLife SA and Endangered Wildlife Trust.

This includes a volley of appeals against the environmental management programme approved by the DMR, the mining rights and the environmental authorisation issued by the Mpumalanga environmental department.

For CER executive director Melissa Fourie, allowing commercial mining inside a declared protected area “sets a terrifying precedent for the protection of South Africa’s protected areas”.

“Until the appeal is decided, the environmental authorisation is suspended. Atha disagrees but has undertaken it won’t commence with activities until the appeal has been finally determined,” says Fourie.

She points out how, while the surface operation is outside the protected environment, the majority of the underground mine is inside it, where the risks are “orders of magnitude higher”.

An appeal has now been lodged with the Water Tribunal after the Minister of Water and Sanitation, Nomvula Mokonyane, upheld Atha Africa’s suspension of its water-use licence in March, noting it was “highly prejudicial and detrimental” to the authorisations it had lawfully obtained.

Last month, Molewa’s approval of the mine was the subject of tense exchanges between the DEA and the Parliamentary portfolio committee on environmental affairs.

The DEA maintains there has to be a careful balance between environmental conservation and economic development, “which we have achieved”.

Atha-Africa says its mine will bring over 500 jobs, its mitigation measures are sufficient and the familial connection between one of its BEE shareholders, Sizwe Zuma, and President Jacob Zuma, “has not, and will not, influence the relationship between Sizwe and Atha-Africa Ventures”. He is reportedly a nephew of the president.

In Atha’s answering papers to set aside the decision to grant a mining right, Praveer Tripathi, senior vice-president, notes that Mabola’s “special environmental status does not result in an absolute legislative prohibition against mining, which seems to be the incorrect assumption of the applicants in their founding papers”.

Burns disagrees, noting the poor decision-making process behind the mining right. “The protected area was in place before the mining right was acquired. The company’s own consultants said this is a no-go area for mining.”

It’s the future he worries about. “There have to be real, tangible restrictions put in place to ensure that mine can mitigate for 400 years after it closes and I can tell you now there’s no mine that can do that.”

Climate change predictions show that over the next 50 to 100 years, there will be a drying trend from the western part of South Africa towards the eastern side. “These natural areas of grassland, which are the main water engines for the country, will contract and there will be a lot more pressure on them to supply water for everybody in SA,” says Burns.

As she hikes into the scenic expanse of Mabola, Christine Colvin, a senior freshwater scientist at WWF-SA, remarks: "This part of our water system made up by the natural environment is often not well understood and invisible to water consumers in the city.

"This is a high mountainous area; it receives much more rainfall than the rest of the country. This is essentially where your water comes from. We've been through a national-scale drought over the past two years. But here the government has signed off on plans for a coal mine.

"What we're experiencing is death by a thousand cuts. Each little cut of a new coal mine in a new landscape doesn't matter on its own, but when they're all added up, they're seriously threatening our future water security," she says.

His voice booming in the neighbouring Kwamandlangampisi protected environment, where the Journey of Walkers have hiked, local resident Vusumuzi Zwane speaks of the "deception" of Atha-Africa.

"The community's aware of the deception of the benefits of this mine. We know those benefits won't be realised in the future."

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