

What SA can learn about offshore mining from Namibia

By [Otto Shikongo](#)

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The incredible wealth of the Southern African region's offshore mineral deposits was once again highlighted by the oil and gas find off the coast of Mossel Bay. So, understandably, there has been much focus on the prospects of the economic development that such a discovery could bring to South Africa and the broader region.



Otto Shikongo, CEO of Debmarine Namibia

But here in Namibia, we have experienced our own major success stories when it comes to extracting marine resources — albeit with a different mineral and a vastly different means of recovering these minerals.

This is because Debmarine Namibia has, for years, pioneered a unique form of marine diamond recovery which not only makes up about 70% of the country's total diamond production, but which is also highly environmentally sustainable.

Debmarine Namibia — which is a 50-50 joint-venture between the government of Namibia and De Beers Group — operates six purpose fitted vessels that are designed to recover diamonds off the Namibian coast in the Atlantic Ocean's Benguela Current large marine ecosystem (BCLME). An area that stretches for approximately 3,500km and produced around 1.4-million diamond carats in 2018.

The recovery method used is also environmentally sustainable because the seabed is largely restored to its natural state after our operations move on.

These are notable feats and we believe that there are three key messages that we can offer the region when it comes to being highly focused on issues of environmental sustainability, local empowerment of communities and economic progression.

Mineral recovery can be environmentally sustainable

Firstly, it's a common cause that mining on land is typically not associated with being environmentally friendly. While there have been advances in technology in various mining endeavours on the continent and around the world, the reality is that it still has a long way to go.

However, marine diamond recovery makes every endeavour to ensure responsible environmental stewardship.

Considering the size of the BCLME ecosystem, Debmarine's diamond recovery impacts a very small area (1.2%) of the ecosystem and is deemed to be of low significance at a regional scale.

Debmarine Namibia works at depths of between 120m-140m, and the unique IP on our technology has ensured that up to 99% of the sediment where we operate is discharged and settles back to the seabed floor.

The seabed organisms are hardy and well-adapted to the high natural variability and thus recover rapidly after being disturbed.

Seabed recovery occurs naturally at a rate dependent on available sediment, and we typically see that functional recovery occurs within:

- three years where abundant sediment occurs (such as close to a river mouth),
- three to 10 years in sparser sediment areas, and
- 10 years in rocky terrain (or very low sediment areas)

We have further made use of a seabed monitoring programme which is guided by a committee that includes independent scientists from academia and industry.

Mineral recovery can be empowering

When Debmarine Namibia started operations in 2002, it was largely a foreign-owned company whose workforce only consisted of 14% Namibians.

Since then, our company's staff complement today consists of 86% Namibians. Almost 50% of our shore-based staff are women.

Our employees are based all over Namibia with representation in almost all 14 regions, and we invest N\$100m annually to train our staff. In fact, 10% of our employees are currently trainees.

We further invest approximately N\$9m per annum in various courses ranging from education, health, security, sport through the company social investment fund and SME development through the Debmarine- Namdeb Foundation.

Mineral recovery continues to be economically relevant

Despite the economic growth challenges that Namibia has experienced in recent years, marine diamond recovery continues to be an area of hope for our country's current and future financial prospects.

From 2014-2018, Debmarine Namibia contributed N\$16.4bn to the Namibian economy in the form of dividends, royalties and income tax. On top of this, our latest financial results indicated that our revenue increased 11% to N\$8.9bn while our

underlying EBITDA rose 6% to N\$4.6bn.

This growth has been driven by factors that include increased production and improved consumer demand. We further continue to invest in and develop our fleet of six vessels, thereby creating tremendous local capacity for technology research and development.

We operate the world's biggest diamond marine recovery vessel, and currently we are in the first phase of designing the world's next largest diamond marine recovery vessel which we expect to be on the water in 2022.

Added to all of this, marine diamond recovery represents the next evolution in Namibia's rich history.

Alluvial diamond mining on land on the west coast of Namibia started over 110 years in 1908. Over time, many mines on land have reached end-of-life while marine diamond recovery is, relatively speaking, still at its beginning stages.

A Debmarine Namibia 'life of mine' is expected to be 31 years to 2050, meaning there is much to gain economically in the years to come.

We believe that the lessons that we have learnt are relevant to the Southern African region and the world. These developments can help further advance our nations and their economies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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