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FEATURES

Mystery still surrounds plan to find gold in the Overberg

A new application for prospecting near Napier has farmers, conservationists and mining experts up in arms. Particularly as it’s unlikely there’s a viable gold deposit there in the first place

BL PREMIUM

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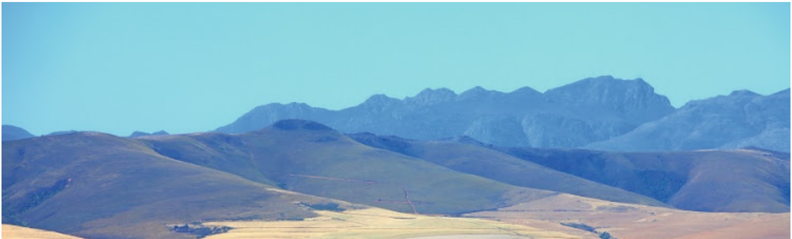
by ANTON FERREIRA



Picture: 123RF/tamsindove

The director of the shell company that has sparked outrage in the Overberg with a plan to look for gold under the rolling wheat fields, Rosy Mvala, is defending it as a bid by a young black woman to cement her place in the mining industry.

Opponents of the plan, who include farmers, conservationists, mining experts and public representatives, probably can't argue with that — but they take issue with almost every other aspect of the case Mvala seeks to make.

Mvala's company, Cienth, lodged its third application for a gold, silver and tin exploration permit covering an area of about 4,200ha 15km west of Napier in December. The previous two applications lapsed due to Cienth's failure to meet regulatory timelines.

Mvala and her geological consultancy, Minrom, in Somerset West, have until now shrouded the project in secrecy, though they did discuss it at a meeting in Bredasdorp in September convened by the Cape Agulhas municipality.

But Mvala in January told the FM in an e-mail she wanted to cast “a different perspective” on the “unnecessary hysteria largely whipped up by the media”.

That “unnecessary hysteria” would be the alarm expressed by critics of the Cienth project who say that if mining does start, endangered renosterveld and wetlands will be at risk, groundwater will be contaminated, tourism will be devastated and the region’s thriving wine industry will be jeopardised.

The critics raise two major questions: who is driving the project and providing the finance, and why search for gold in an area where geologists are all but unanimous that none exists in viable quantities?

Critics say mining in the Overberg will destroy tourism. Picture: Getty Images/David Silverman

Asked who is behind Cienth, Mvala, 29, says: “I have various partners and investors. I am a young black woman with big aspirations, and the majority of my projects are greenfield in nature and require early-stage funding to establish viability, and then potentially to look at developing the projects into mining rights. I only work with like-minded individuals who share [my] values and passion for mining.”

While Mvala won’t give any names, John Bristow, a geologist who has close ties with Minrom and its owner/founder, Oscar van Antwerpen, says the "gent" who "put in the application and now effectively owns and runs the company" is a well-known figure.

Bristow, whose CV includes directorships of Incubex Minerals and the Global Diamond Network, says the man concerned, a "new entrant" to the sector, has the probably misguided expectation that mining will make him wealthy. He describes the man as uninformed about the industry and "somewhat ambitious", but declines to name him. "People are very sensitive about the whole show."

Van Antwerpen refers questions about this man's identity, and other issues, to Mvala.

She says in her e-mail: "One of the major frustrations that I have encountered is the ignorance and misconception between the concept of prospecting activity and that of commercial mining. At this stage, [it] is purely a prospecting right application with the sole purpose of identifying potential mineralisation of gold and other minerals in the Napier area. There is more than enough historical geological information and mining activity within the area to justify prospecting, though with any prospecting you are not guaranteed of viability for commercial mining."

> **" The majority of my projects are greenfield in nature and require early-stage funding to establish viability, and then potentially to look at developing the projects into mining rights "**
>
> - *Rosy Mvala*

In fact, there is no recorded history of gold, silver or tin mining in the region, and there are records of just two abortive gold prospecting ventures, one of them at a site known as Hansiesrivier in the vicinity of the area Cienth is targeting.

In the 1880s, amid the gold fever spawned by discoveries on the Witwatersrand and in the Klondyke, two English prospectors dug a tunnel, or adit, about 100m into a hillside at Hansiesrivier in the hopes that a quartz vein there would yield pay dirt.

“These two guys sold shares, formed a gold company,” says Jean Malan, a semi-retired geologist in Kleinmond. “They then went off to find more funds in England and they were never seen again.”

Interestingly, Malan, a former chief geologist at PetroSA, showed Van Antwerpen and other Minrom geologists the Hansiesrivier adit in November 2022, about five months before Cienth lodged its first exploration application.

“We had an in-house training course with Minrom and part of what I showed them was mineral occurrences in the area,” says Malan, who mapped the region for the Council for Geoscience in 1984.

Some members of the Napier Farmers Association saw a link between the field trip and Cienth’s subsequent exploration initiative.

“There was a bit of a finger-pointing my way, that I was the guy making people aware of this [Hansiesrivier], which could have well been the case,” Malan says. “But I can extract the section from my field guide: the chance of finding any gold there is basically zero."

Recent assays indicate a gold grade of 0.3g a ton at the Hansiesrivier site — never enough to justify mining.

Bristow agrees that the site is not worth mining. "If Hansiesrivier had been worth a dime, whoever found it would have mined it. Hansiesrivier is probably just an anomaly, at best it would be a prospect, I'm prepared to put money on it. I don't see this coming to anything."

So why bother to even look for gold in the Overberg?

Bristow says the Cienth investor recognised that gold mining on the Witwatersrand had become too expensive and had sought prospects in "nontraditional" parts of the country.

"He had contracted a geologist just to 'give me an overview of where there might be other gold deposits', in particular near-surface deposits that would be easier and less capital intensive when it came to the prospecting and the mining," says Bristow.

"So Hansiesrivier, if you google it, you come up with it."

Mvala, who is the director of about 90 shell companies, says she has been "actively involved in the mining and exploration space since 2019. I am involved in various mining applications and mining projects of different minerals across seven provinces all over our beautiful country."

> **" I'm actually not opposed to mining per se, but I am opposed to mining that's doomed to be a failure from the start or very short term "**
>
> *- Jeremy Mann*

But the pushback Cienth has received from Overberg communities has been "challenging".

"This testing time has made me even more determined and resilient than ever to continue and grow my career and aspirations in the mining space. I would like to note the … support and guidance from the Western Cape [regional office of the] department of mineral resources & energy, which has shown strong commitment to transformation and empowerment of women in mining.”

She says: “We have received strong support from certain members of the Napier community as well as the broader community, where unemployment is extremely high, who see sustainable mining as a long-term potential source of meaningful employment and upliftment.”

But this is news to Raymond Ross, deputy mayor of the municipality and DA councillor for Napier, who says he knows of no-one who backs the exploration proposal. He says both he and the mayor, Paul Swart, oppose the application.

And DA MP Nicholas Myburgh, whose constituency is the Overberg region, says: “The community clearly is not for it. I haven’t been able to find anybody who is for it.”

And as for Cienth's motive — "That's the curious part," he says. "Why would you go to all this trouble? What do they know that we don't know? We must not be caught napping, and block it every step of the way."

Lengthy delays in the processing of rights applications by the national department of minerals & energy could mean there's little immediate chance of prospecting starting outside Napier. On top of that, Bristow says: "The success rate of any prospecting programme, and that's an important point with Hansiesrivier, is at best 1%."

That's little comfort to Cienth opponents such as Jeremy Mann, a process metallurgist who worked at Anglo American for about 30 years in South Africa, Mali and South America. Now an adjunct professor at the University of Cape Town, he says even a prospecting operation that yields nothing would harm the environment and probably attract zama zamas.

"I'm a mining guy, I'm actually not opposed to mining per se, but I am opposed to mining that's doomed to be a failure from the start or very short term, and is not going to add any sustainable value and ensure sustainable livelihoods in the community," he says.

Mann, whose years at Anglo American included conducting feasibility studies for new mines, now lives in Struisbaai on the coast south of Napier.

“Say they do find 3g [of gold] a ton, which is highly unlikely. The nature of the mining is likely going to be open cast, it’ll be a number of little pits,” he says.

“They have to remove the overburden; typically, that means for every ton of rock they move, they are probably going to move 5t-10t of overburden …

“They’re going to have a tailings dam. If you look at the topography of that area, it has all these rolling hills and valleys, and you get real flash flooding. So it’s going to be extremely difficult to build a safe tailings deposit.”

Mann says any gold reserves that Cienth did find would be exhausted within five years.

> “This is going to be disastrous for the environment. The community will end up carrying the can.”

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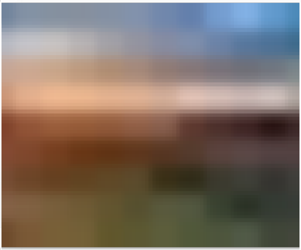

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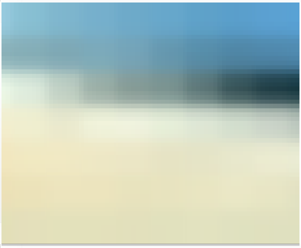

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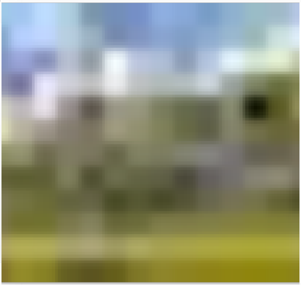

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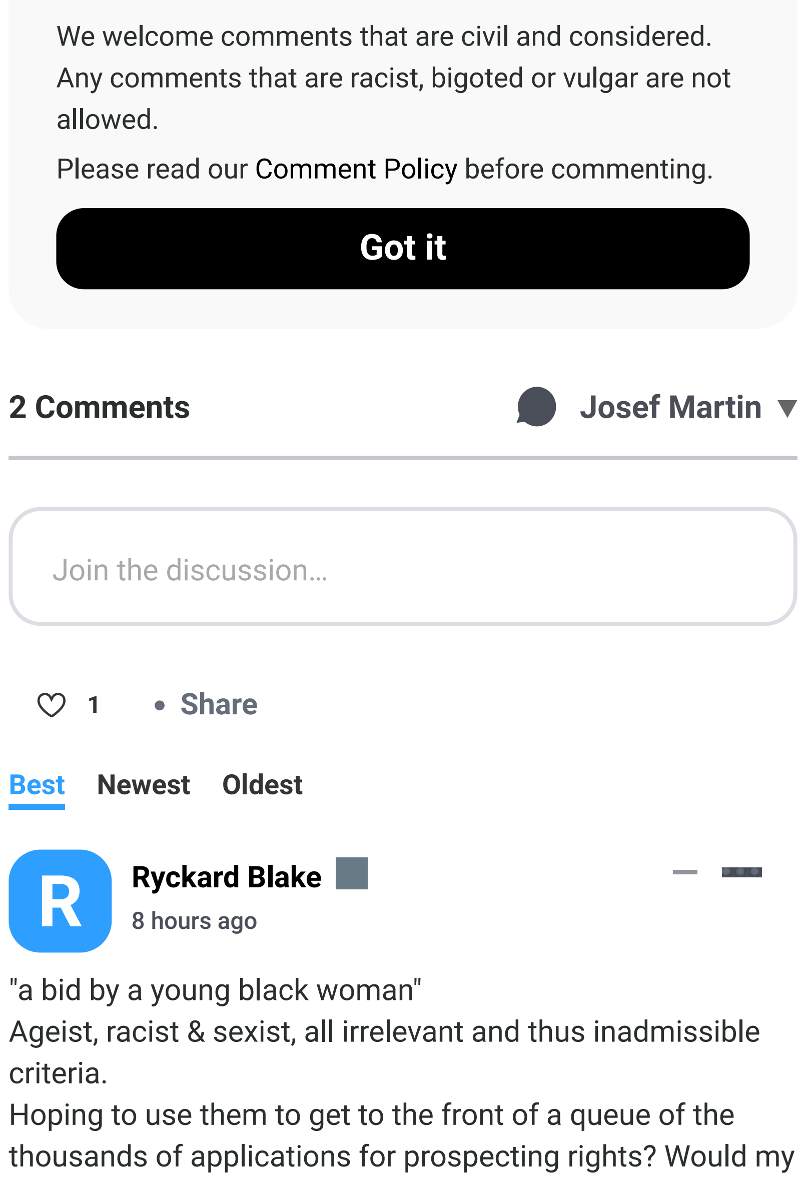

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Ryckard Blake

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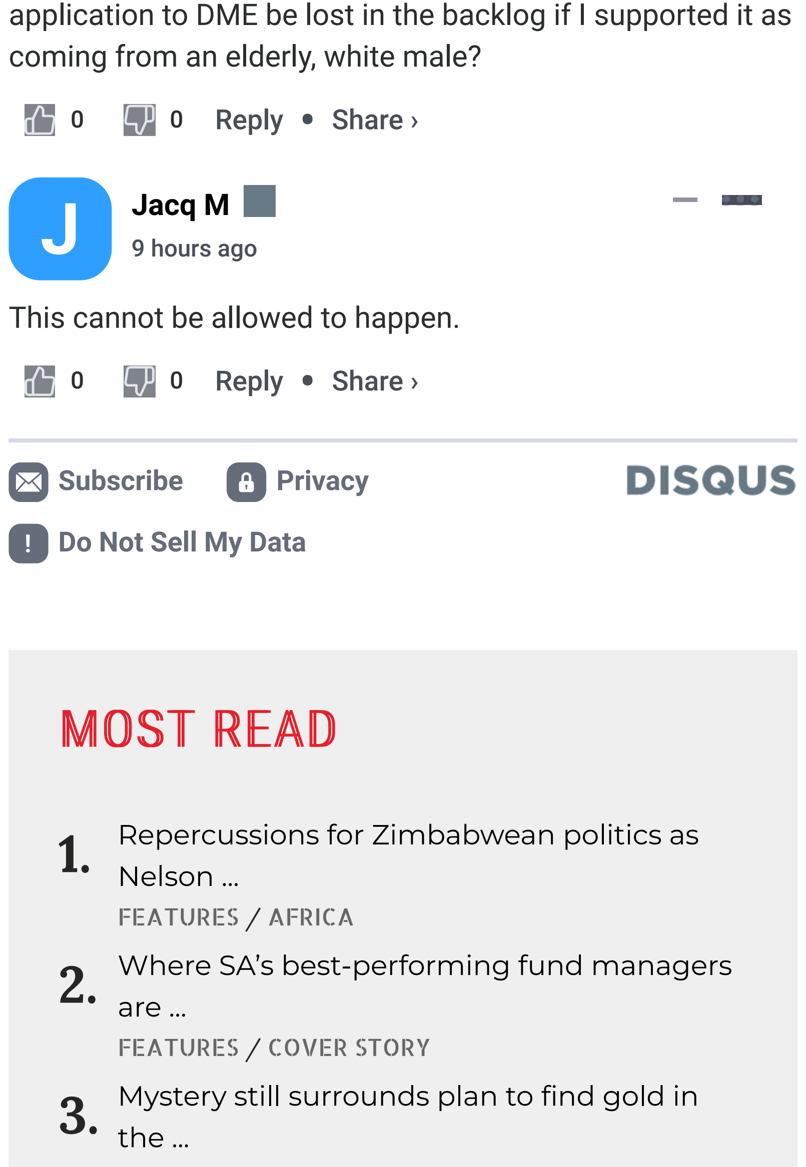
"a bid by a young black woman"
Ageist, racist & sexist, all irrelevant and thus inadmissible criteria.
Hoping to use them to get to the front of a queue of the thousands of applications for prospecting rights? Would my



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This cannot be allowed to happen.

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