

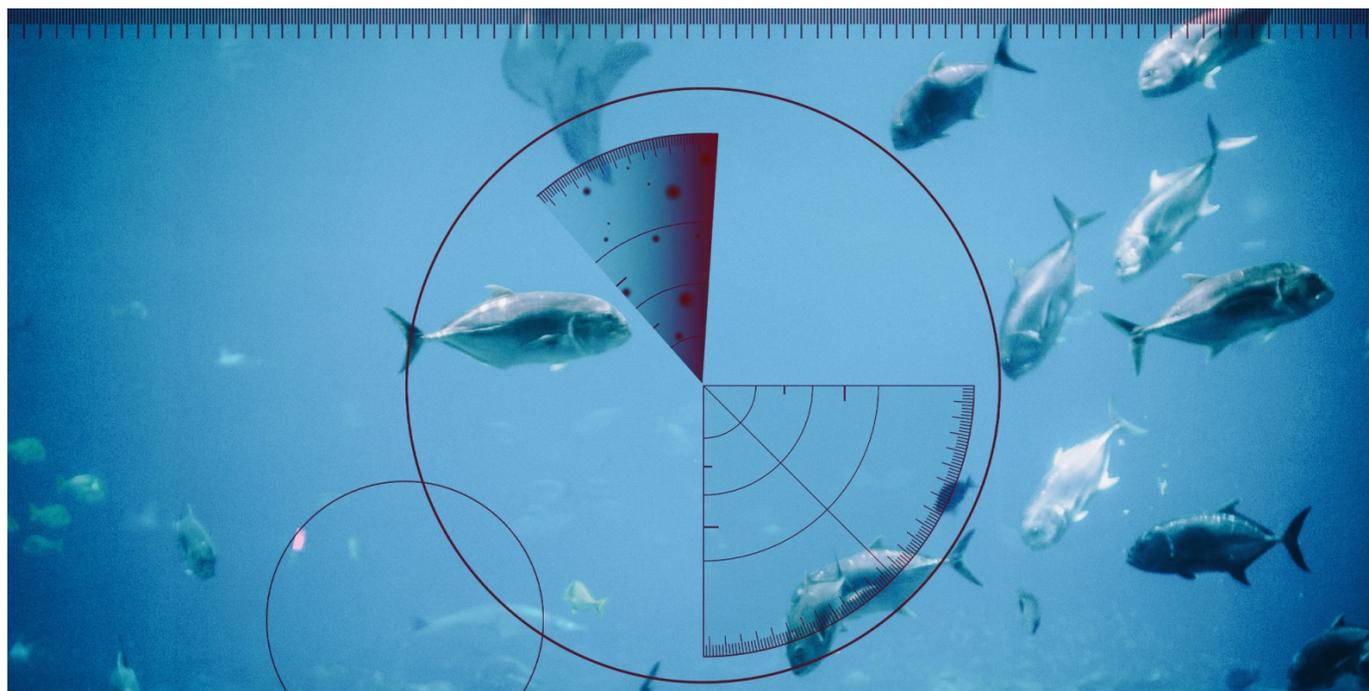
DAILY MAVERICK

(/)

OUR BURNING PLANET

OFFSHORE EXPLORATION

Searcher Geodata returns to South Africa to pursue seismic surveys off the West Coast



 *Image: Unsplash / Ian Schneider | Rawpixel*

By Onke Ngcuka

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Following a court ruling that halted its operations off the West Coast and saw Searcher Geodata leave South African waters, the company has returned for another attempt to complete its seismic surveys. Small-scale fishers, however, are still opposed to such activity.

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The geoscience and tech exploration company Searcher Geodata has returned to South Africa in the hopes of conducting seismic surveys off the West Coast, just months after the company was chased off South African waters by an [urgent interdict](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-03-01-victory-for-small-scale-fishers-after-high-court-interdicts-searcher-geodatas-west-coast-seismic-survey/) (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-03-01-victory-for-small-scale-fishers-after-high-court-interdicts-searcher-geodatas-west-coast-seismic-survey/>) in March.

In a circulated announcement, the UK company said it was inviting participants as it sought to conduct seismic surveys about 256km offshore of St Helena Bay to 220km offshore of Hondeklip Bay. The company had previously stated it would not return to South Africa should the interdict be granted.



(https://event.webinarjam.com/register/638/k6334i2zx?utm_source=mavio&utm_medium=inline_banner&utm_campaign=mav_inline_elephantsofTT)

The company had hired SLR Consulting to conduct the halted survey but has now obtained the services of Environmental Impact Management Services as the environmental assessment practitioner.

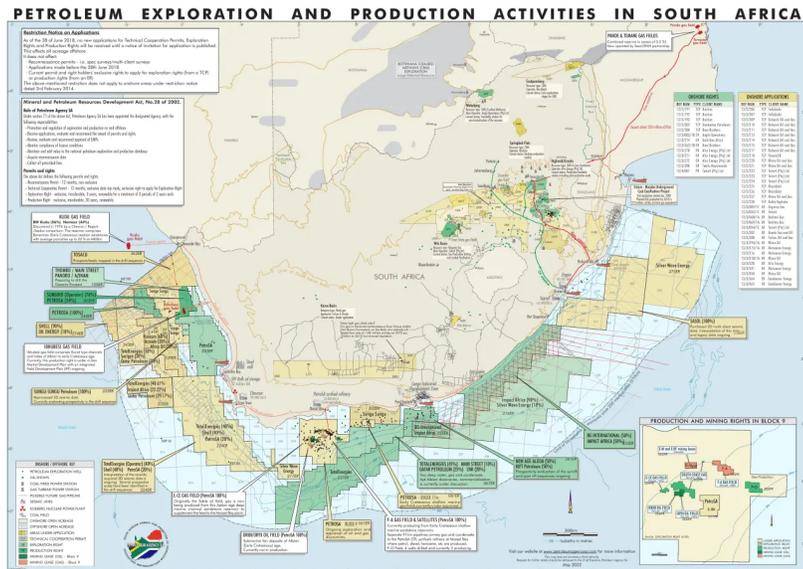
Alan Hopping, the general manager at Searcher Seismic, told *Daily Maverick* that the second attempt at the surveying was to answer the question: “Does South Africa have its own natural resources that could provide safe, reliable and affordable energy for all South Africans?”

He added: “We have taken on board the learnings from our last attempt and are planning to address all the issues raised to the best of our ability.”

In his March ruling in the Western Cape High Court to halt Searcher’s exploration, Judge Daniel Thulare said: “If Searcher truly wanted to ensure that [small-scale fishers] were included in the consultation process, it would have advertised [notices of the survey] in isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans.”

This time, notices of the survey were advertised in the three languages. However, Pedro Garcia, the chairperson of the South African United Fishing Front, told *Daily Maverick* that this didn’t mean

they took into consideration the local dynamics of affording access to the information or guaranteed that people understood the issues being raised.



(<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/hubmap0522-page-001/>)

Voice of the people

“It is the voice of the people who are directly impacted that needs to be heard. But, by the same token, they also need to be capacitated. It’s not as simple as saying, we support it or we don’t support it. The problem is in the consultation processes, and whose voice is eventually heard when we have these conflicts or litigation arising after the fact.

“So, our position is really clear: we will maintain a neutral position on this issue until the consultation issues have been adequately resolved ... There has to be oversight, there have to be assessments of engagements, etc,” said Garcia.

He added that he didn’t want his comments to negate the economic benefits of offshore exploration and that the community needed to know how to mitigate the effects of offshore

exploration on their livelihoods.

Jackie Sunde of the Coastal Justice Network told *Daily Maverick* the promise of economic gain from foreign exploration companies was false, as much of the profits would be enjoyed in those countries and not in South Africa. She added that it was a ploy to convince poor and desperate local communities of empty job promises.

“I’m not surprised that Searcher is coming back and has applied [for environmental authorisation], because if we listen to our minister of mineral resources and energy, Gwede Mantashe, and to our President, this government seems intent on pursuing an oil and gas agenda, completely defying the United Nations secretary-general’s call to all countries, to all nations to stop all fossil fuel extraction, given the climate emergency.

“As far as I’m concerned, our government, illegally, has captured our ocean and is giving our ocean away to these companies to prospect and explore for their own gain. [They are] not looking at the impact on the livelihoods of the most poor and marginalised users of the ocean, which are the small-scale and traditional fishers as well as the fishing industry as a whole.”

Hopping said the area they were seeking to survey was smaller than the one in the initial survey and limited to the region where they believed they had the highest potential for success.

“The area that we are requesting permission to survey is approximately 100km by 100km, which equates to just 1% of the total South African

offshore exclusive economic zone. Another major difference is that the survey area is over 220km from the coastline,” Hopping said.

Neville van Rooy, the community outreach coordinator for The Green Connection, told *Daily Maverick* the organisation was not surprised that Searcher had returned and hoped it would follow the authorisation process properly.

He said West Coast fishers were not comfortable with seismic activity in their area, where there is a snoek run. He said the matter would be highly contested and would probably head to court, as not only fishers were affected, but also women who run a processing plant in St Helena Bay.

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NB: Any similarities to the Titanic's maiden voyage are purely coincidental

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