

TRENDING

West Coast gas surveys are now unsafe, its own social experts tell seismic mapping company

Business Insider SA [Phillip de Wet](#),



(Getty)

UK company Searcher Geodata is again trying to get authorisation for a 3D seismic survey off the West Coast.

Searcher, and more recently Shell, have failed to get permission for that early stage of exploration for oil and gas deposits.

Searcher's own social experts say that, right now, no company has a "social license" for such exploration.

Until they do some serious fence-mending, attempting such surveys could lead to violence.

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It is not currently possible for any company to safely map out oil and

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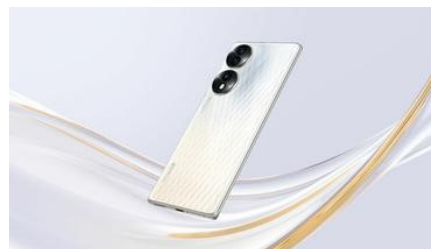
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gas deposits off the West Coast, a new report on behalf of UK company Searcher Geodata says.

Communities are now so mistrustful that no company has "social license to operate" in the region, consultants Equispectives told Searcher in an expert report.

Attempting the kind of 3D seismic survey Searcher has in mind will probably lead to protest and could well lead to violence, both directed at the company and within communities that are split about the risks and economic advantages that oil and gas production could bring.

First, says Equispectives, Searcher and its peers such as Shell will have to mend fences with coastal communities, including by doing fundamental research into fish behaviour. Only then could it, perhaps, be safe to put survey vessels to sea.

The social impact assessment report is part of [more than 550 pages of specialist reports published on Friday](#) by Environmental Impact Management Services (EIMS), which is managing an environmental authorisation process for Searcher. That process is due to see a series of public meetings, starting next week,

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in Cape Town, Vredenburg, Lamberts Bay, Hondeklipbaai, and Port Nolloth.

Company representatives should not expect a warm welcome, the social impact report suggests, after discussions with affected communities since last month.

"Some of the communities are adamant that they would not allow gas or oil extraction in the area, and that includes collecting the required data from the ocean," said Equispectives.

"Some community members have threatened with violence against Searcher's vessel. Others have threatened that they will take action to fight seismic surveys, in any way that they seem appropriate. This is a very emotional issue for many people and that could erupt into social unrest. Related to this is potential for conflict between community members who support the project and those that are against the project."

In March, [the Western Cape High Court blocked Searcher from conducting a seismic survey](#), on the basis that it had failed to adequately consult with affected communities.

The illiterate and poor were excluded from consultation, the court said, while only the commercial fishing sector was deemed 'worthy' to be consulted.

In September, [the high court in Makhanda set aside a decision that would have allowed Shell to conduct a seismic survey](#) off the Wild Coast, also in part due to deficiencies in consultation.

It's not about the survey, really

Now, on the West Coast, objections have little to do with the technical plans to tow eight kilometres of cables behind a vessel that emits seismic blasts in order to map the seabed hundreds of kilometres from shore. Some people "feel that the seismic surveys are only the first step and that it will open the door to exploration for oil and gas", with associated environmental objections. For others "the core of the issue is the impact on their indigenous and culture rights, their customs and traditions and their livelihoods".

Few seem to have any faith in the government to manage the process of exploration and extraction.

At the same time, coastal communities no longer "differentiate between the different companies that apply for seismic surveys. They see a different face standing in front of them, sharing similar information, but never providing answers to their questions," consultants say.

These communities have organised lines of communication, the social consultants note, and support from rights groups that make them capable of launching legal action.

And they will not be pacified quickly or easily. Besides "meaningful consultation" and setting up a way to deal with community grievances on an ongoing basis, Searcher needs to support independent research on how fish such as snoek respond to seismic surveys, Equispectives recommends. On top of that, the seismic survey industry as a whole

need to "embark on an awareness raising and education campaign".

"From a social perspective the project can only be recommended after meaningful consultation, local research, education, and awareness raising has been done in the project affected communities" Searcher's consultants found.

"At this stage communities feel that they cannot make informed decisions. Although all legal processes have been followed, the seismic survey industry is not moving at the pace of the community, and in the long run this will be detrimental to the industry."

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