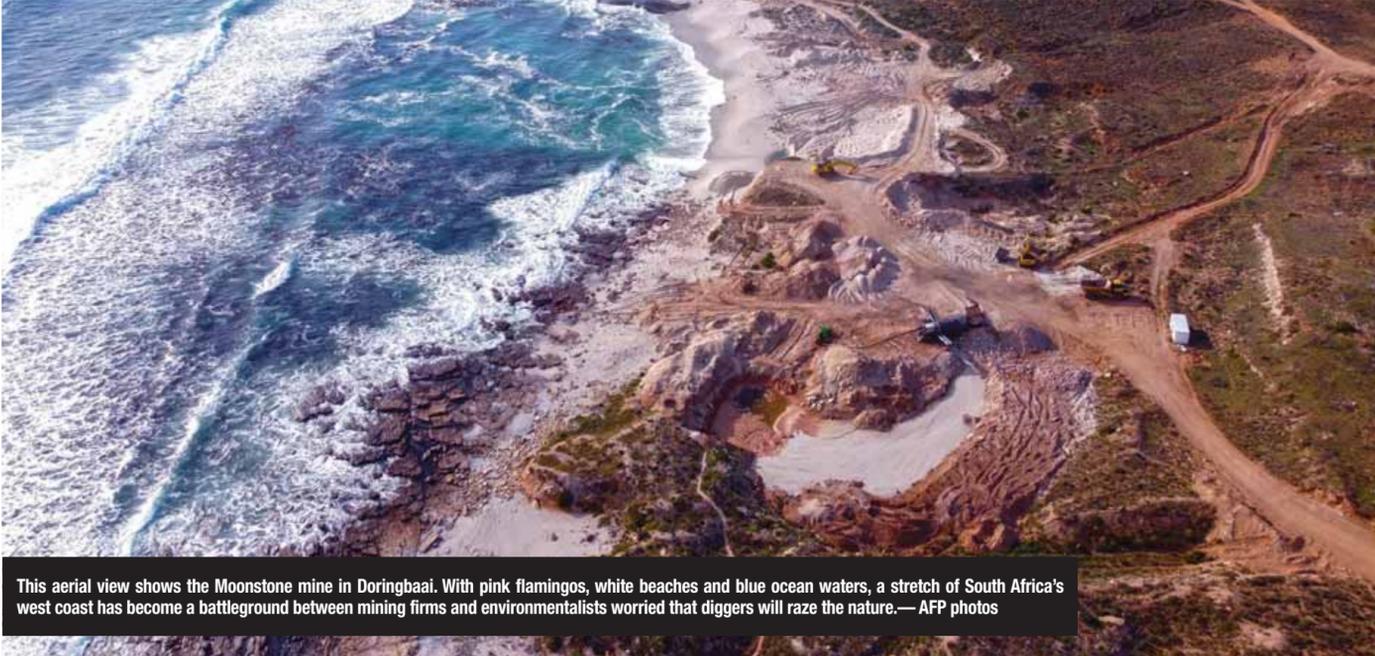


Lifestyle | Features



This aerial view shows the Moonstone mine in Doringbaai. With pink flamingos, white beaches and blue ocean waters, a stretch of South Africa's west coast has become a battleground between mining firms and environmentalists worried that diggers will raze the nature.— AFP photos

Surfers, miners fight over S Africa's white beaches

To those who live here, it's like a little piece of heaven, boasting pink flamingos, white beaches and blue ocean waters. Yet this stretch of South Africa's west coast has also become a battleground, pitching mining firms against environmentalists fearful that one of nature's last wild treasures is being bulldozed away. Diamonds, zircon and other minerals have long been extracted in the sandy coastline near the Olifants river, which flows into the Atlantic about 300 kilometers north of Cape Town.

But plans to expand the mining have angered surfers, animal lovers and residents in this remote, sparsely populated region—and they are pushing back with lawsuits and petitions. "It's one of the last frontiers of the South African coastline where you can go and sort of lose yourself," said surfer Mike Schleich, 45, co-founder of a green campaign group, Protect the West Coast.

Mining companies say they bring much-needed jobs to the area and insist they abide by environmental rules. But locals contend the excavation, in which sand is extracted from beaches and the seabed and sifted for valuable minerals, is scaring off fish and tourists alike—and

shrinking rather than broadening employment opportunities. "If we are going to have sea mining, beach mining, land mining... where is the public going to have access to the coast?" questioned Suzanne Du Plessis, 61, a local resident and campaigner.

Dolphins, seals and excavators

From off-shore diamond prospecting to the construction of a new harbor, several projects threaten to scar the area, a biodiversity hotspot home to dolphins, seals and succulent plants, according to Protect the West Coast. Campaigners secured a small victory in June, when the operator of a mineral sand mine that had gained government approval to expand its activities to 10 more beaches, committed to additional environmental checks.

This came on the back of a lawsuit brought by the Centre of Environment Rights (CER), another environmental group, that was settled out of court by the mine operator, Australian-owned Minerals Commodities. But activists remain wary. "CER is entitled to go back to court should the mine not comply with the provisions of the agreement," said CER's lawyer Zahra Omar.



A general view of a sign board prohibiting access to the Moonstone mine in Doringbaai.

The mine has already asked for more time to put together its biodiversity management plan, she said. Minerals Commodities legal counsel Fletcher Hancock said the company was committed to conducting its operations "in an environmentally sustainable and responsible way." Activists and locals feel the government has left them to fend for themselves. Two government ministries in charge of mineral resources and environmental affairs did not respond to requests for comment.

Smaller catch

In Doringbaai, a small town a few kilometers south of the Olifants estuary, a once-pristine beach where people used to walk their dogs and enjoy the sunset to the sound of crashing waves is now being torn up by heavy machinery. Resident Peter Owies, 54, said locals were blindsided when mining started earlier this year. "It was quite a surprise and shock to us," he said. A meeting requested by the community to discuss the mining plans was never held, with the required consultation happening only online, said Du Plessis, the campaigner. Preston Goliath, a 46-year-old fisherman, said his catch had dwindled after the mining work began

and the same is true for dozens of others.

"Because they were pumping for diamonds... the fish moved away and our richest (fisheries) bank is now empty," said Goliath. Some residents want the beach mining to stop. But mine owner Trans Hex said all its environmental papers are in order, adding it has held mining rights for the area since 1991. With dozens more mining permits waiting for approval, Schleich of Protect the West Coast said he hoped the government would rethink its strategy for the region.

"There's a whole array of new industries that could have a profoundly positive effect on the people that live on that coastline like algae farming," Schleich said. "We've got to show them that there's a much better way. Activists here are optimistic, emboldened by victories scored elsewhere by environmentalists. On September 1, activists claimed victory in a court case against energy giant Shell - despite the government's support of the company - resulting in the ban of seismic exploration off the touristic Indian Ocean coast.— AFP



A general view of a sign with hiking trail routes in Doringbaai.

Chemical hair straighteners 'may cause' uterine cancer

Women who frequently use chemical hair straightening products could face more than twice the risk of uterine cancer compared to those who never use them, according to a new study published Monday. The findings, published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute, have particular relevance for Black women, who make up a majority of users of straightening products in the United States. Scientists lauded the work, calling for action even though more work is required to confirm the conclusions, in what is an understudied area of research.

Lead author Alexandra White, a cancer epidemiologist with the National Institutes of Health led the study, told AFP it grew out of her previous research that found a link between permanent hair dye and straighteners and breast and ovarian cancers. "We know that these straighteners contain many different chemicals, including endocrine disruptors, and we would expect them to have adverse health effects for hormone sensitive cancers," she said.

"That led us to extend our previous work, just focusing on uterine cancer." Uterine cancer accounts for three percent of all new cancers but is the most common cancer of the female reproductive system, with more than 65,000 new cases and 12,500 deaths are expected in 2022. The outlook is generally good if the cancer is caught early, but treatment often involves removing the uterus, which would preclude child-bearing.

The new paper relied on data from more than 33,000 US women aged 35-74 who took part in the Sister Study, which is led by the government and designed to identify risk factors for cancer and other conditions. Over the course of 11 years, 378 women developed uterine cancer, which primarily affects tissue lining the uterus called endometrium. Type 1, the most common form of the cancer, is thought to be linked to having too much of the sex hormone estrogen.

Women who reported using hair straightening products in the past year were almost twice as likely to develop uterine cancer compared to women that never used them, the researchers found. The link was stronger still for frequent users - defined as more than four uses in the past 12 months. These women had around 2.5 times the risk of developing the cancer compared to women who never used the products. No similar associations were found for other hair products including dyes, bleach, highlights, or perms.

Brazilian blowouts

"The concern is that there are chemicals in these products that act essentially like estrogen in the body," said White, disrupting normal hormonal processes that could influence cancer risk. A second possibility is that some products include carcinogens, such as formaldehyde, to break

the bonds between keratin proteins in hair, which changes its structure and makes it straight.

Though the study did not specifically ask women what products they used, a particular keratin treatment known as "Brazilian blowouts" was popular at the time the women were enrolled for this study, between 2003 and 2009, though its use has decreased since. White said one of the strengths of the study was that it asked women about the products years before they actually went on to develop cancer, which limits the possibility of people misremembering or wrongly attribute their exposures.

But a key limitation was they weren't able to collect information on the types of straighteners used or specific brands, which would have further strengthened evidence. White said more lab work should be done to study the proposed ways the chemicals cause cancer, as well as more population studies that recruit racially diverse populations and capture information on brands.

A related commentary in the journal acknowledged some shortcomings, but said the study added to a "growing body of evidence" that "hair-straightening products are associated with hormone-related cancers in women," and called for evidence-driven policy changes. It added that the personal care product industry upheld Eurocentric "radicalized standards of beauty" and persistently failed to conform to being transparent about chemical constituents and formulations.— AFP



Iranian greeted as hero after competing without hijab

An Iranian climber who caused a sensation by competing at an event abroad without a hijab was on Wednesday given a hero's welcome on her return to Tehran by supporters who raucously applauded her action. With Iran still shaken by women-led protests over the death of Mahsa Amini one month ago, Elnaz Rekabi flew back to a Tehran airport after the competition in South Korea.

In an Instagram post and comments at the airport, Rekabi has apologized over what happened and insisted her hijab - which all Iranian women, including athletes, must wear - had accidentally slipped off. But activists fear her comments were made under pressure from Iranian authorities, who were likely infuriated by her actions. "Elnaz is a hero" and "Well done Elnaz!" chanted dozens of supporters who gathered outside the Imam Khomeini International Airport terminal, clapping their hands and brandishing mobile phones to record the moment.

They continued to chant and applaud as a van and vehicle - one of which they presumed was carrying the climber - drove out of the airport through the crowds of people clapping above their heads. It was unclear where she was headed. Some of the women present were themselves not wearing the hijab. "A hero's welcome - including by women without the forced hijab - outside Tehran... Concerns for her safety remain," said the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).

'State propaganda'?

Inside the airport terminal, Rekabi was greeted by family members with her hair covered with a baseball cap and a hoodie although not a headscarf, before addressing state media with a mask pulled down on her face. "Due to the atmosphere prevailing in the finals of the competition and the unexpected call for me to start my run, I got tangled with my technical equipment and... that caused me to remain unaware of the hijab that I should have observed," she said.

"I returned to Iran peacefully, in perfect health and according to the predetermined plan. I apologise to the people of Iran because of the tensions created," she said, adding she had "no plan to say goodbye to the national team". Her comments were similar to those made on Tuesday in an Instagram post, in which she apologized for "concerns" caused and insisted her bare-headed appearance had been "unintentional". But the Islamic republic has been repeatedly accused by activists of coercing people into making statements of contrition on television or social media.



A woman looks at a screen displaying a video of an international climbing competition Seoul, South Korea, during which Iranian climber Elnaz Rekabi competes without a hijab, in the Cypriot capital Nicosia on October 18, 2022.— AFP

The British actress of Iranian origin Nazanin Boniadi, who is an ambassador for Amnesty International in the UK, tweeted that it was clear Rekabi had been "forced to make this statement by authorities that constantly use forced and televised confessions." Observers "should not be swayed by state propaganda", the CHRI said. Prominent exiled Iranian journalist Maziar Bahari described Rekabi's airport comments as a "forced confession". "You can see the fear in her eyes. She's just repeating what she's been told," he said. There has been no news from her or activity on her Instagram account since she left the airport.

Unconfirmed reports had already suggested she had been pressured by Iranian officials in South Korea. BBC Persian quoted an unnamed source as saying friends had been unable to contact her and the team had left their hotel in Seoul on Monday, two days before the scheduled departure date. Meanwhile news website Iran Wire said the head of Iran's climbing federation had "tricked" her into entering the Iranian embassy in Seoul and the federation chief had promised her safe passage to Iran if she handed over her phone and passport. The Iranian embassy in Seoul, however, issued a statement to AFP denying "all the fake, false news and disinformation regarding" her situation. The spokesperson for the UN office of the high commissioner for human rights, Ravina Shamdasani, said the UN was "closely following" the case and concerns were being raised with the Iranian authorities.— AFP