



- o [Latest issue](#)
- o [Subscribe](#)
- o [Back catalogue](#)

o **In this month's issue**

- [Press](#)
- [subscribe](#)

- [RSS Feed](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Linked In](#)
- [Youtube](#)
- [Google Plus](#)
- 

[Close](#)

**VIVA** MAY 16-18  
TECHNOLOGY 2019 PARIS

**MEET + 9,000  
STARTUPS**

**GET YOUR PASS**

**Opinion: Africa must stop selling its nature short**

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Share
- [Rate](#)
- [0 Comments](#)

[Close](#)

**Opinion: Africa must stop selling its nature short**

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Share
- [Rate](#)
- [0 Comments](#)

**Opinion: Africa must stop selling its nature short**



- [African Business Magazine](#)
- 14 March 2019
- [0 Comments](#)



Extractive activities such as mining are causing profound ecological and social damage in Africa. Governments must ensure that nature is protected while trade and the economy expand.

In October 2018, a high court judge in South Africa overturned permission for an Indian-owned company to mine for coal in the protected Mabola wetlands.

In early 2018, protests arose in Côte d'Ivoire at a gold mining company, with locals demanding more jobs and compensation for land destroyed.

Meanwhile, in Lamu, Kenya, a planned coal power plant in a pristine marine ecosystem sparked opposition.

These are not random occurrences. Across Africa, mining, both small-scale and industrial, is destroying wildlife and nature at an alarming rate.

Some 44% of Africa's major metal mines are inside or within 10km of a protected area, while in at least five countries there has already been downgrading or downsizing of protected areas to allow mining development.

Africa is home to 30% of the world's mineral resources, including some of the largest deposits of oil, gas, diamonds, gold, coltan and bauxite.

While mining has largely been associated with economic growth, recently the scale and impact of threats has increased.

As the race to extract Africa's natural resources heats up, investments are fostering environmental degradation, with knock-on impacts for local people and other economic sectors.

This problem arises partly because of skyrocketing demand from new players, such as China, as well as Western companies such as Tesla and Apple.

Between 2005 and 2016, approximately half of China's outbound investments went into energy and mining, with Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), attracting roughly one-third of this.

Meanwhile, demand for commodities that rely on Africa's minerals – coltan in phones and laptops, lithium in electric vehicles – is rapidly rising.

Minerals frequently occur in areas of rich biodiversity, but mining activities often fail to take ecosystem services, such as provision of fresh water, or soil fertility, into account.

Because these services are provided "free" through ecological processes, their value is disregarded.

The resulting damage can be profound, with threats ranging from reduced crop yields arising from loss of pollinators, to the extermination of species which support ecotourism.

Cobalt mining in the DRC, which provides more than half the world's supply for rechargeable batteries, is one growing threat.

Mining waste is polluting rivers and drinking water, while exposure to dust from pulverised rock causes breathing and other health problems in miners, including tens of thousands of children.

Habitat destruction from mining activities, and secondary effects such as bushmeat harvesting for miners, have contributed to the decline of the critically endangered eastern lowland gorillas.

A quarter of all mines may require special measures in order to conserve globally important biodiversity on the African continent.

## Valuing nature's services

Africa has significant development needs and the continent's mineral resources should be used responsibly to finance them.

However, sustainable growth and significant poverty alleviation can only be achieved if nature is protected.

One of the best ways of doing so is to place real value on its services.

Roughly 62% of Africa's poor rural population depend directly on wild nature and its services for their livelihoods, whether for wild foods, ecotourism or grazing.

The new era of expanded trade could still be a "win-win" situation for investors and for Africa – if African governments, as custodians of Africa's resources, formally recognise the true value of nature.

While there is no one way to do so, Costa Rica and Norway offer important lessons.

Costa Rica long ignored the value of nature, with its area of forest cover dropping from 85% in 1945 to 35% in 1980.

Subsequently, the country put in place strong incentives for forest protection and strengthened environmental institutions and governance.

Today, despite a doubling of population, income per capita has tripled and forest cover is now over 50%.

Norway has used the surplus revenues from the sale of its oil to build the world's largest sovereign wealth fund.

In this way, rather than simply receiving a temporary income boost from selling its non-renewable reserves, Norway has laid the base for sustained long-term growth.

## Cost-effective solution

The South African ruling, which protected the interests of local people and of nature, is what the continent needs.

Ensuring that nature is protected while trade and the economy expand is ultimately more cost-effective than retrospective attempts to restore degraded natural assets.

As with other valued assets, governments need to protect and invest in nature, for its vital role sustaining social wellbeing and for nature's value in itself.

To deliver this, African countries will need strong political leadership and support from their trade and investment partners.

*By Maxwell Gomera, Director of the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services at UN Environment and James Vause, Head of Economics, at the World Conservation Monitoring Centre.*

*Maxwell Gomera is a 2018 Aspen New Voices Fellow. He is an expert on public investments in agriculture and nature. James Vause is an expert on the economics of biodiversity and environmental economic policy development.*

2

Rate this article

- [climate change Africa](#)
- [Macron East Africa](#)
- [United Nations Environment Assembly](#)



Written by [African Business Magazine](#)

African Business and its award-winning team is widely respected for its editorial excellence. We provide the all important tools enabling you to maintain a critical edge in a continent that is changing the world. Our special reports profile a wide range of sectors and industries including Energy, Oil and Gas, Aviation, Agriculture to name but a few.

[Read our Discussion Policy](#)