

Fossil Fuel Extraction Threatens Africa's Remaining Elephants
From [Tzeporah Berman and Ina-Maria Shikongoi, Independent Media Institute](#)
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Destructive oil drilling, fracking and new roads are coming to a UNESCO World Heritage site, putting endangered elephants at even greater risk.



***Not in my home:** A baby elephant with her mother. The Okavango Delta is home to Africa's largest surviving population herd, but their migratory routes are threatened by seismic testing in the Kavango Basin. (Photo credit: Curious Ape)*

The [growing global outcry](#) against the destruction caused by the oil and gas industry has pushed leaders to address their actions to fight the resulting climate and ecological crisis. Yet, the divergence between the ‘[climate champion](#)’ rhetoric—which was on full display at last year’s COP26 conference—and leaders’ concrete [climate commitments](#) needs to be scrutinized and put to test. The fate of humanity—in particular, the BIPOC and fenceline communities who are [bearing the brunt of the climate crisis](#)—depends on the actualization of these commitments.

In a 2022 [report](#), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that climate change is the cause of “[w]idespread deterioration of ecosystem structure and function” across the globe. The fossil fuel industry is not only responsible for the polluting products that worsen the climate but also for destroying ecosystems in their search for and extraction of oil and gas. That is exactly what is happening in the Kavango region in northern Namibia, home to many of Africa’s remaining wild elephants.

In the Namibian headwaters of the Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage site, the country’s flag flutters beneath Canada’s, flying above a new oil well. This violation of the [Namibian Constitution](#)—which requires that the national flag should be “hoisted first” and “flown on separate staffs” when flown with other nations’ flags—is a blatant symbol of neocolonialism, embodied further by an oil rig standing in the midst of a magnificent landscape, rich in biodiversity and a refuge for the wildlife and communities alike, their home for millennia.



Petro-colonialism: At the site of ReconAfrica's first oil well, Canada's flag even flutters above Namibia's, violating the country's national constitution which stipulates that the national flag must be flown on a separate staff from other international or national flags. (Photo credit: Namibia Media Holdings)

The Canadian flag marks the land where a destructive and controversial project is being carried out by the Canadian oil company called [ReconAfrica](#), which currently holds a license to explore for oil in an area extending over [13,200 square miles](#) in both Namibia and Botswana. Local communities and [environmental groups](#) point out that the massive pool of oil that the company hopes to access and extract oil and gas from will represent [one-sixth](#) of the world's remaining carbon budget when these products are finally used. The oil and gas also lie under wild and beautiful lands that are critical for providing millions of people access to drinking water, and are also home to wildlife that is crucial for the survival of global biodiversity.

Fossil fuel drilling in the region poses a catastrophic threat to the climate and global attempts being made by environmental groups and leaders to stop global biodiversity loss. The Kavango Basin is home to a diverse and rich array of wildlife and covers crucial migratory routes for the world's [largest remaining herd of savanna elephants](#), which are threatened on a [genocidal scale](#) by ReconAfrica's activities in the basin. Cheetahs, rhinos and other critically endangered species living in the region are also in grave danger of extinction as a result of this oil exploration.

Furthermore, the Okavango Delta is an [Indigenous territory](#), and this oil exploration by ReconAfrica threatens to displace and alienate [the San and Kavango communities](#), [jeopardizes the drinking water](#) for more than a million people calling the Kavango Basin their home, and threatens the region's [major](#) sources of income that are crucial to providing livelihood to the people here, including tourism, farming and fishing. This oil drilling by the company clearly breaches the rights and clauses outlined in the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), of which ReconAfrica's home country, Canada, is a signatory and has supposedly committed itself to honor.

Should the project pull ahead, a carbon bomb hangs over humanity's head. The company's [own projections](#) of 120 billion barrels of oil equivalent translate into [51.6 metric gigatons of CO2](#). To put this into perspective, one single metric gigaton is equal to 200,000 elephants that can be stacked to reach from the Earth to the moon. ReconAfrica's shortsighted fossil fuel bid makes a laughingstock of attempts to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, as outlined by the [Paris agreement](#).

The Namibian Minister of Mines and Energy, Tom Alweendo, is aware of the region's vulnerability but [still views the project as a source of revenue](#) for his country. However, new global oil demand scenarios that take into account climate policies such as zero-emissions vehicles mean that this project will probably create both [significant](#) stranded assets and unfunded cleanup, which will undermine Namibia's and Botswana's public revenues. In spite of the socio-environmental impacts and economic risks, the Namibian government is defending the project and attempting to [discredit local climate youth activists](#) through racist attacks and attempts to intimidate local opposition.

On the Canadian side, the Trudeau government is turning a blind eye to the project, despite human rights abuses, while claiming Canada is a climate champion. In April 2021, at U.S. President Joe Biden's [virtual climate summit](#), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [claimed](#), "Canada is a committed partner in the global fight against climate change, and together we will build a cleaner and more prosperous future for all." In practice, the Canadian government has not undertaken any concrete action to prevent ReconAfrica from contributing to the climate crisis. In addition, the company is operating in complete impunity in a region of the Global South despite obligations under international human rights law [requiring](#) Canada to protect foreign populations from human rights abuses perpetrated by their own companies.

It is time for Canadian officials to do everything in their power to ensure a federal investigation regarding ReconAfrica's activities and walk their talk to show their commitment to fighting climate change and to stop oil and gas plans from going forward in the Kavango Basin. This [means](#) barring finance to ReconAfrica from Export Development Canada, empowering the [Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise](#), which has the independence and the power to investigate human rights abuse allegations, and upholding Canada's international human rights law obligations by passing legislation requiring Canadian companies to prevent human rights abuses abroad, and to undertake comprehensive human rights and environmental due diligence throughout their global operations.



Near one of the exploratory wells in Kavango, in northern Namibia, a local soccer field was destroyed by ReconAfrica as it mined for sand, leaving local children without a place to play. (Photo credit: Fridays For Future Namibia)

The Dutch court's [recent ruling](#) holding Royal Dutch Shell responsible for its activities demonstrates how it is indeed possible to hold oil companies accountable wherever they operate. For the first time, a corporation has been obliged to answer for its actions in light of the climate crisis. With this court order, a

precedent has now been set in terms of multinationals' duty of care, and this follows the International Energy Agency's (IEA) [first 1.5 degrees Celsius-aligned energy scenario](#) declaring there is no room for new fossil fuel investment. This shows the potential power of legislation in protecting the world, fueling the campaign to make [ecocide a crime](#) and ensuring the arrest and prosecution of those who are enabling, funding and causing severe environmental harm.

In order to support countries like Namibia which rely on fossil fuel exploitation, international cooperation based on [principles of equity](#) is critical to ensure a just transition. Calls for initiatives like the [Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) could be helpful not only to demand the end of the expansion of fossil fuels but also to define the role wealthy nations in the Global North, like Canada, should play to support countries in the Global South in their bid to build stable economies while transitioning away from fossil fuels. A Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty would also help fulfill demands outlined in the communiqué of the [2020 Africa Energy Leaders Summit](#) and push wealthy countries to actually put an end to fossil fuel expansion, phase out existing production and secure a fair and just transition that will empower all humans to live with dignity while preserving precious ecosystems, of which we are all an integral part.

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