

Paper Number: 1042

The History of Diamond Mining in Namibia

Schneider, G.I.C.¹

¹Geological Survey of Namibia, Windhoek, gabi29156@gmail.com

The credit for the discovery that confirmed the presence of diamonds goes to a railway worker, Zacharias Lewala. In April 1908, a stone picked up by Lewala near Kolmanskop was given to his German supervisor, August Stauch, who quietly began to peg claims and started prospecting. All finds had to be



reported to the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwest-Afrika* within a month. By June 1908 the story was out and the rush was on. Lüderitz buzzed, people resigned their jobs, pegged claims and began to prospect and mine under the very harsh conditions of a barren, waterless desert subject to almost constant wind and regular, raging sandstorms that abraded even the hardest rocks.

Early recovery methods

The free-for-all did not last long. In September 1908, the German Government proclaimed the area a forbidden area and stopped any further pegging of claims. All mineral rights were allocated to the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwest-Afrika*. Existing claims were honoured so mining could continue. Some claim holders, such as Stauch, entered into agreements with the *Kolonialgesellschaft* to do the mining for it. Mining consisted of the removal of coarse and fine fractions in the field, mainly with the aid of cylindrical sieves. Initially, the diamond-bearing fraction was washed with a rotating movement in hand-held sieves and overturned on sorting tables for picking out of the diamonds. Operations increased rapidly, concentrating jigs were invented and banks of them were built into ever larger concentration plants. Narrow-gauge railway lines using mules or engines transported people, material and concentrate. Power stations and sea water desalination plants were set up. World War I interrupted operations but they gradually resumed late in 1915. Between 1908 and 1919, 6.26 million carats were recovered. In 1920, most of the stakeholders agreed to amalgamate their mineral rights into the Consolidated Diamond Mines of South West Africa (Ltd.) (CDM), and Kolmanskop, Elizabeth Bay and the Pomona area became the centres of operations.

CDM geologists found the incredibly rich terraces just north of the river mouth near present-day Oranjemund in 1928. Production here began in 1929 on a small scale. But the Great Depression halted production. In 1936, only Oranjemund resumed operations and the first wooden shacks eventually grew to a fully serviced company town. Stones of 1 to 5 carats were common and many were up to 20 carats. The largest ever found was 246 carats [1].

So far, 91 million carats have been recovered from the now almost exhausted Namibian onshore deposits between Oranjemund and Conception Bay (recoveries north thereof have been negligible) and 11 million carats from the offshore. Estimates are that 3000 million carats reached the sea, so that much more remains to be recovered. It is therefore not surprising that the Namibian offshore saw the



development of sophisticated marine diamond mining operations. The last frontier, the water which is too shallow to be accessed by mining vessels, and too deep to access it from land, is now tackled with innovative methods such as shore accretion.

Marine Diamond Mining

[1]_Schneider GIC (2009) Treasures of the Diamond Coast – A Century of Diamond Mining in Namibia. 320 pp., MacMillan Education, Windhoek.

