

DAILY NEWS

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Environmentalists demand halt of potential oil drilling project on Red Sea Coast

By Alexandra Sandels

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CAIRO/HURGHADA: As British oil company Burren Energy Ltd. makes final preparations for a potential oil drilling project near a protected area on the Red Sea Coast, environmental organizations demand the project's immediate halt.

Environmentalists claim that the project will have devastating consequences on the environment and on animal life.

"We will do anything and everything to protect our rich sea life and environment from bulldozers and oil drills. It's either make or break for us at this point. We won't give in," Amr Ali, managing director of international award-winning Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (Hepca), warned in an interview with *The Daily Star Egypt*.

It was in late April this year when things took a turn for the worse. Ali received a letter from London-based Burren Energy stating that the company was given an area of concession near Hurghada from the Minister of Petroleum.

Apart from issuing a letter of courtesy, the company also announced its plans to conduct a seismic survey of the location. Since this type of operation reportedly involves heavy machinery, the firm requested a meeting with Hepca representatives to discuss "the measures the company will take to minimize the impact on the environment in which it is operating."

Ali maintains that Burren's announcement came as a "total surprise" and that Hepca had not been consulted with or notified by any officials.

But David Evans, Geologist at Burren Energy Egypt, told *The Daily Star Egypt* that Burren is not conducting any drilling campaign, but only a seismic survey which will not cause any damage to the coastal reef in the concession area.

"We will conduct this non-invasive operation with minimal impact machinery to determine whether there is oil or not. We will lay cables in the water by hand which will help us to collect the necessary geophysical data. We will retrieve these cables by hand. Most of the work will be performed during the night to reduce disturbance to the area," Evans told *The Daily Star Egypt* in a telephone interview.

Mahmoud El-Kaissouni, chairman of the Egyptian Federation of Tourist Chambers' Ecotourism Committee, emphasized to *The Daily Star Egypt* however that Burren and its partners have "completely ignored everyone who is being seriously affected by the project," leading to an explosive situation.

"Several important ministers were ignored and not told about the project. This includes Red Sea diving centers which brought in more than \$3 billion dollars to the national economy from their activities last year. The governor of the Red Sea only found out about Burren's plans through an article I recently wrote on the topic for *Al-Ahram* newspaper. That is unacceptable behavior," El-Kaissouni said.

He added that Burren's Egyptian partners should take a considerable part of the blame, stressing that "they as Egyptians should have known the national laws better and made sure that ministers and officials were informed about the project."

Furthermore, when Ali recently met with representatives from Burren in Hurghada, he says he was stunned to hear that the company was planning to use heavy machinery, including so-called air guns, in their surveys of the concession area — "a not so environmentally-friendly tool," as Ali puts it.

“The whole meeting was a farce. They were trying to convince what they probably thought were a ‘group of stupid activists’ that their air gun techniques would not have a damaging affect on the environment and animal life. We have more than 70 studies proving that air guns severely hurt marine mammals,” Ali said angrily.

However, Evans disagreed, saying that numerous non-government agencies and organizations have published reports proving that air gun procedures do not destroy the reef. He further stated that ski-boats and dive boats going across the sea at high speeds scare fish and animals “just as air gun procedures might do.”

In an effort to patch up the wounds, Ali claims that Burren offered to cover their oil rigs with “decorative items” and exclude the “nicest piece of the reef” from their drilling activities.

“They are completely crazy. It’s like turning the pyramids into movie studios and painting them pink. They are ruining our natural resources and Egypt’s national heritage,” Ali continued.

According to Evans, Burren has decided to leave out the Shaab El Erg Reef, a area popular with divers home to many different sorts of marine mammals.

“We left out this piece of our concession area because we know it is an important and sensitive area where we shouldn’t work,” Evans continued.

The controversial concession area termed ‘North Hurghada Marine’ encompasses a 240 square meters located between two island protectorates near El Gouna and Shadwan Island; a favorite destination for sun vacationers and water sportsmen.

“Burren’s oil drilling may be conducted outside the protectorate itself, but it will still seriously harm the areas around it, including the protectorates. They are simply breaking the law in this project,” El-Kaissouni added.

According to Ali, oil spill has caused considerable damage to the Red Sea Coast in the past.

“Once we had an oil spill in Hurghada coming from a project 250 km up north. Imagine what it will look like having them drill in our backyard. I expect devastating consequences on the environment and the Red Sea’s rich animal life,” Ali said.

Stressing the importance of addressing Burren’s planned activities to Red Sea locals and officials, Ali suggested a public hearing in Hurghada, which Burren agreed to at first.

A week later, however, Hepca received a fax from Burren saying “we feel that a public hearing is not warranted or required” following discussions with the company’s Egyptian government partner Ganoub El Wadi and Burren’s Environmental Consultant Hani Shalaby.

“It is not a surprise that Burren cancelled the scheduled meeting. They knew that it would open the gates of hell and that the public would verbally slaughter them,” El-Kaissouni filled in.

Evans, however, says that he was under the impression that the company’s meeting with Hepca and Red Sea officials was a public meeting.

“We have focused as much as possible on the stakeholders in this project. Our main concern was to address the bread winners of the area in which we would be working, such as fishermen, dive centers and environmental associations. We did that,” Evans emphasized.

With no public hearing held, Ali told *The Daily Star Egypt* that it appears as if Burren has at least maintained a stream of written communication in recent time.

Not long ago, the Red Sea Association received a letter from Burren in which the company instructed the agency to keep all divers out during its initial tests, Ali said.

“If Burren is asking to keep divers away from their work area they should have included the many types of water mammals living there too,” Ali said.

Mahmoud Hanafi, general supervisor of the national parks of the Red Sea, stressed in an interview with *The Daily Star Egypt* that Burren’s planned drilling activities will not only have serious implications on the environment, but will also cause a significant drop in Red Sea tourism; a sector that boosted the Egyptian economy by more than \$7 billion last year.

“We are talking about drilling oil in a very sensitive area where humans, animals, coral reefs and several endangered species coexist. It would pose significant threats to the area’s natural resources and would blow a hole in tourism since you can’t have tourists dwelling around at drilling sites,” Hanafi told *The Daily Star*

Egypt.

El-Kaissouni warns of a “potential grave environmental disaster” as a result of the planned works.

Yet Burren is making other promises.

“We will use the best practices, instruments and standards in this project. Whether we decide to drill or not depending on the results from the geological survey, we will not touch the costal reef with the drills. We are now in the 21st century and have far better equipment available than when I started as a geologist 23 years ago,” Evans said.

He added that nine oil wells were drilled in Burren’s concession area between 1980 and 1993 without causing major damage.

“We have the military clearance and we have performed environmental check-ups in the area. Everything is in place,” Evans added.

But for El-Kaissouni, the stakes are much too high.

“The Red Sea and its beauties are like the cave of Aladdin for Egypt. I can’t imagine that oil drilling can prove more important for Egypt than maintaining the environment and the country’s prosperous tourism sector,” he said.