Palaeontological Heritage component of FibreCo Telecommunications, basic assessment for the proposed fibre optic data cable project: Route 4: George to Port Elizabeth

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Background

SRK Consulting Pty (Ltd) ("SRK") has been appointed by FibreCo Telecommunications ("FibreCo"), to undertake a BAR in terms of the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), (Act No. 107 of 1998) as amended in 2010 for the construction and operation of an optic fibre data cable and associated infrastructure linking certain cities and towns in South Africa. The authorisation of the BA study will be managed by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA).

This BA (DEA reference 12/12/20/2160) deals with the section of the route linking George and Port Elizabeth. Separate BA's are being undertaken for other sections of the route in South Africa. The FibreCo data cable is anticipated to follow national/ provincial road servitudes. Exact details regarding road cutting and river crossings have not yet been finalized.

Rob Gess consulting was contracted on 17th March 2011 to conduct a phase one Palaeontological Impact Assessment for this and five other routes. A drive through examination of this entire route was conducted together with a desktop assessment.

Geology and Palaeontology

The Geology of this route includes ancient pre-Gondwanan sediments of the Kaaimans Group, associated with the break up of Rodinia between 700 and 600 million years ago; granite intruded into these sediments around 550 million years ago; Agulhas Sea Gondwanan sediments, of the Table Mountain Group and lowermost Bokkeveld Group (Cape Supergroup), deposited between 500 and 400 million years ago; Late Jurassic and early to mid Cretaceous sediments of the Enon and Kirkwood Formation deposited between about 150 and 120 million years ago; as well as a range of Tertiary deposits dating to the last 30 million years.

The **Kaaimans Group**, situated near Natures Valley consists of a number of subunits, the Sandkraal Formation, Skaapkop Formation, Soetkraal Formation and Victoria Bay Formation. These units were deposited as sediments in a shallow sea that opened between the Kaapvaal Craton (consisting of most of southern Africa) and the Falklands Plateau situated to the south, approximately 700 million years ago. These sediments were extensively metamorphosed approximately 600 million years ago due to compression resulting from the closure of this Sea and its compaction between continental landmasses. Resultant crustal thickening led to the formation of Granite magma which intruded these metamorphosed sediments between 600 and 500 million years ago. Former shaly units have been transformed into schists, destroying any possible traces of past life. The sandier, well layered Sandkraal Formation alone has the potential to preserve evidence of past life. Records of metazoan life from such ancient rocks are, however, extremely rare and generally microscopic. As yet no fossils have been found in this unit.

Most of this route is situated over strata of the **Cape Supergroup**. More specifically the **Table Mountain Group** and lower portions of the **Bokkeveld Group** are represented. These rocks represent sediments deposited in the Aghulas Sea, which had opened to the south of the current southern African landmass in response to early rifting between Africa and South America.

The Table Mountain Group constitutes the first of three subdivisions of the Cape Supergroup. It comprises quartzitic sandstones derived from coarse sands deposited within the Agulhas Sea, and along its coastal plane. It was deposited during the Ordivician, Silurian and earliest Devonian Periods, approximately 500-400 million years ago. Between the mountains and the Sea, from the current positions of Port Elizabeth to George, a broad wave cut platform was developed about 30 million years ago during the Miocene. The result of this is that there is very little outcrop of less resistant (and generally more fossiliferous) strata along this route. Palaeontologically significant outcrops are generally restricted to river valleys that have subsequently carved deep gorges into this coastal plain.

The route is dominated by underlying strata of the Peninsular Formation, a sandy unit from which rare trace fossils have been recorded in the Western Cape, but which has, as yet, provided no palaeontological material in the Eastern Cape. Sandy units within the Table Mountain Group are generally of low palaeontological sensitivity.

More importantly, shale and mudstone interbeds within the Table Mountain Group are known to contain rare records of early Agulhas Sea life. Significantly the Soom and Disa shales of the Cederberg Formation provide an extremely valuable record of latest Ordivician life. The Soom shale exhibits soft tissue preservation, and has yielded specimens of primitive jawless fish, eurypterids, trilobites, orthocone nautiloids, brachiopods and molluscs. A brachiopod dominated invertebrate fauna has also been recorded from the somewhat sandier overlying Disa Formation. In addition to brachiopods this fauna includes trilobites, bryozoans, crinoids, tentaculitids and crustaceans. Due to poor outcrop, fossil faunas of this unit have not yet been uncovered in the Eastern Cape.

The Baviaanskloof Formation, uppermost unit of the Table Mountain Group has been recorded, particularly within the Klein Karroo, to contain concentrated lenses of invertebrate fossils which help to establish an earliest Devonian age for this Formation. They provide very early examples of the cold water marine Malvinokaffric invertebrate faunas that characterised the near polar Agulhas Sea during deposition of the Bokkeveld Group and its equivalents in south eastern South America. The Baviaanskloof Formation fossil record is dominated by brachiopods, but also includes the remains of trilobites, bivalves, gastropods and tentaculitids. Some burrow fills are also known.

Extremely important new outcrops of fossiliferous material within the Baviaanskloof Formation have recently been discovered during PIA survey work in the Eastern Cape. These include invertebrate bearing beds containing remains of bivalves, brachiopods, trilobites, tentaculitids and echinoderms, trace fossils, as well as South Africas oldest plant fossil locality. South Africa's previously oldest plant fossil, *Dutoitia pulchra* (Hoeg, 1930), collected within this study area from the Blaaukrantz River Pass, may well be of the same age.

The Bokkeveld Group, constituting the middle subdivision of the Cape Supergroup conformably overlies the Table Mountain Group. Bokkeveld strata consist largely of shales and thin interbedded sandstones derived from marine continental slope muds of early to mid Devonian (+/- 400 - 370 myo) age – which were deposited within the basin of the Agulhas Sea.

A roughly east-west trending syncline, bounded in the north and south by rocks of the Peninsular Formation of the Table Mountain Group, extends from near Jeffreys Bay to Plettenberg Bay. Progressively younger formations of the Table Mountain Group outcrop towards the centre of the syncline, in which shales of the Ceres Subgroup of the Bokkeveld Group are exposed.

Shales of the Ceres Group also underlie the route north of Jeffreys Bay and west of Humansdorp, but these are deeply weathered and present no outcrop.

Lower Bokkeveld Group strata have yielded abundant fossil evidence of a range of early to mid Devonian deep water invertebrate faunas comprised of diverse brachiopods, molluscs, echinoderms and trilobites. In addition a few very localised but exciting fish fossils have been described. Trace fossils are also known.

Only two areas of palaeontological sensitivity were identified along this route. These are the gorges of the Blaaukrantz and Kleinbos rivers, in which the route crosses upper Table Mountain Group and lower Bokkeveld Group shales exposed within the centre of the eastwest trending syncline. It is not yet clear how the cable will cross these deep gorges, but SANRAL has indicated that it will not be willing to allow the cable to be attached to the bridges. It seems highly likely that, in the case of the Blaaukrantz River gorge, the cable line will need to be routed along the old Blaaukrantz River Pass, somewhat to the north of the main route. This route is of high palaeontological sensitivity as it, unusually, provides good outcrops of mudstones and shales of the upper Table Mountain group. These include the type locality of *Dutoitia pulchra*, South Africa's oldest described plant fossil.

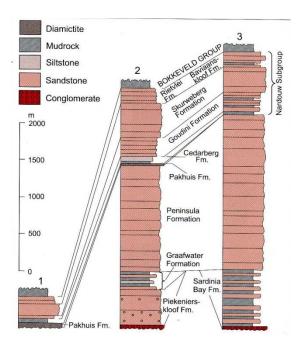


Fig. 1. Stratigraphy of the Table Mountain Group, 3 represents the Eastern Cape (Johnson *et al.*, 1999)

Late Jurassic and Early to Mid Cretaceous sediments of the **Enon** and **Kirkwood Formations** (**Uitenhage Group**) were deposited in small basins that formed along the southern margin of South Africa due to stretching and tearing associated with the final breakup of Gondwana. Although the Enon Formation, consisting of pebbly conglomerates deposited in high energy terrestrial environments, is very poor in fossil content, much of what we know of Cretaceous vertebrate life comes from evidence preserved within riverine deposits of the Kirkwood Formation. These include the remains of a number of Dinosaur taxa, principally from the Algoa Basin. Outcrops of the Kirkwood Formation along this route are extremely restricted. There are no outcrops along the route in the immediate vicinity of Port Elizabeth, and occurrences on the east side of the Gamtoos River do not impinge on the road reserve. Outcrops near Plettenberg Bay are insignificant. Better exposures are apparent where the route circumscribes the Knysna Lagoon, however these are very weathered and unlikely to be palaeontologically significant.

In the vicinity of Port Elizabeth much of the bedrock is covered by partially consolidated sand dunes of the **Nanaga Formation**, which are unfossiliferous. Other Tertiary deposits such as the **Wankoe Formation** between Plettenberg Bay and Natures Valley, and the lime rich **Bluewater Bay Formation** east of Jeffreys Bay are also not considered to be palaeontologically sensitive.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Very little palaeontological material is likely to be impacted by this development. This is largely the result of deep weathering and marine erosion of strata during the Miocene, which have removed most topography and limited outcrops. Extensive covers of unfossiliferous Tertiary material further mask the ancient bedrock.

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It is recommended that cutting of a route through the Blaaukrantz River and Kleinbos River gorges is monitored by a qualified palaeontologist.

