

# Ravishing Gaia: A Multi-species History of Diamond Mining, Kimberley South Africa 1870-1920

The chance find of a diamond, at the foot of a Camelthorn tree on a kopje in South Africa in 1871, initiated an industrial mining revolution, the effects of which continue to reverberate into the present and far into the future. The Camelthorn was chopped down and the kopje shovelled away, to become the biggest hole dug by human hand and the richest diamond mine of the world, the “Big Hole” in Kimberley. The mining revolution, triggered by diamonds, radically transformed all of southern Africa. To be sure, it brought untold financial wealth to a small number of people, but at the expense of shattered ecosystems and societies throughout southern Africa. I am in the process of researching and writing a multi-species history of diamond mining in Kimberley, South Africa, between 1870 and 1920. I am drafting a history that consciously seeks to decentre the human, and focus instead on the inter-connected nature of the past, in which geology and geography, flora and fauna, and water and air all play a role. In this I am inspired by a worldview that seriously acknowledges the symbiotic interconnected nature of the world in which we live.

## Muscles and Miners

The labour of thousands upon thousands of human and non-human animals made possible the incredible wealth that emerged from the “Big Hole”. Human labour was initially attracted to the mine by the “excellent bait” of firearms (De Kiewiet), and soon came to be incarcerated in compounds that were more akin to prisons than accommodation (Turrell). Cattle provided the mainstay of draught labour, along with equines, and prior to the steam engine all heavy haulage at and to the mine was done by oxen and mules. These animals, as well as the men who controlled them, were drawn from all over the sub-continent.



Kimberley Mine, 1874

## Geology and Geography

The unique geology and geography of the “Big Hole”, its very foundation, forms the physical context within which the history to be written takes place. A geology that allowed for the development of diamonds in the earth’s crust 3 billion years ago, and their subsequent transport to the surface 90 million years via a volcanic pipe, the weathered remains of which became Colesburg Kopje. A kopje that existed in an arid and harsh environment that was determined by the geography of its location.



Kimberley Big Hole, October 2021

## Water and Wood

All water had to be carted to Kimberley, until a pipe line was laid to the Vaal River in 1882. The extreme aridity of the environment in which the “Big Hole” exists allowed for the growth of shrubs and grasses. The only trees indigenous to the area were *Acacia erioloba* (Camel thorn) and *Acacia tortilis* (Umbrella thorn), slow growing hardwoods with a lifespan in excess of 250 years. These were soon stripped from the land within a radius of 250 kilometres of Kimberley. Shillington indicated that a staggering 200 waggon-loads of wood were consumed as fuel every week in 1885 (1985). Mixed deciduous forests a thousand kilometres away in Knysna and Tsitsikama, as well as in the Cederberg, and later as far away as western Buluzi were stripped of wood for building and mining purposes in Kimberley. Instead of indigenous trees, stands of what would later become invasive species such as, *Schinus molle* (Pepper tree), *Prosopis glandulosa* (Mesquite), and *Eucalyptus* (Blue gum) from the Americas and Australasia, were planted.

## Fodder and Food

The extreme aridity of the environment determined an ecology of mobility in the area prior to 1870. Herds of ungulates, including cattle and associated humans, engaged in seasonal migration in keeping with the grazing resources available. Following the discovery of diamonds, all fodder and food had to be transported to Kimberley. The hunting of animals for biltong production expanded as far afield as the Linyanti River 1500 kilometres to the North. Similarly 1000 kilometres to the South the fishing industry in the Western Cape expanded. Animals for flesh were driven from all over southern Africa, even across the Kalahari from what is today central Namibia. Grains and fodder came from the Western Cape and Highveld, and preserves of meat, fruit and vegetables in tins and bottles from around the world.



Diamond bearing Kimberlite, October 2021

## Wealth and Waste Death and Destruction

The “Big Hole” generated tremendous wealth and waste. To produce 14.5 million carats of diamonds an estimated 22.5 million tons of kimberlite were mined, processed and dumped. In the South African War these dumps provided shelter from shelling, and before and after the war the dumps provided easy sites for the burial of thousands of unnamed labourers who died through disease and accident. The wealth generated by the “Big Hole” initiated an industrial mining revolution in southern Africa, which unleashed a process of transformation, inequality and destruction that bedevils the sub-continent into the present, and will almost certainly continue to do so far in the future.