

Diamonds are Forever

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ABSTRACT It is officially accepted that the first diamond in South Africa was discovered on the banks of the Gariep in 1867. At that point in time the area was inhabited by the San, the Khoikhoi and the Tswana. There are indications that the original inhabitants were familiar with diamonds, had a specific use for them and were already fully aware of their potential value by 1869. Subsequent discoveries led to a rush and thousands of diggers congregated on the banks of the Vaal River. Because of the original inhabitants' knowledge of diamonds and the area, they were the ones who showed the first diggers where to dig. In all probability the majority of the diamonds discovered during the initial years of the diamond industry were also found by members of the indigenous population. By means of their capital and advanced technology the white diggers monopolised the diamond industry and overexploited the region – only to depart afterwards. The original inhabitants stayed behind, but this time without their assets – diamonds, land and stock. A typical culture of poverty developed and almost the only option available was to eke out an existence as small-scale diggers. Diamonds are not a renewable resource. And because the available sources were exploited intensively and almost depleted, the life span of the diggings cannot really be extended through judicious management. In order to survive, the small-scale diggers have already developed a range of indigenous “resource management techniques”. These socio-cultural mechanisms are the subject matter of discussion of this paper.