

OUT OF ACTION: Private vintage steam train operator Atlantic Rail says it has been battling to get Transnet's permission to restore and run the Red Devil.

PICTURE: MELINDA STUURMAN

Historic locomotives run out of steam

A Transnet decision to sell assets may mean end of the line for many decommissioned engines

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SOUTH Africa's rail tourism is in a shambles – and some of its most historic steam locomotives are in danger of ending up as scrap metal.

One of them is the renowned Red Devil, the only one of its kind in the world.

The Transnet Foundation is believed to own about 200 old steam locos, but most are deteriorating at station sidings across the country.

Rail tourism took a knock last year when the Outeniqua Choe-Tjoe, which ran between George and Mossel Bay, was shut down. Soon afterwards, the Apple Express in Port Elizabeth also ground to a halt because of a lack of funding.

Now, steam locomotives such as the Red Devil could be scrapped as part of Transnet's strategy to dispose of some of its assets.

"Transnet has listed all its heritage assets and is making preparations to get rid of them," said Chris Janisch, chairman of the Heritage Railway Association of Southern Africa. While some might be bought



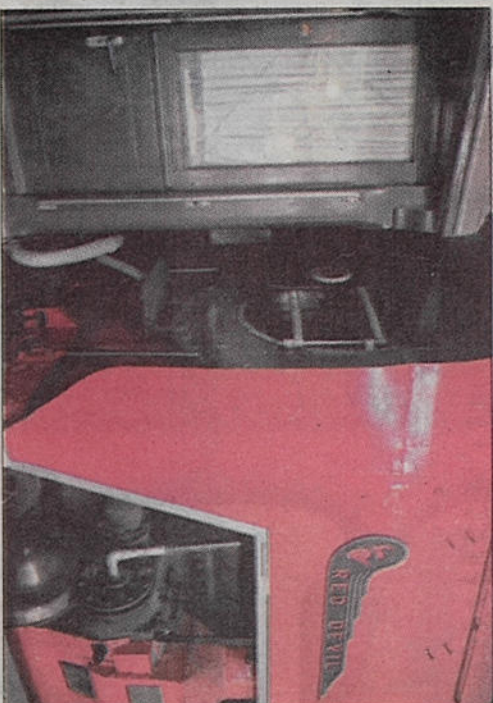
PULLING POWER: The Red Devil steam locomotive hauls the Union Limited tour train during its heyday. It has not run for more than eight years. PICTURE SUPPLIED

by enthusiasts, the locos were likely to be sold at market value, which meant that scrap metal would get the bulk of them. Those that Transnet held on to faced an uncertain future, he said.

Transnet Foundation spokeswoman Thandi Mlangeni said the SA Heritage Resource Agency (Sahra) was identifying Transnet's heritage locomotives

before "disposal and preservation of heritage assets" went ahead.

Rail enthusiasts and steam clubs in Cape Town, Germiston, Durban, Pretoria and Creighton in KwaZulu-Natal say they can do little more than watch over some of the foundation's locomotives. Ian Pretorius, director of the private vintage steam train



GOING NOWHERE: The Red Devil locomotive stands idle at Cape Town Station at the mercy of vandals and copper thieves. PICTURE: MELINDA STUURMAN

operator Atlantic Rail, which houses the Red Devil at Cape Town Station, said that despite their efforts, the engine had been stripped of copper pipes and Atlantic had to remove some parts to prevent further theft.

The Red Devil is a former Class 25 steam locomotive, built in the 1950s and later modified to significantly decrease its coal

and water consumption. Now a Class 26, and the only one of its kind in the world, it has been out of action for eight years.

Pretorius said that although Atlantic was desperate to fix the locomotive, it could not do so without Transnet's permission.

"We've been trying to secure permission for years, but there's so much procrastination in coming to a decision. Even if

we do get permission, we probably wouldn't be able to run her on mainlines because Transnet has a ban on running steam locos on mainlines." Mlangeni denied that Transnet had received any requests from steam clubs or associations in the past two years.

She said some steam clubs that had Transnet locomotives had neither spent any money on them nor operated them for years, resulting in some engines being in a state of disrepair.

She added that Transnet's mainlines were predominantly used for its core business, freight rail. Any other requests were secondary.

Pretorius said most of the steam trains still in operation were privately owned, and were run at a huge cost because of high coal prices, as well as pilot and rail fees.

"If these assets... are left to rust, and then go out on tender, the scrap merchants will win and our railway heritage will be lost and turned into cars or tin cans. This is the reality of the situation that faces us all in railway preservation in South Africa."