

Award-winning actor launches gold explorer in Sierra Leone

By: Trish Saywell
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With roles in the latest James Bond movies *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace* and a parallel career on Broadway, award-winning actor Jeffrey Wright is a busy man. His performances have earned him a Tony, a Golden Globe and an Emmy, but over the last seven years he says he has spent more than 97% of his time on developing a gold exploration company and charitable foundation in Sierra Leone.

Wright co-founded Taia LLC in 2003 after touring the country while filming the movie *Ali*, starring Will Smith, in Mozambique. Now the company has engaged Northland Capital Partners for a private share offering in Taia Lion Resources, a new company to be registered in Alberta.

"We hope to take it public in the next three to six months once we have drill results --something tangible for investors to analyze," explains Mike House of Northland Capital in Toronto. "There's gold all over the place in Sierra Leone. It's got a great management team, the property is in the right real estate...The valuation, the property, the management, is a perfect storm for investors who like this kind of early stage gold play."

Incoming chairman of Taia Lion Resources is veteran mining executive Ian Stalker, co-founder of Ashanti Goldfields. Stalker has described Taia as having "assembled a portfolio of exciting properties in West Africa's most under-explored greenstone belts."

"The group's country expertise and relationships on the ground are simply unmatched," Stalker outlined in a press release. "It is now up to us to explore the concessions systematically, as the presence of gold is abundantly clear on these properties with multiple artisanal sites working high-grade quartz veins, lateritic in-situ gold deposits and alluvial terraces."

The tale of how Wright, a political science graduate from Amherst College, built those relationships is almost as interesting as his film career.

"I had been following the war in Sierra Leone very closely for several years beginning in the late 1990s and it happened that I met a gentleman who lived in Sierra Leone while I was working on the film *Ali*, shot in Mozambique," Wright

recalls in a telephone interview from New York. "He was curious about my interest in the country and I was curious about him. He had been involved in the war on the government side so I felt comfortable traveling back with him to Freetown during this last phase of the war."

That trip was to alter Wright's career path more than he could have foreseen at the time. Shortly after that trip, he set up a logistics company in the country providing services to companies engaged in all sorts of industries, including palm oil and mining.

"From the start my involvement was predicated on the idea that if we did well, we would earmark some of the proceeds back into social development initiatives," he says.

His work in logistics led Wright and his colleagues to mining opportunities. "We recognized that we could bring valuable assets in logistics to a mining setting," he continues, "and we also recognized that there was a vast disparity between the potential in the mining space and the reality on the ground. We wanted to take advantage of that and see if we could narrow that disparity and really build a company that was first-rate, first-tier, and lead the way on gold exploration and also in corporate social responsibility."

Since then the actor has tailored his career around his work in Sierra Leone and in particular the Taia Peace Foundation, a non-profit arm the company established to undertake cost-effective social development work in local communities. In February it will complete the reconstruction of the 18-mile Manowa-Sandaru road, a farm-to-market corridor serving one of the least accessible corners of Sierra Leone, a project announced by former U.S. president Bill Clinton in the 2009 Clinton Global Initiative in New York.

Wright says he wants to create a modern 21st century gold explorer in the country and at the same time, undertake important social development work through the Taia foundation. "We're trying to develop a symbiotic relationship between commercial and philanthropic work," he explains. "Our ability to build commercial success will enable us to get things done in terms of social development."

Wright also argues that the best way forward for developing African countries is to build strong companies that can create jobs and income.

"The more I learned from a first-hand perspective, the more I realized that the most effective way to improve the situation in Africa is through creating strong, inclusive commercial enterprises that recognize competitive advantages and the

potential within the continent," he says. "In that way I think I deviate from some of the other actor types who have been part of the dialogue about Africa. I think we've gotten off track a bit in terms of real effective engagement on the continent."

In terms of business opportunities in Sierra Leone, Wright is particularly interested in the country's natural resource potential -- both in mining and agriculture. And on the mining side, he says, "best practices had not been utilized and there was an opportunity from a business standpoint to take advantages of some of the missteps of others."

Part of the \$7 million Taia hopes to raise through a private placement with Northland Capital will go towards the acquisition of Sierra Leone-based mining company Lion Mining and its Lake Sonfon property and mining camp on the Sula-Kangari greenstone belt.

Taia also owns 100% of the Gori Hills property on the Gori Hills greenstone belt. It also holds the Sandaru property, about 85 km east of Gori Hills, as well as the Pujehun diamond concession in southern Sierra Leone.

Following the private placement, Wright will serve as vice-chairman of Taia Lion Resources and will continue to chair the company's charitable arm.

Hopefully Wright, who co-starred with George Clooney in the 2005 award-winning film *Syriana* and also played Colin Powell in Oliver Stone's *W*, will save some time for acting.

He is currently playing the lead in John Guare's *A Free Man of Colour* at the Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater and will next appear in the Duncan Jones-directed sci-fi drama *Source Code* in April.