# Conservation breakthrough in Botswana

Title The barren, inhospitable salt flats of Botswana?s Makgadikgadi Pans might hardly seem like a conservation hotspot, but its designation as an Important Bird Area gives one an inkling that there is more to the area than meets the eye. Indeed, it is one of only four breeding sites for the Near Threatened Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* in Africa ? as well as providing a haven for 30 other globally and nationally important birds. To date, the breeding sites of the Lesser Flamingo in the Makgadikgadi have been protected by their remoteness and inaccessibility, but in recognition of the crucial role they play in the long-term survival of the species, the Botswana Government has recently gazetted a flamingo sanctuary to provide formal protection of the area. ?We are very aware of the importance of the flamingo nesting areas in the Makgadikgadi, especially in the light of current threats to the Lake Natron breeding site in Tanzania, and the Kamfers Dam artificial island in South Africa? said Dr Lucas Rutina, Regional Wildlife Officer responsible for implementing the project. ?We felt that we should take action to secure the Makgadikgadi site since it is the largest and most important in Southern Africa?.

Community members assist Dr McCulloch (centre) with flamingo capture (Photo: P Hancock)

The sanctuary was only declared after extensive consultation with all communities living around the area, which revealed widespread support for the initiative. Community members share a common vision for the area, whereby they plan to create a buffer of community photographic areas around the core protected area, thereby creating a larger more viable sanctuary from which they could also benefit without impinging on the sensitive breeding site. ?We are committed to protecting the flamingos as the flagship for biodiversity in the Makgadikgadi? said David Seabe, Secretary for the Gumakutshaa Conservation Trust which represents communities in the area. ?We also realise this species is one of our most important assets - the sight of 100,000 flamingos on the pans is one of Africa?s top birding spectacles which can drive avi-tourism in our area? he explained. Regulations for the sanctuary have been drafted by Botswana?s Department of Wildlife and National Parks, with inputs from community members, flamingo experts Tim Liversedge and Dr Graham McCulloch, and BirdLife Botswana (BirdLife Partner). A management plan will be completed shortly. The flamingo sanctuary joins several other protected bird sanctuaries in the country, reaffirming Botswana?s commitment to conserving birds and biodiversity, not just during 2010, but as an ongoing responsibility to its people. Top image: Part of the flamingo breeding colony (Photo: G McCulloch)