

Ecology now knocks out Lake Natron Soda Ash mining

Title

The proposed soda ash mining at Lake Natron has suffered another major blow as a new scientific study shows that such an activity would 'almost certainly' wipe out the Lesser Flamingo population. The study also shows that ninety per cent of the Lake is important for flamingo survival. Lesser Flamingos also breed occasionally when conditions are right and this is difficult to predict and monitor.

Conducted over the last 8 months on behalf of the National Development Corporation (Tanzania government agency), the study reveals that the breeding hotspots are to the north, eastern and southern lagoons of the lake. Unfortunately, the 'resource' that NDC proposes to mine sits squarely over these hotspots.

'After hatching, the chicks, accompanied by adults, criss-cross the lake in search of fresh water, which is available from the many springs that dot the lake fringes. Access to fresh water is critical as this removes excess soda from the feathers, which would otherwise cause death' said Marc Baker of Ecological Initiatives in Arusha, Tanzania, last week.

The study was accomplished, among other things using low-flying drone helicopter.



Lake Natron in northern Tanzania is the most important breeding site for Lesser Flamingos in the world. Eastern Africa has between 1.5-2.5 million Lesser Flamingos - representing 75 per cent of the global population - and most of them are hatched at Lake Natron. Since 2006, the Government of Tanzania has maintained a keen interest in mining soda ash at Lake Natron. However, local communities and environmental organisations in Tanzania and beyond have cautioned against the move, citing serious environmental, ecological and socio-economic impacts. BirdLife International, the Lake Natron Consultative Group and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have led a campaign against the proposal.

Tata Chemical Industries of India which initially put forward the soda ash proposal withdrew in 2008.

A recent economic study showed soda ash mining would lead to economic losses of up to \$492 million in 50 years while tourism and livelihoods support would provide benefits of up to \$1.57 billion. [Read more](#)

Lebaraka Laizer, a local resident of Lake Natron said: "The authorities have refused to listen to the voice of local communities, who have rejected soda ash mining." "We rejected it because it will damage tourism and pastoralism which are our lifeline. It should not be allowed," he added.

The new study further shows that the earlier plan of mining soda ash using brine (concentrated salty water) is not workable since the lake comprises of a set of separate lagoons. "Excavating the hard material during the dry season poses a serious challenge because it is difficult to tell when flamingos will breed," said Marc.

"Evidence has now converged. Economic studies have shown soda ash mining is not a viable option. Ecology, hydrology and technical considerations now confirm the same," said Ken Mwathe, Policy and Advocacy Programme Coordinator at BirdLife International. "The Government of Tanzania should respect this evidence and drop soda ash mining?"

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