

Fresh Lake Natron soda ash push threatens the future of East Africa's Flamingos

Title

BirdLife International, a partnership of over 120 NGOs globally, is gravely concerned over recent statements by the Government of Tanzania regarding the intention to construct two soda ash factories at **Lake Natron** and Engaruka in northern Tanzania. The National Development Corporation's (NDC) Acting Managing Director, Mr. Mlingi Mkucha, has been quoted as saying that the two separate factories will produce 1.5 million tonnes of soda ash per year and will employ over 1,000 people and are expected to bring in net income of \$480 m (720 billion Tanzanian shillings). NDC further said it was looking for investors to take up the investment which will be preceded by a land use plan.

Of great concern is the assertion by the NDC that research has shown that "mining of soda ash will not have any negative impacts on the breeding of Lesser Flamingos" and the environment. They have further stated that the Lake Natron factory will be built at least 10 kilometres from the lake "to avoid disrupting the flamingos."

One report quotes a highly placed source saying Tanzania may go ahead without fear at Lake Natron, because "Kenya to the north is already mining soda ash at another shallow salt lake, Lake Magadi, that is still frequented by flamingos."

Festo Semanini, the Head of the BirdLife International Office in Tanzania, based in Arusha says: "Mining of soda ash from Lake Natron would be the greatest ecological mistake Tanzania has ever committed". "Indeed, recent studies have shown that mining would wipe out the lesser flamingos, to the detriment of Tanzanian economy and that of other East African countries. Flamingos use over 90% of the Lake and digging the soda ash is the real threat; not where you place the factory," he added.

The new call for fast tracking of soda ash mining comes at a time when Lake Natron has drawn the attention of the UN tourism body, the **World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)** and nominated it as part of a global ecotourism project – **Destination Flyways** - covering 8 countries. Lake Natron is one of only three such sites selected in Africa. Two months ago, a delegation from UNWTO visited Lake Natron and was impressed with the tourism potential. As a result, Tanzania's Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, BirdLife International, the

local community and other stakeholders are in the process of developing a funding proposal.

Mining of soda ash at Lake Natron would contravene international conventions especially the [Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#). During a Ramsar Advisory Mission in February 2008, the Government of Tanzania was requested to prepare an Integrated Management Plan (IMP) for Lake Natron Ramsar Site. “The IMP has not been developed to date” said Ken Mwathe, the Policy and Advocacy Manager at BirdLife International Africa office. “A holistic plan for the entire area must be developed and all major developments, including road and rail network subjected to Strategic Environmental Assessment.”

On the other hand, Lake Natron and Magadi in Kenya are not directly comparable. Lake Natron is the only regular **breeding** site for the 1.5-2.5 million Lesser Flamingos in Eastern Africa. “Lesser Flamingos use Lake Magadi and other lakes in the Great Rift Valley as feeding sites. Soda ash mining at Lake Magadi has been going on for 100 years but it has not wiped out the flamingo population. However, it would be detrimental at Lake Natron” said Dr. Chris Magin, the Senior Partner Development Officer at the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) (RSPB, BirdLife in UK).

BirdLife International is further concerned that the Government has not taken into consideration economic studies that have demonstrated that soda ash mining would not be economically viable.

In a [study](#) completed in 2012, experts from Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania led by Dr Reuben Kadigi concluded soda ash mining would deliver negative returns to the Tanzanian economy and local people (with a projected loss of between \$44 and \$492 million over 50 years). However the Tanzanian public and local communities would gain between \$1.28 and \$1.57 billion in 50 years, if the Government invested in tourism, protection of the environment and promotion of local livelihood alternatives.

“We are working with the Tanzania government, the conservation community and the UN to develop Lake Natron’s tourism potential and promote community livelihoods. It is therefore essential that the soda ash plan be set aside to make this possible” said Dr Julius Arinaitwe, BirdLife International’s Regional Director for Africa.

“Furthermore, with India, China and the USA increasingly producing synthetic and cheaper soda ash, efforts by the government at Lake Natron could produce white elephants,” he added.

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