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Over 18,000 residents of Engaruka area of [Lake Natron, Tanzania](#), are up in arms against a government plan to build a soda ash factory in the area. Over the past one year, the National Development Corporation (NDC) has been carrying out intensive exploration of soda ash deposits to complement those at Lake Natron.

At a press conference held at an Arusha hotel last week, the residents condemned the plan terming it a threat to their livelihood and the environment. Led by Mr. Alex Babulo, Ms Noosikito Rwako and Loserian Ramadhani they said they were not consulted on the matter: they just saw big trucks and machinery appear one morning and starting work. [Read more](#)

The local communities are worried that soda ash mining will deplete scarce water resources, destroy land that is used for livestock keeping and agriculture and chase away the many birds, including flamingos, that regularly use Lake Engaruka.

‘We feed our cattle here and if they put up a mining plant it will destroy the water source. We are all going to perish?’ said Ms Rwako.

Lake Natron and Engaruka are critically important for [Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor*](#). Natron is the most important breeding site for the species globally. Eastern Africa has up to 2.5 million birds, which represents three-quarters of the global population ? and most of them are hatched at Lake Natron. The initial plan to build a \$450 million soda ash plant presented by Tata Chemicals was withdrawn after intense international and local opposition. However, the Tanzanian government has maintained a keen interest through NDC.

Recent scientific studies have cast doubt on the viability of the soda ash plan. A government commissioned study in 2013 showed that flamingos utilize over 90 per cent of the lake, thus a soda factory would ‘almost certainly’ wipe out the Lesser Flamingo population. [Read more](#)

Another economic study, conducted in 2012 by experts from Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania, concluded that soda ash mining is not economically viable. The report said investment in tourism, environmental conservation and improvement of livelihoods was a better economic option in the long term. [Read more](#)

‘Local communities have consistently opposed this plan. From Ngare Sero to Wosi Wosi and now Engaruka; the local people have said ‘No?’ said Mr. Festo Semanini, the Head of BirdLife International Project office in Tanzania. ‘If not for the local people, for whom is the factory being built? Clearly, this plan has no future.’