

New Lake Natron soda ash exploration raises concern

Title

The Government of Tanzania has started exploring for soda ash at Engaruka basin, which is part of the Lake Natron ecosystem. The exploration involves taking core samples to establish if there are sufficient amounts of the right kind of soda to justify the development of infrastructure that would be required to mine and remove the resource to the coast.

Recent information indicates that six companies have submitted bids to the National Development Corporation (NDC), a government agency, as they position themselves to mine the soda ash, if the exploration is successful (Read more [here](#)).

According to Lota Melamari, former CEO for Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST), the exploration causes major concerns since there is no structured consultation on the matter. “The authorities have not followed due process as far as Environmental and Social Impact Assessment is concerned. NDC should put everything on the table since this is a legal requirement,” he said.

Lebaraka Nainyeyengeri Laizer, a local resident says the local communities are worried about the ongoing exploration activities since they do seem to discriminate against arable and grazing land “We just saw earth movers and experts arrive, there was no consultation at all” he said. “We are concerned that only a few leaders seem to know about this, the wider community is in the dark.”

Lake Natron is the most important breeding site for Lesser Flamingos in the world. Eastern Africa has 1.5-2.5 million birds - 75 per cent of the world population - and most of them are hatched at this saline lake in Northern Tanzania. In 2006, Tata Chemicals put forward the first proposal to construct a factory at the Lake but this was withdrawn in 2008 after international pressure. Since then, the Government of Tanzania through NDC has maintained a keen interest to develop soda ash mining infrastructure.

image not found
http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SAM_0729-300x225.jpg



Oldonyo Lengai (mountain of God)
overlooking Lake Natron © Ken Mwathe

It is in the public domain that the proposed construction of a new port in Tanga as well as the Tanga-Arusha-Musoma railway has a strong link to soda ash mining. The Tanzania Government plans a rail branch from Arusha to Lake Natron to transport soda ash to the coast.

The renewed soda ash push comes after a new study revealed that mining of the resource at Lake Natron would not be economically viable. According to the study by economic experts from Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania stood to lose up to \$ 492 **million** in 50 years, if the soda ash option is pursued. However, the study showed that investment in tourism, community livelihoods and environmental conservation was a better economic option. By pursuing this option, Tanzania stood to gain up to \$ 1.57 **billion** in the next 50 years. (Read more [here](#))

“As a country, Tanzania will be missing a golden opportunity to improve the lives of its people through tourism because of a low-value mineral. Competition from cheap alternatives from China further complicates the soda ash argument,” said Ken Mwathe, the Policy and Advocacy Manager at the BirdLife International Africa Secretariat. He added: “The soda ash plan has failed both the ecological and economic tests; it should be discarded.”



Part of the community living around Lake
Natron © Ken Mwathe