

Serengeti highway back on World Heritage agenda

Title

At the World Heritage Committee (WHC) meeting in June 2011, the Tanzanian government confirmed that the 53km stretch of road through the Serengeti National Park would not be paved, and would continue to be managed by TANAPA (the Tanzanian National Park Authority). It would be continue to be used mainly for tourism and administrative purposes, which results in a low level of traffic. The Tanzanian government was also said to be seriously considering construction of an alternative road running south of the Serengeti. The BirdLife Partnership welcomed this statement as the removal of a threat to the world's best known national park, which is part of the route of the world's greatest mammal migration, involving 1.8 million wildebeest and other antelopes. But since June 2011, the Tanzanian authorities have been progressing the plans for the eastern stretch of the Serengeti road, and there have been no clear public statements about the western stretch of the road.

A revised Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) has not been published or submitted to the WHC. Nor has there been any public statement about an alternative southern route. BirdLife understands that some commercial traffic is already passing through the Serengeti National Park. Although some of the Tanzanian Government communications state that the road will not be upgraded and will remain a gravel road, at present it is not a gravel road but a seasonal dirt track, so any change, including gravelling, will in fact amount to upgrading.

The Serengeti National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Important Bird Area, is home to over 450 bird species including two endemic to Tanzania. It is thought one third of Africa's population of Endangered Rueppell's Vultures *Gyps rueppellii* uses the Serengeti ecosystem. 300,000 tourists visit the Serengeti every year, and tourism is a major foreign exchange earner for Tanzania. It would therefore be an economic as well as an environmental mistake to endanger the Serengeti.

Globally, public perceptions would be very negative, eclipsing the current goodwill and admiration for the many conservation achievements of Tanzania. The local communities' livelihoods base could also be greatly and negatively impacted. BirdLife is concerned that a road across the Serengeti would negatively affect its biodiversity in a number of ways, but especially through increased road kills of large mammals and attendant scavengers, including vultures, which are facing extreme pressure outside Protected Areas. It could also increase the risk of poaching.

Furthermore, the proposed road will pass close to Lake Natron, by far the most important

breeding site for Lesser Flamingos in the world, and could adversely affect their breeding. The Wildlife Conservation Society Tanzania (BirdLife in Tanzania) and the BirdLife International Partnership recognise the need for Tanzania to upgrade its transport infrastructure, including the road network, to provide increased access for local people around the Serengeti National Park. However, BirdLife remains concerned that development of the eastern stretch of the road is proceeding, particularly as this is happening in advance of any studies on an alternative southern route. This piece-meal approach is likely to lead to increased future pressure for the section of the road through the Serengeti to be upgraded.

Transport solutions must be sustainable and environmental issues should be properly taken into account in route decisions as is required by both Tanzanian and international law. BirdLife believes a solution is possible through strategic planning. A Land Use Plan exercise supported by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), with full public consultation, should be carried out for Northern Tanzania to examine strategic options for meeting transport needs and for integrating these with environmental objectives (including biodiversity protection) and the needs of local people. BirdLife, therefore, requests that at its June 2012 meeting, the World Heritage Committee adopts a decision which:

- Urges Tanzania to set a clear timetable for undertaking Land Use Plan/Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) processes to examine a range of potential alternative routes, which could meet the objectives of the proposed Serengeti Highway (providing an international transit corridor and better transport links for local communities) without serious damage to the World Heritage Site;
- Urges Tanzania to put individual road projects on hold, including plans for any tarmac roads through migration routes and/or up to the edges of the National Park, pending completion of the Land Use Plan/SEA; and
- Urges Tanzania to confirm that it has abandoned plans for upgrading the dirt track road across the Serengeti National Park (by gravelling or otherwise).