

Tanzania steps up for the Serengeti and says 'no' to asphalt road

Title The proposed asphalt road which would have bisected the Serengeti National Park, jeopardising the world's last great mammal migration, will not now be built, the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism has announced at the UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting. As the UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting comes to a close in Paris, the conservation community congratulates President Kikwete and the Tanzanian Government for their decision to reconsider the proposed North Road through the Serengeti National Park. Hon. Ezekiel Maige, Tanzania's Minister of Natural Resources and Tourism, confirmed that the existing tourist route would remain as it is, while roads outside the Park to District capitals would be upgraded. 'This decision has been reached in order to address the increasing socio-economic needs of the rural communities in northern Tanzania, while safeguarding the Outstanding Universal Value of Serengeti National Park,' stated the Minister. The Serengeti National Park, a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site, is the world's largest protected grassland and savannah ecosystem, and provides the stage for one of the last terrestrial animal mass migrations on earth. Shaped by the circular march of some two million herbivores, including wildebeest and zebra, in their endless search for forage and water, the park supports one of the world's highest concentrations of large predators, and is home to over 450 bird species. It is also of huge importance for Tanzania's tourism and the country's economy. Welcoming this announcement, Dr Markus Borner from the Frankfurt Zoological Society said 'We thank President Kikwete and the Tanzanian Government for recognising the importance of the Serengeti ecosystem and to balance development with conservation. We urge the international community and the donor agencies to consider providing support for the construction of a southern alignment, which will avoid Serengeti National Park.' 'This is a very welcome step in the right direction,' said Thomas Tennhardt, Vice President of NABU (the German BirdLife Partner). 'We congratulate the Tanzanian Government and encourage them to consider the road to the South to ensure a sustainable long-term solution. As well as reducing impacts on wildlife, it would also be of considerably greater benefit to local communities. Coupled with an extension to the East of the Serengeti, it would also address the Tanzanian government's objective to connect isolated communities to commercial centres and road networks'. Dr Tim Stowe for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife in the UK) added: 'We are delighted the Tanzanian Government has decided to not build the road. We now encourage the Government to undertake a Strategic Environmental and Social Assessment of the Northern transport corridor route to assess alternatives which are likely to benefit the livelihoods of more communities without destroying the integrity of other important sites like Lake Natron.'

"By taking this bold decision to protect the Serengeti, the government of Tanzania has once again demonstrated its commitment to sustainable management of the country's abundant biodiversity resources for the good of current and future generations of Tanzanians. Last year, the country received a top award for best practice in management of Lake Natron," said Victoria Ferdinand, the Acting CEO of the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania. "The practice on the ground must adhere to this decision with TANAPA effectively controlling the traffic allowed into the Park." "The announcement at the World Heritage Committee session is a great advance and we warmly welcome the Tanzanian Government's far-sighted decision," said Dr Julius Arinaitwe, Director of the BirdLife International African Partnership Secretariat. "However, there are still serious concerns about traffic through the park after upgrade of the roads either side, which will need to be fully examined as the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment for the North route is finalised." The proposed road would have been used by 800 vehicles a day by 2015 (one every two minutes) and 3,000 a day by 2035 (one every 30 seconds). Collisions between people and wildlife would have been inevitable. The road would have acted as a barrier to migrating herds of wildebeest, and the follow-on effects on predators, including one of the world's most important lion populations, would have been catastrophic. The decision means that tracks through the Northern Serengeti will continue to be managed by the park authority TANAPA. Tarmac roads will not reach the border of the park but will end at Mugumu to the west (12 km from the border) and Loliondo to the east (57.6 km from the border), leaving fragile habitat on both sides of the park without tarmac roads. Earlier this year, Federal Minister for Development Dirk Niebel announced that Germany would be willing to finance a study on alternative ways of connecting areas bordering the Serengeti in the north to the existing road network, without crossing the Serengeti. In addition, Niebel reaffirmed willingness jointly to finance an international feasibility study for an alternative southern bypass for the national park.

Editors Notes: Last year, the UNESCO, World Heritage Committee expressed its utmost concern about the potential effects of the proposed Serengeti Highway on the Serengeti National Park. The proposed road is expected to be used by 800 vehicles a day by 2015 (one every two minutes) and 3,000 a day by 2035 (one every 30 seconds). Collision and fatalities amongst people and wildlife would be inevitable. If built, the road would negatively affect biodiversity by acting as a barrier to the migration's dry season range. Experts from the Frankfurt Zoological Society calculated that if this was to be the case, it is likely the population of 1.8 million animals would drop by a third. This would most likely spell the end of the great migration. The follow on effects on dependent predators, including one of the world's most important lion populations, would be catastrophic. The road would also be likely to act as a conduit for the introduction of invasive plants, animals, and diseases as well as poachers. Poaching already poses the primary management challenge in both the Serengeti National Park and the adjacent Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya, which form part of a contiguous ecosystem. Poachers kill an estimated 50 000 animals a year in the Serengeti alone and more than 1000 are arrested each year. Ninety nine percent of the Park's rhino population and more than two thirds of its buffalo population were annihilated as a result. Local communities' livelihoods could also be greatly affected. Tourism is Tanzania's largest foreign revenue earner. It raised over 1 billion US\$ in 2009 and provides more than 600,000 jobs. The Serengeti is Tanzania's premier tourist destination, attracting more visitors than any other destination. A joint-NGO statement from BirdLife and the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) was presented to the World Heritage Committee, prior to the official deliberation, requesting that the decision on the Serengeti National Park implements a verdict that: -

- Inscribes the Serengeti National Park on the List of World Heritage in Danger pursuant to paragraph 180 (b) (iii) of the Operational Guidelines to the Convention, on the basis of the major threat posed by the highway; and
- Urges Tanzania to abandon the current route for the road across the Serengeti National Park; and
- Urges Tanzania to undertake a

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) 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. The Tanzanian Minister of Natural Resources and Tourism has confirmed by letter to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention that the tarmac road would stop at Loliondo 57 km to the east of the park and at Mugumu, 11 km west of the park boundaries. The Frankfurt Zoological Society is committed to working to save some of the last wilderness areas and their unique biodiversity. The goal of FZS is the conservation of ecosystems where natural ecological processes still occur, for their intrinsic values and for the long-term benefit of people. We believe in working professionally and practically at grass roots level with minimal administration costs and providing long term commitment, input and support through building partnerships with local governments and communities. Together with Tanzania National Parks, FZS has been active in the Serengeti for over 60 years. BirdLife International is a global Partnership of conservation NGOs in 116 countries, with around 10 million members and supporters worldwide. BirdLife's work is built on a strong scientific foundation: we provide authoritative information on the status and conservation of bird species, and are the IUCN Red List Authority for birds. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is the UK Partner in BirdLife International and has over one million members. RSPB has provided assistance to conservation in East Africa for the past 20 years, primarily through our BirdLife International Partner organisations. It has worked with the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WSCT) (BirdLife in Tanzania) for over 15 years. NABU, (The Nature And Biodiversity Conservation Union), is one of the oldest and biggest environment associations in Germany. It brings together some 500.000 members in advocacy for threatened habitats, flora and fauna, for climate protection and for energy policies.

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