

Tata denies links with new Lake Natron soda ash plant plans

Title

The Tata Group has denied any involvement in plans to mine soda ash at Engaruka area near Lake Natron. In March 2012, Mr. Cyril Chami who was then Tanzania's Minister of Trade and Industry said that the government was talking to Tata Chemicals Ltd to set up a \$450 million soda ash factory at Engaruka area, part of Lake Natron basin. The factory would exploit newly discovered 460 billion cubic litres of soda ash at Engaruka, and if the Tata deal went through, the Government of Tanzania would hold 46% shares through the National Development Corporation.

In a letter dated 27th June 2012, Tata's Managing Director Mr. R. Mukundan said Tata was no longer involved in any developments at Lake Natron and had no intention of going back. "I would like to reiterate that as an outcome of a detailed business review Tata chemicals formally exited the Lake Natron development project on 29th January 2009. Tata Chemicals has not been involved with the Lake Natron project since that time and we are unaware of any current developments," he said. The letter from Tata is the first direct evidence that indeed, Tata left Lake Natron.

Since 2006, the Government of Tanzania has been interested in building a soda ash facility at Lake Natron; an iconic lake which is the most important breeding site for Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor* in the world. There are 1.5-2.5 million Lesser Flamingos in Eastern Africa (three-quarters of the global population) and all of them breed at Lake Natron. BirdLife International, the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (BirdLife Partner), the Lake Natron Consultative Group (a coalition of 56 institutions globally campaigning for protection of Lake Natron) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife in UK) opposed the government proposal citing concerns over damage to flamingo habitat and interference with the livelihoods of the local communities.

“BirdLife would like to commend Tata for this move and encourage the Tanzania Government to withdraw the soda ash plant plan in its entirety”, said Ken Mwathe the Ag. Policy and Advocacy Manager at BirdLife Africa Partnership Secretariat and Coordinator of the Lake Natron Consultative Group. “The future of Lake Natron and the local communities is better off without a soda ash plant. Tourism and improvement of livelihoods should be the key”, he added.