

What does the Serengeti Highway decision mean for Lake Natron?

Title Focus is now squarely on Lake Natron, following the Tanzanian Government's recent statement that the proposed highway through the Serengeti will not be paved. Conservation organizations and local communities worry that the construction of roads to connect major cities in the region could have detrimental effects on the ecology of Lake Natron and could be used as an incentive to revive plans to build a soda ash plant at Lake Natron. Victoria Ferdinand is the Acting CEO of the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST - BirdLife in Tanzania). She said: "While we applaud the Government for scaling down its intentions for the Highway we call for a holistic look at the Northern Transport Corridor? Development is required, but we must not destroy Lake Natron and the Serengeti, two unique jewels that we have as a country." The Government of Tanzania proposed a 53-kilometre long commercial highway to run East-West through the Serengeti; Tanzania's oldest national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Conservation organisations raised concerns that this would interfere with the ecological processes of the Park, including the phenomenal mass migration of the wildebeest and other ungulates. The announcement that the road through the park will not be tarmacked was made by the Tanzanian Minister of Natural Resources and Tourism at the 35th annual session of the World Heritage Committee in Paris in June 2011. While making the announcement, the Minister said the 117 km stretch from Mto wa Mbu through the Lake Natron area to Loliondo will be fully tarmacked. While the road would make the area more accessible for the local community, we believe it is critically important to proceed with great caution. Lake Natron is the most important breeding site for Lesser Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus minor*) in Eastern Africa. This region has 1.5-2.5 million birds - which constitute 75% of their global population - and they are all hatched at Lake Natron. Since 2006, plans have been underway to construct a soda ash plant at the Lake but it faced strong opposition from within Tanzania and globally. Mr Lota Melamari, the former CEO of the WCST said: "The road through Lake Natron must progress in a manner that does not interfere with this sensitive environment, especially the Lesser Flamingos, which are a major tourist attraction. If we destroy Lake Natron, we interfere with three-quarters of the global population of Lesser Flamingos? There are also fears that opening up Lake Natron through to Loliondo could be used as a justification to revive plans to build a soda ash plant at Lake Natron. Sarah Sanders of the Royal Society of Protection of Birds said the entire Northern Transport Corridor should be subjected to more detailed assessment. "We are not against development but believe roads should be constructed at an appropriate scale to improve access for communities and not to the detriment of Lake Natron. Plans to open up the North through a network of roads and a railway should be subjected to a Strategic Social

and Environmental Assessment to ensure both people and biodiversity benefit? she said. Dr Julius Arinaitwe, BirdLife International's Regional Director for Africa said, "Tanzania is a leader and pace-setter for conservation in Africa, and has won global and regional conservation awards and accolades, the most recent one being the World Wetlands Network Blue Globe Award for the management of Lake Natron. This clear leadership has been shown in taking the far-reaching decision to stop the tarmac road across the Serengeti. We expect that Tanzania will similarly continue efforts to protect Lake Natron for the sustainable flow of benefits for current and future generations?"