

Fresh concerns as President orders Lake Natron soda ash mining fast tracked

Title Fresh concerns have been raised following a directive by the President of Tanzania to fast track the construction of the proposed soda ash factory at Lake Natron in Tanzania. Tanzanian press quoted the President who was speaking at the Ministry of Industry and Trade officials in Dar es Salaam last week. He said that the country would not continue reeling in poverty while our minerals are lying untapped? adding with harvesting at Lake Natron, we will not be the first to do so, because our neighbours, Kenya, are doing the same on the other side of the lake,? He said there was no need for further delay since experience has it that excavation can continue without any disruptions to the ecosystem.? Lake Natron is the only regular breeding site for Lesser Flamingos in Eastern Africa. The 1.5-2.5 million Lesser Flamingos which represents three quarters of the world population - breed only at Lake Natron. Food is plentiful, nesting sites abound and above all, the lake is isolated and undisturbed. The Lake is an Important Bird Area and also a Ramsar Site. Building a soda ash factory at Lake Natron is not good for the Tanzanian economy? said Lota Melamari, the CEO of Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania, Tanzania heavily depends on tourism and Lake Natron and other Rift Valley lakes are a huge tourist attraction. But Lake Natron is special as it is the only breeding site for flamingos in this part of Africa. We can't afford to destroy that?, he concluded. In 2006 an Indian company, Tata Chemical Industries Ltd, in collaboration with the Tanzanian Government put forward a proposal to construct a \$450 million factory that would produce 500,000 tonnes of soda ash per year and employ 150 permanent staff. However, there was a huge outcry from conservation groups BirdLife International, the Lake Natron Consultative Group, RSPB, among others - that opposed the move, saying, it would disrupt the breeding of Lesser Flamingos that are listed as Near Threatened.? Intensive campaigning led to a shelving of the initial project and withdrawal by Tata Chemical Industries in May 2008. Reacting to the new development, Sarah Sanders, from RSPB's International Division, said The new directive is very worrying. The concerns raised over the project in 2008 still stand. Moreover, constructing the soda ash plant away from the shores of Lake Natron will not address the threat to Lesser Flamingo breeding.? She explained that the raw material will still be mined from the Lake, which provides the substrate for making Flamingo nests. Noise from the heavy equipment, the presence of people and a network of pipes will chase away the birds which are highly sensitive to disturbance while breeding?. She also added that the waste water would prevent the development of a thick crust that can support the weight of the birds while breeding. Tanzania should learn lessons from the Kenyan experience. Soda ash mining has been going on at Lake Magadi for over 100 years and Flamingos have not attempted to breed there over the last 50 years? said Mr

Paul Matiku, the Executive Director of Nature Kenya. ?Soda ash mining at Lake Magadi has left local communities disillusioned with little to show for the 100 years of mining. The environment has been damaged and fresh water nearly depleted?. He said that in 2003, scores of local Maasai were injured by Police as they protested against a controversial land lease renewal in favour of Magadi Soda Company. It is not yet clear whether a new project proposal nor a new Environmental and Social Impact Assessment has been submitted according to Tanzanian law. Neither is it clear who the new investor or funder is. What is clear is that the new directive is likely to spur a new uproar from conservation organizations and the local community at Lake Natron, which is vehemently opposed to soda ash mining.



President Kikwete (Google Images)