

11th Conference of Parties to the Ramsar Convention

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Current status of four threatened wetlands: Lake Natron (Tanzania), Lake Naivasha and Tana River Delta (Kenya) and Bahía de Panamá (Panama)

This briefing provides information on three key wetlands in East Africa, relevant to COP meeting document COP11 DOC.8 (Report pursuant to Article 8.2 concerning the List of Wetlands of International Importance) and COP11 DR4 rev. 1 (Draft Resolution XI.4 – The status of sites on the List of Wetlands of International Importance).

In October 2011, in advance of the 43rd Standing Committee meeting, BirdLife International submitted an Information Document relating to these sites. This briefing covers developments since then. It is based on recent information from national BirdLife Partners - the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST) (BirdLife in Tanzania) and Nature Kenya (BirdLife in Kenya).

Lake Natron, Tanzania

Lake Natron is one of only three natural, regular breeding sites for the Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopus minor* (Near Threatened) in Africa and by far the most important, supporting all the East African and 75% of the global population of this species. In recent years there have been proposals to develop soda-ash mining at Lake Natron, potentially with serious negative effects on Lesser Flamingo.

In our October 2011 Information Document we reported conflicting information. The Director of Environment in the Vice-President's Office, Dr Julius Ningu, said that the Tanzania Government position on Lake Natron was to maintain the ecological system so that flamingos continue to breed, and that damaging human activity was prohibited in the area¹. However, at the same time, the Tanzania National Development Corporation and an investment bank were undertaking a field inspection to look at the prospects for mining.

Mixed messages have continued since then. The Minister of Trade and Industry, Mr Cyril Chami, said recently that the government was in talks with Tata Chemicals Ltd to set up a \$450 million soda ash factory within the Lake Natron basin, in the Engaruka area. *The East African* newspaper quoted the minister saying that 460 billion cubic litres of soda ash had been discovered at Engaruka, and that if the deal with Tata went through, the Government of Tanzania would hold 46 percent shares through the National Development Corporation². However, Tata has subsequently denied any involvement.

The Regional Commissioner of Arusha, Mr Magesa Mulongo, recently stated that the regional government was committed to fast-tracking the construction of a soda ash factory at Lake Natron, and that the project would create job opportunities and play an important role in boosting the country's economic development³.

Key point: In these circumstances the situation at Lake Natron remains precarious. It is essential that an Integrated Management Plan for the Ramsar Site is completed and implemented.

¹ See <http://www.ippmedia.com/frontend/index.php?l=34206> and <http://www.eturbonews.com/25690/statement-tanzania-senior-official-pits-him-against-presidential>

² <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/business/Dar+insists+on+soda+ash+factory+on+Lake+Natron+/-/2560/1377288/-/nqywpd/-/index.html>

³ <http://www.ippmedia.com/frontend/index.php?l=41713>

Lake Naivasha, Kenya

Lake Naivasha used to support an abundance of wildlife, including fish, birds and many of Africa's most iconic mammals. However, over-abstraction of water, pollution, invasive alien species, overgrazing and loss of surrounding vegetation to industrial-scale horticulture have had very severe impacts on the lake in recent years.

In October 2011 we reported on the initial progress made by the Imarisha Naivasha initiative including establishment of the Lake Naivasha Management Board with multi-stakeholder representation.

Since that time, there have been further positive developments: an action plan has been developed and, with funding from UK-based retailer Marks and Spencer Nature Kenya is developing Site Support Groups within the local communities. However more action is needed and is limited by current funding levels. For example, the action plan needs implementation, and significant issues remain to be addressed in the catchment and on-site.

Key points:

- ***The Kenyan Government, private sector and other stakeholders are encouraged to continue the positive developments***
- ***Further funding is needed to fully implement the Imarisha Naivasha initiative***

Tana River Delta, Kenya

The Tana River Delta on Kenya's north coast is a vast patchwork of natural habitats, an Important Bird Area of global significance and qualifies for listing as a Ramsar site. The Delta is under unprecedented threat as corporations and foreign agencies move to exploit its potential for export crops, biofuels and minerals.

In October 2011 we reported that: the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) had started the process of designating Tana River Delta as a Ramsar site; work to formulate a Spatial Land Use Plan (LUP) for the Delta informed by Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) had commenced; and that a further community court case to block the proposed developments and promote creation of a long-term plan was underway.

Since then, an excellent development is that KWS have submitted the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for the site. Also that there has been further progress with the LUP and SEA processes, eg village level consultations with all the communities in the Delta to seek their views, preparation of a LUP Framework and SEA scoping report, and constitution of a Local Planning Advisory Group (PAG) to represent local interests. The LUP/SEA will include mapping and analysing competing land claims. If the long-term sustainable development of Tana River Delta is to be secured it is important that decisions on further land use allocations or implementation of historic projects are not taken until the LUP/SEA has been concluded in 2013.

Key points:

- ***The RIS has been submitted and we look forward to designation of Tana River Delta as Kenya's sixth Ramsar site***
- ***The LUP/SEA is in preparation and is due to be concluded in 2013. Decisions on individual projects should not be taken until this process concludes.***

Bahía de Panamá, Panama

The Panama Bay (Bahía de Panamá) wetlands constitute a vast stretch of mudflats, mangroves and other habitats stretching for over 150 kilometres to the east of Panama City, the country's capital.

The wetlands at this Ramsar site are exceptionally important for migrating shorebirds and provide many vital environmental services to the people of Panama – but are under increasing pressure from urban development.

Despite their crucial importance as ‘natural infrastructure’, the Panama Bay wetlands recently lost their legal protected status. At the same time, regulations on mangrove cutting have been relaxed.

The Upper Bay of Panama was recognized as a globally significant Important Bird Area in 1998, declared a Wetland of International Importance in 2003 under the Ramsar Convention and designated a Site of Hemispheric Importance in 2005 — as the most important shorebird site in Central America.

In 2009, the “Humedal Bahía de Panamá” (Panama Bay Wetland), covering over 80,000 ha, became a National Protected Area. However, in May 2012 the Panama Supreme Court suspended the protected area designation following a technical legal challenge inspired by the pressure for urban and resort development on the mangrove forests closest to Panama City.

At the same time, the Governing Body of the Autoridad de los Recursos Acuáticos de Panamá (Panama's Aquatic Resources Authority) reduced the fees for the use of mangroves, and the fines for illegal mangrove clearance.

These changes leave the Panama Bay wetlands, and other mangrove wetlands in Panama, highly vulnerable. Developers are poised to start filling-in mangroves and dredging to create marinas, golf courses and housing.

Key point:

- ***This exceptionally important site is now vulnerable to inappropriate and damaging development. Rapid restoration of its Protected Area status is needed, with effective safeguard in the interim.***

Further information:

- BirdLife International: Leon Bennun, leon.bennun@birdlife.org, tel +44 1223 277318 / +44 7500 667 404; or Ken Mwathe, BirdLife Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, ken.mwathe@birdlife.org, tel + 254 20 8068314
- WCST: Deo Gmassa, Director, dgamassa@gmail.com, tel +255 655 194184
- Nature Kenya: Paul Matiku, Chief Executive, director_naturekenya@mitsuminet.com, tel +254 20 353 7568
- Audubon Panama: Rosabel Miro, Executive Director, rosabelmiro@mac.com, tel +507 232 5977