

Flamingo update

Carte Blanche

11 January 2009

Last year we brought you the remarkable story of the Kimberley flamingos. Kamfers Dam is a privately owned natural heritage site that has been home to the threatened Lesser Flamingo for decades, but they were never able to breed here because of disturbance from humans and animals.

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Ekapa Mining's Jahn and Peter Hohne took up the challenge of building an island in the middle of the dam at their own expense.

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Jahn Hohne (Ekapa Mining): "A very exciting project, with a causeway built 200 metres out into Kamfers Dam... And we trucked in some 26 000 tonnes of material - an around the clock operation - set up night crews and didn't stop for two weeks. And thereafter removed the causeway, leaving the island 200 metres free, standing in Kamfers Dam."

[Carte Blanche June 2008] The island was built in an S-shape and aligned to the prevailing winds, providing two sheltered bays for chicks. Solar panels on the shore power a submersed pump that feeds water to four ponds on the island, providing the flamingos with mud for constructing nests. It cost the company half-a-million rand, but 18 months ago there were very few flamingos in residence. A year later the investment paid off in flamboyant fashion.

Bonita Gorrie-Nuttall (Carte Blanche presenter): "January 2008 was a momentous occasion. The first chicks hatched on the island... the first time lesser flamingos have bred in South Africa."

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Jahn: "We expected a few hundred chicks. And six months later, there's an aerial photograph counting in excess of 9 000."

In international birding circles, the Kamfers Dam island has been hailed as the single most important conservation project for the Lesser Flamingos in the world.

But we also highlighted various threats to the flamingos. The Homevale Sewage Works handles the bulk of Kimberley's waste water disposal, but it was found to be completely overloaded. Raw sewage was being pumped directly into the dam.

Jahn: "The quantity of raw sewerage that was bypassing the plant... It's quite evident that they would need a complete new plant. We have a serious problem right now! We are poisoning Kamfers Dam."

But the mayor Patrick Lenyibi disputed this.

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick Lenyiba (Mayor: Kimberley): "Kamfers Dam, is it clean water?"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Bonita: "Is it what water?"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick: "Is it clean water that has been discharged into Kamfers Dam?"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Bonita: "No!"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick: "Yes, its treated effluent, am I right?"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Bonita: "Treated effluent and raw sewerage!"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick: "No, there is no raw sewerage."

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Bonita: "Excuse me sir, but we saw raw sewerage flowing into the dam."

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick: "There's no raw sewerage there."

We also looked at the proposed Northgate development - a R2-billion project within 2km of Kamfers Dam. It includes a mall, a commercial office park, four primary schools, two high schools and over 6 400 affordable housing units. The Environmental Impact Assessment was still underway at the time and at a public meeting the Northern Cape Department of Tourism, Environment and Conservation's Mark Anderson warned against the development of Northgate.

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Mark Anderson (Ornithologist): "We don't know yet whether any further developments close to Kamfers Dam could in the long term effect of the breeding of flamingos on the island. It potentially could, and one could consider using the precautionary principle that maybe a development of this nature should go somewhere else because there could be a long term an effect on the breeding of flamingos at this dam."

The developers Group 1 refused to give us an interview, but we asked the Mayor why the city council approved the rezoning of the land before the EIA had been done.

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick: "No, it's always done like that. We don't wait for the EIA. We approved a piece of land, and once the approval is done, then that's it. And most cases we've never had a problem, but I don't where that thing comes from - that, 'Why is the Northgate development going to take place? The flamingos at Kamfers Dam are going to become a thing of the past'. There's not such a thing."

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Bonita: "But how do you know that?"

[Carte Blanche June 2008] Patrick: "I know because we took a decision as council."

We went back to Kimberley in December to see how things have changed. Mark Anderson the ornithologist who conceived the island was suspended from his job at the department. He has since been appointed Executive Director of Birdlife South Africa.

Mark: "I was suspended from my position at the Department of Tourism, Environment and Conservation, following a complaint about my involvement with the Save the Flamingo Association. They felt it would influence the final decision of whether the development would go ahead or not."

The suspension was sinister according to Save the Flamingo Association's Jahn Hohne.

Jahn: "It's quite questionable as to the reasons why they were suspended. Their recommendations were against awarding an ROD within the department, and they had to be gotten rid of so the ROD could be issued."

Bonita: "In November 2008 the Department of Tourism, Environment and Conservation issued a positive Record of Decision. In other words the Northgate development has been given the green light. We wanted to discuss this decision with the MEC Peter Saaiman, but he wouldn't grant us an

interview because the case is being appealed."

Mark: "It's really a pity that this site adjacent to Kamfers Dam has been chosen for the Northgate housing development because there are many other localities in Kimberley that are preferable. Firstly, much closer to Kimberley for the people who are going to be living out at Northgate, and also integrating communities - apartheid's long gone. Birdlife South Africa believes this proposed development should have been considered by the national Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, and not by the provincial authority."

In the meantime this national treasure has gone from strength to strength. A webcam, microphone and infra red lights have been installed on the island. It transmits live images that can be remotely controlled by Mark at his home in Kimberley.

Mark: "It's a fantastic tool to be able to monitor the breeding of the birds on the island, so we can know exactly when they start breeding, when the first eggs hatch. It opens up so many opportunities for research. If you think of the places Lesser Flamingos have bred up until now - Etosha Pan, Sua Pan and Lake Natron - these are vast, inaccessible pans and nobody can get close to the breeding areas. So as a result very little is known about the biology of the species - the breeding biology. And here we have been able to learn so much. There's virtually nothing known about the breeding biology of Lesser Flamingos."

The flamcam is hosted by the Africam website.

Mark: "The idea really is not only the research, but to allow people around the world to have a look into the private lives of flamingos. It's a fantastic opportunity to create an increased awareness about Lesser Flamingos."

A recent count revealed there were over 83 000 flamingos at Kamfers Dam, and a few months ago 8 517 nests were counted on the island. Many of these nests are used more than once.

Mark: "The fact that the birds are breeding now two consecutive years is amazing. Lesser Flamingos breed successfully every 12 years on average. Here they are breeding for the second consecutive year. I'm almost certain they're going to breed every year - if we could be producing 10-20 000 chicks a year we'll reverse the negative population trends we've been witnessing."

But the future of the Kamfers Dam flamingos remains uncertain.

Bonita: "After our last programme the municipality said that they'd see to the problems at the Homevale Sewage Works. And while some work has been done, there is still raw sewage flowing into Kamfers Dam."

Recent tests of the water reveal dangerously high levels of eColi and coliform bacteria.

Jahn: "We are getting readings of 80 000, 600 000 and 400 000 respectively cfu units per 100ml. The maximum tolerable is 100! There's still no facility for the treatment of solids which is the primary objective for any sewage works is to neutralise solids it receives. Without that in place they are simply aerating the water with aerators - mixing it all up together into a soup and a froth and releasing it into Kamfers Dam."

Phase 1 of the Northgate development will not use Homevale at all. Instead they will use the Lilliput system of septic tanks and the treated effluent water will now be diverted by a pipeline some 20km out of town to Marrick Pan, owned by Trevor Datnow.

Bonita: "What guarantees do you have that you won't have the same problems with Northgate and the Lilliput system?"

Trevor Datnow: "I've no guarantees, but if I were to support this it would be subject to an extensive, transparent Environmental Impact Assessment."

But the EIA on Marrick Pan has not been done yet, and until it's been approved the construction of Northgate cannot go ahead.

Bonita: "The positive ROD was given based on the strength of the Bio-Diversity Offset. In other words this agreement is Group 1's promise to compensate for any damages caused to the bio-diversity of the environment. This agreement changes everything."

According to the Bio-Diversity Offset Agreement, Group 1 will construct a pipeline from Northgate to Marrick Farm to hydrate the pan. They will also pay for the re-routing of existing power lines that run through the pan as well as the construction of another breeding island here for flamingos.

Bonita: "How are you benefiting from this agreement other than with the ecotourism?"

Trevor: "That's it. There's no commercial motivation. I've not been offered a cent and I've not asked for a cent. I think this should be seen not as an alternative but as an additional sanctuary for the flamingo."

Bonita: "How certain are you that the flamingos will come here?"

Trevor: "There's no proof. But one thing I can tell you is that before you and I were born they've been coming here. If it rains today, they'll be here tomorrow. Not necessarily those flamingo, but flamingo come here within 24 hours - not only flamingo but other water birds. It's amazing; it's just like a busy airport here, 24 hours a day there are birds taking off and landing. But we're not attracting the flamingo, the flamingo come here."

According to the offset agreement every unit sold at Northgate will make a donation to the Flamingo Conservation Trust. This yet-to-be-formed organisation will receive over R6.4-million to build an ecotourism centre at Marrick Pan, and to protect and conserve the flamingos.

Bonita: "The bio-diversity offset agreement involves an organisation called the Flamingo Conservation Trust. Everybody we spoke to knew nothing about them - probably because it hasn't been formed yet. But we do know the name of the woman who is behind it all. Seyathie Mitha is the owner of a London Pie shop."

Seyathie Mitha was not at her shop when we went to look for her and she did not return our calls.

Bonita: "Despite the fact that Group 1 can't begin building Northgate yet, they've opened up a sales office here in Kimberley. We've asked them for an interview about their plans, but they refused to speak to us."

While everyone awaits the outcome of the appeal against the department's decision, the flamingos continue to raise their chicks at Kamfers Dam.

Mark: "The eyes of the world are watching the Department of Tourism, Environment and Conservation with this appeal, so things may be handled differently."