

Water level threatens birds

STAFF REPORTER

THE INTERNATIONALLY-RENOUNDED artificial breeding island for lesser flamingos at Kamfers Dam is in danger of becoming totally submerged following the rising level of the dam due to the recent rains and the inflow of sewage.

Award-winning ornithologist Mark Anderson, the executive director of BirdLife South Africa, said yesterday the island was already flooded in places.

"We have reached a critical stage. If it rains any more and the temperatures stay cool, we will lose the island soon."

The water level at Kamfers Dam is at the highest level it has ever been.

"A lot of the material that the island was constructed with has already washed away."

Kamfers Dam is one of only six breeding sites in the world for lesser flamingos and the fourth such site on the continent, but it is threatened by too much sewage water of an exceptionally poor quality, which pours into the dam from the malfunctioning Homevale sewage works.

"More and more sewage is being produced in Kimberley and we've had a bit of rain in the last few weeks. The sewage works hasn't been upgraded.

"They (the municipality) haven't come up with a plan to dispose of excess, treated sewage water," Anderson said.

"It worries us. The whole breeding event is in jeopardy. At other sites - like Etosha Pan - the flamingos breed successfully only every 10 years.

"Here they've been breeding every year for the past three years. This site is internationally important and we are in danger of losing this important island," Anderson said.

Anderson laid full blame for the



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Picture: Lizell Muller

situation at the door of the Sol Plaatje Municipality, which, he said, has allowed large volumes of raw sewage to flow into the dam.

"They knew that this was coming for years but they have done nothing to alleviate or address the situation - not even in terms of water conservation, for example installing dual flushing systems in toilets.

"Even the leaking water pipes throughout the city, which flow into the drains, contribute to the high level of water at Kamfers Dam."

About a year ago, the municipality suggested pumping water from Kamfers Dam to Piet Els' farm on the Vaal River to keep the water level down.

Anderson's wife, Tania, of the Save the Flamingo Association, has meanwhile pointed out that the high water level would negatively

affect the flamingo chicks.

"Now that there's water over much of the island, there is very little dry ground for the young chicks to stand.

"They leave the nest four days after hatching.

"The breeding activity so far also seems to be confined to a smaller area, and this is almost certainly related to the flooding of the island.

"Last year, they spread out over the whole island, but as it's only the beginning of the breeding season, they may still use the nests in the currently unused areas."

This year would have been the third year that flamingos have bred at Kamfers Dam following construction of the breeding island by Ekapa Mining in September 2006.

In 2007 an estimated 9 000 chicks

were produced, with 13 000 chicks being produced last summer.

Municipal spokesperson, Sello Matsie, conceded yesterday that the water level at Kamfers Dam was at an unacceptable level and posed a danger to the breeding island.

"An objection was received to the Record of Decision regarding the pumping of the excess water to Piet Els' farm.

"The MEC Environmental Affairs and Nature Conservation (Sylvia Lucas) is expected to announce a decision on this matter soon."

Matsie said purified effluent was being discharged into the Kamfers Dam but quality of the effluent has improved up to 80 percent.

"To date, we have committed about R30 million on redressing the situation with regard to the quality of the effluent.

"Work on refurbishing of one of three clarifiers (oxidation ponds) and the construction of a new one is expected to start this month after the appointment of a contractor through the supply chain process."

Work on the plant is expected to be completed by June next year when it will be fully functional.

"We have repeatedly stated that the doors of the municipality are open to everybody to discuss and find solutions to the problems affecting the flamingo breeding island.

"As a municipality we are committed to the flamingos and will do everything in our effort to find a lasting solution.

"There is no personal issues at play here and we all need to work to find ways to correct the situation."