

Save the Flamingo Association

MEDIA RELEASE

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FLAMINGO BREEDING ISLAND UNDER SEVERE THREAT

Kimberley is about to lose its world-famous Lesser Flamingo breeding island. “With increased inflow of poorly-treated water from the Homevale Waste Water Treatment Works, recent rains and limited evaporation, the island is under threat from flooding”, says Jahn Hohne, Chairman of the Save the Flamingo Association.

The Lesser Flamingos are currently breeding, but in fewer numbers than the previous two years. In 2007/8 they produced 9000 chicks, and during the summer of 2008/9 they produced 13,000 chicks. “Parts of the island are now under water and the effective area that is available to the breeding flamingos has been reduced” added Hohne.

Hohne’s company, Ekapa Mining, which built the island at a cost of half a million rand during 2006, has packed 5000 sandbags around the island during 2008 and 2009 to stem the erosion and limit flooding. “The battle now appears to have been lost”.

With 65 mm of rain falling last night, and much of the run-off flowing into Kamfers Dam, this may signal the death knell of this internationally-important project. This morning, thousands of people from around the world watched images of drowning chicks via the island’s webcam (see www.africam.com). According to Mark Anderson, Executive Director of BirdLife South Africa “it is possible that hundreds of chicks and eggs have drowned and been washed away in the past few days.”

The flamingo island project was the brainchild of Anderson and he got into trouble with his former employer, the Northern Cape Department of Tourism, Environment & Conservation (DTEC), when he joined the Save the Flamingo Association in his private capacity and opposed the NorthGate housing development and raised concerns about the quality and quantity of water flowing into the dam.

The island was constructed by Ekapa Mining in 2006 and, although the Lesser Flamingos did not breed during the initial summer, they have bred during the three subsequent summers. The

project has received international acclaim, and has been the recipient of several national and international awards.

According to Anderson “Lesser Flamingos only breed at four places in Africa and at Etosha Pan in Namibia, for example, they are successful about every 10 years. Annual breeding at Kamfers Dam will help reverse the species’ negative population trend in southern Africa”. “With a southern African population numbering about 150,000 birds, the production of 10,000 chicks per annum may ultimately result in the Lesser Flamingo being removed from the Red Data Book”.

Kamfers Dam’s flamingos are threatened by the Homevale Waste Water Treatment Works. Too much water of an exceptionally poor quality flows into Kamfers Dam and the Save the Flamingo Association’s water quality analyses have shown that raw sewage has been flowing into the dam for several years.

“Although the Sol Plaatje Municipality intends to upgrade the sewerage works and divert some of the treated water to another locality, it does not seem as if it has the resources to do so”, said Hohne. He added that “The Municipality should have anticipated the imminent collapse of its infrastructure several years ago, and planned for the city’s growth and increased production of waste water”.

The leaking water pipes do not help, as this water also ends up in Kamfers Dam and it has been estimated that up to one third of Kimberley’s water is lost in this way. Storm water runoff from rainfall events also ends up in Kamfers Dam.

Another major threat to Kamfers Dam’s flamingos is the Northgate housing development, a controversial development on the property adjoining Kamfers Dam which was given the go ahead by DTEC. Several organizations, including the Save the Flamingo Association, BirdLife South Africa and WESSA, as well as Northern Cape Ranchers, Kamfers Dam’s landowner, appealed the Provincial Government’s decision to allow this development.

These appeals were unsuccessful.

Both the Save the Flamingo Association and Northern Cape Ranchers recently launched Applications in the Northern Cape High Court for the Review and Setting Aside of this decision. It is feared that the additional storm water and sewerage runoff into the dam as well as the presence of an urban settlement in close proximity could result in South Africa losing its total breeding population of Lesser Flamingos and Kimberley losing an ecotourism destination of international importance.

The Northern Cape Government's decision to allow the development was surprising to the conservation community, especially since there is other land which could be used for this development. The bird specialist studies submitted to DTEC during the Environmental Impact Assessment Process, particularly a report by Dr Robert Simmons of the University of Cape Town, suggested that the housing development would impact extremely negatively on the Lesser Flamingo breeding site.

The Save the Flamingo Association and its partners remain committed to the conservation of Kamfers Dam and its flamingos. We need to conserve our wildlife as we cannot survive at even the most basic level without other organisms. The lives of our children also depend on their survival and a healthy environment in future. Caring for wildlife ultimately means caring for the welfare of people, especially the poor, who are the first to suffer when the environment deteriorates.

Kamfers Dam not only important for the future conservation of the Lesser Flamingo and a variety of other waterbirds, but has great potential to contribute to the economy of Kimberley and the Northern Cape.

Many ecotourists visit Kamfers Dam annually to see the spectacular display of more than 80,000 flamingos and, with the development of suitable viewing infrastructure, the dam and its flamingos could become a world-renowned place to watch and photograph flamingos.

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For enquiries and/or images, please contact Mark Anderson at director@birdlife.org.za, cell. 082-7880961.



This Lesser Flamingo chick photographed on 3 November 2009 (alive and well) and again on 4 November 2009 (drowned in the dam's rising waters).