



media release

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Twin threat heightens flamingo's plight

A second major threat is facing endangered lesser flamingos in Africa after the announcement of development plans close to a man-made breeding site, built less than two years ago to help reverse the birds' decline.

Kamfers Dam near Kimberley, South Africa, is the only nesting site for lesser flamingos in the country and one of only six breeding areas for the birds in the world.

The wetland has hosted more than 50,000 lesser flamingos – about 50 per cent of the southern African population – and an incredible 9,000 chicks hatched on the dam's deliberately S-shaped artificial flamingo island this year.

But conservationists believe new homes planned for a buffer zone protecting the island could cause the birds to desert the site, where pollution from a sewage plant is thought to be causing deformities in lesser flamingo chicks.

Lesser flamingos are notoriously vulnerable to disturbance and human encroachment and the new development, and the pollution, could break South African Government commitments to international treaties safeguarding wildlife.

Duncan Pritchard, Acting Executive Director of BirdLife South Africa, said: "Creating the breeding island at Kamfers Dam was a huge investment and its future should not be jeopardised by development or pollution.

"If tests prove the birds' deformities are being caused by poor water quality, many other species and possibly the entire aquatic system of the dam could be at risk.

"Without urgent action, the dam will become a polluted cesspool devoid of birdlife and a hazard to the people of Kimberley. If nothing is done and the housing development is allowed, our political leaders will have failed us."

Kamfers Dam is being used to dump raw sewage from a malfunctioning treatment works close to the birds' breeding island. Yet the Sol Plaatje Municipality, which runs the sewage plant and includes a lesser flamingo in its emblem, is backing plans to build 6,500 upmarket homes on part of a buffer zone surrounding the island.

The South African Government has designated Kamfers Dam a Natural Heritage Site and Dr Brooks Childress, a world expert on flamingos, described the dam as "arguably the single most important flamingo conservation project to have taken place anywhere in the world in recent years."

He added: "If left undisturbed, this new breeding island should have a significant beneficial effect in stabilising the southern African population of this species."

Development and pollution pose the most serious threats to lesser flamingos in Africa. Between 1.5 and 2.5 million of the birds – 75 per cent of the world's population - have nested on Lake Natron in Tanzania but the Tanzanian government is backing the plans of Indian multinational TATA to develop the site.

TATA wants to take saltwater and freshwater from the area for the export of soda ash. Lake Natron forms an isolated and magical panorama, which for years has been the species' most important breeding site in the world.

Paul Buckley, an Africa specialist with the RSPB, said: "Lesser flamingos are facing enormous threats most of which are being caused by man. Southern and eastern Africa are incredibly important areas for these birds and the loss of lesser flamingos from Kamfers Dam and Lake Natron would together be a very serious blow to an already gravely threatened species.

"Lesser flamingos have declined throughout Africa and Kamfers Dam should be allowed to become an important sanctuary for these birds."

Ends

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Notes to editors:

- More details of Kamfers Dam and an online petition to save Kamfers Dam's lesser flamingos are available here www.savetheflamingo.co.za and more on Lake Natron is here <http://www.rspb.org.uk/news/details.asp?id=tcm:9-175962>
- Kamfers Dam is a 400-hectare wetland on the northern outskirts of Kimberley, Northern Cape Province, South Africa. It is rich in blue-green algae, on which

lesser flamingos feed.

- The artificial island where they breed was built in late 2006 by Ekapa Mining company which won the Nedbank Capital Green Mining Award as a result. It is S-shaped to provide two sheltered bays for lesser flamingos with the long axis of the island facing into the wind to limit wind and water erosion. It has four large ponds, fed by a solar-powered pump. Flamingos use wet clay from the ponds to construct their nest turrets, or mounds, which resemble sandcastles. Kimberley's guides, scouts and other schoolchildren helped build 1,000 artificial turrets.
- Kamfers Dam's flamingos have huge ecotourism and economic value for the city of Kimberley. Many businesses use the flamingo in their logos, and people come from all over the country to see the birds.

Flamingos are important to the residents of Kimberley, and the city has a Flamingo School, a Flamingo Real Estate, a Flamingo Race Course and a Flamingo Casino. Flamingos are also included in the emblems of the Sol Plaatje Municipality and the Frances Baard District Municipality.

- BirdLife International has classified Kamfers Dam as an Important Bird Area, for its large flamingo population and because of the presence of other endemic and threatened waterbirds.
- The three other African breeding sites for lesser flamingos are Lake Natron in Tanzania, Makgadikgadi Pan, Botswana and Etosha Pan in Namibia. There are only two other sites in the world where the species breeds: Ziazuwadia salt pan and Purabcheria salt pan, both in India.
- The lesser flamingo, *Phoeniconaias minor*, stands between four and five feet high but is the smallest of the six flamingo species. With the greater flamingo, it is one of two Old World flamingo species. The clearest difference between the two species is that the greater flamingo has a pale pink bill with a contrasting black tip while the lesser flamingo has a dark crimson bill. The lesser flamingo is also shorter and redder in colour.
- The species has long pink legs and a long neck. Its large body is rose-pink, the colour coming from pigments in its food, the cyanobacteria *Spirulina*. The birds eat by holding their bills upside down in the water. Flamingo bills are shaped to filter tiny food items within the bill using a specially adapted tongue.
- Flamingos seek breeding sites on wetland areas only a few centimetres deep in water. Drought in Africa means breeding is irregular. Research at Etosha Pan, Namibia, found lesser flamingos attempting to breed every three years but

successful only every nine years.

- The Lesser Flamingo is listed as “Near-threatened” in national and international red data books, mainly because of its falling population, the few breeding sites that remain and human-induced threats to breeding sites.
- Mass die-offs of lesser flamingos in East Africa have been attributed to toxic algae and it may not be long before such mass die-offs occur at Kamfers Dam.
- Dr Brooks Childress is Chairman of the IUCN-SSC/Wetlands International Flamingo Specialist Group.
- South Africa has signed the international Convention on Migratory Species and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

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