

Are Lake Natron's flamingos on the edge of extinction?

Contributed by Mary Purvis
Wednesday, 25 February 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 25 February 2009

With the American dream in shambles and our country struggling with its own environmental and conservation issues why should anyone care about a bunch of flamingos nesting in some obscure lake in Tanzania? Why should it matter that a chemical company wants to build a soda extraction plant at or near their only nesting site forcing the birds into extinction?

It should matter because the door will slam shut on the balance of nature.

For Americans, flamingos are creatures of whimsy, synonymous with those pink plastic lawn ornaments invented in the 1950s. Since then, they have flown in and out of front yards depending on the trend at the time until the manufacturer went out of business a couple of years ago. The closure left prospective buyers and owners who needed replacements of the faux flamingos with no choice but to search for them in second hand stores, garage sales or on eBay; but they could be found. Now, to the relief of flamingo enthusiasts a new company will start producing the pink plastic, which I am sure, will be stuck in our lawns for generations to come.

As delightful as the plastic birds are, the real flamingos are beautiful and vital creatures that deserve our respect, concern and care.

After leading countless safaris, I took for granted the bucolic scene of thousands, sometimes millions of pink cotton candy-colored flamingos that seemed to undulate along the edges of Kenya's Lake Nakuru. The colony, a divergence from rhinos, elephants and big cats, was the reason we kept the lake on our safari itineraries. I loved to watch the spectacle and it always reminded me of a well choreographed ballet. Some of the feathered throng strutted and preened while others balanced on a stilted leg in typical flamingo pose. Still others twisted their elegant slender necks in surreal angles, so they could use their bills as upside down ladles in the water to filter algae. The more blue-green spirulina they ingested the more their plumage blushed. Every so often, several birds took a running leap into the air and flew low over the water as if to flaunt their black-tipped wings. Armed with camera gear, we left the van and walked toward the birds, but they grew restless, started to honk and collectively marched away then dispersed like the parting of the Red Sea.

But on my latest safari in April 2008, the familiar pink rim had vanished. Instead, thousands of yellow-billed pelicans flew loops and converged along the shoreline engulfing the few remaining flamingos. Our driver informed us that most of the colony had flown to Lake Natron in Tanzania to breed. I inwardly cringed and later cried when I learned the birds were in grave danger.

Lake Natron, sole breeding ground for millions of East African lesser flamingos, rests low in the Rift Valley just south of the Kenyan border surrounded by primeval landscape blotched with thorn trees and brush. Nearby, Tanzania's only active volcano, Ol Doiyo Lengai, "Mountain of God," stands guard and occasionally belches lava rich in sodium carbonate that bolsters salt concentration in the lake. As water evaporates, levels of salt skyrocket triggering spirulina, which thrive on the soda, to run rampant tingeing the lake in hues of raw salmon and orange. And, if pH levels continue to escalate, Natron turns crimson. Yet, lesser flamingos consider this raw harshness paradise. The area is so crucial that it is listed by the international Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and designated an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International. There is no other home like it in the world.

Unlike the replaceable yard ornament, the lesser flamingo personifies fragility. Their feeding, breeding and nesting habits depend on abundant algae, just the exact soda content, precise water levels and solitude. The birds do not breed every year and only lay one egg that both parents take turns incubating. They prefer privacy, and with the slightest disruption, become skittish and desert their nests. After birth, the gray downy-feathered chicks stay in shallow water in huge groups called crèches under the watchful eye of a few adults until they are able to feed themselves and fly. Despite posted sentries, the chicks are defenseless against carnivorous marabou storks, hyenas and mongooses that sometimes stalk the colony.

In 1962, disaster struck when East Africa suffered torrential rains flooding Lake Natron. The soda became so diluted and unsuitable that the flamingos flew north into Kenya landing in Lake Magadi. But Magadi had and still has a much higher concentration of sodium than Natron. At the time, ornithologists said approximately one-million eggs hatched. The adults flew off each day to feed leaving the chicks to paddle around. As they became increasingly mobile, excess soda deposits started to cake and encircle their swollen legs rendering them unable to move. Thousands died. Nairobi National Museum's curator heard about the debacle and enlisted groups of school children and other volunteers who captured the chicks and tapped off soda deposits that saved thousands and averted a major catastrophe.

The latest tragedy occurred in November 2008 when heavy rains flooded the lake again. This time thousands of eggs floated off conical mud nests to their demise. Shells cracked, and chicks sprawled flaccid around the lakeshore. Death permeated the lake. Nature can be harsh, but it is the way of the universe - a natural event.

Conversely, what a chemical company proposes to do with Lake Natron's sodium carbonate is unnatural and not the way of the universe. The company wants to extract soda to manufacture soap, medical and glass products. The same group already operates a century old plant at Lake Magadi, which is just across the border in Kenya. Initial Environmental and Social Impact Assessment reports for the proposed development were opposed by concerned environmental groups, among them, the Lake Natron Consultative Group and BirdLife International. Due to increased pressure the investor withdrew the environmental assessment report, which bought the birds a temporary reprieve, but now the company would like to move the project 32 km (19 miles) away.

Lota Melamari, chief executive of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Tanzania said, "Whatever the decision, the survival of the lesser flamingo must not be jeopardized."

It doesn't matter where the plant and employee housing will be built, the brine extraction and pumping will still negatively affect the breeding site. I can't imagine a mishmash of pipes across the lake instead of birds and nests. Is it need or greed?

Dr. Chris Magin, the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB) international officer for Africa said, "Putting Lake Natron at risk is bonkers. It is a pristine site like no other in the world. This could be the beginning of the end for the lesser flamingo."

So, in the name of soap and other products, do we push aside a species that has every right to be there? What happened to compromise or finding a better way to manufacture goods without destroying part of the planet in the process – a piece we never may see again? Is it right to force out residents when we have other options? We share this earth; we don't own it. We are here for a brief moment, so let's make that moment worthwhile.

Tourism is worthwhile and steadily growing in Tanzania. Studies have shown that safaris are much more profitable than soda, especially in a region that offers the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater and Mt. Kilimanjaro plus many more parks and reserves. Dr. Magin also said, "Millions of people have enjoyed the spectacle of flocks of flamingos in Tanzania and Kenya and all of that is now in jeopardy."

There are several lodging options available in the area from rugged tented camps to upscale accommodations. Ngero Sero Lake Natron Camp and Lake Natron Tented Camp are the only camps near the lake. They offer basic tents in a sparse environment, but the properties create an up close and personal experience for visitors who wish to spend quality time at Natron or trek up volcanic Ol Doiyo Lengai. Nestled on the slopes of Mt. Meru, and not far from Arusha is Ngero Sero Lodge, a colonial German farmhouse built at the turn of the century and now a wonderful country lodge with all the amenities. Another choice is Gibbs Farm, an extraordinary working farm outside of Karatu town in the Ngorongoro Conservation area. The last option is Shompole, an exclusive lodge and camp just north of the border in Kenya and perched on the Nguruman Escarpment, overlooking the Rift Valley. All three properties offer a plethora of activities and excursions including a tour of Lake Natron. Most importantly, they are eco-friendly, believe in sustainable living and give back to their surrounding communities.

It is understandable that many people currently don't have extra money to visit East Africa, but what you can do is go see the Disney nature movie, "The Crimson Wing – Mystery of the Flamingos," produced by Matthew Aeberhard. The documentary was filmed entirely on location at Lake Natron and eloquently portrays the life of the flamingo. Initially released in December 2008 in Europe, it should be released in the United States sometime in 2009.

After you see "The Crimson Wing," and have taken a deep breath, please think about what we can do as neighbors to preserve a habitat that is essential for the flamingos' existence. The idea of viewing several pink birds in a zoo instead of large colonies in the wild is not very appealing considering some birds do not adapt well in captivity; therefore, they are not able to reproduce.

We are one – inexplicably woven together into a global community. What matters in Africa will eventually matter to us. Homes are being lost everywhere, but we are resilient and with our ingenuity we will survive. But will the flamingos? People and greed are their biggest threats, not marabou storks, mongooses or hyenas. If we allow the extinction of a species then we could soon be extinct ourselves.

BirdLife International has launched the "Think Pink" campaign in response to the birds' plight. Your simple act of writing a letter, or sending a small donation or even volunteering with a conservation group can help bring success.