

Wetland Tourism: Kenya – Lake Nakuru



Kenya, Lake Nakuru, Flamingos feeding, © Amos Rono, KWS

Lake Nakuru is one of Kenya's 'Premium Parks' – i.e., it has iconic sites that draw international tourists to visit Kenya, and is part of the country's tourism brand. The Lake was declared a Ramsar Site in 1990, in 2009 as an Important Bird Area, and in 2011 as part of the 'Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley' World Heritage site. The lake is renowned for the large flocks of flamingos which feed there, though hydrological changes in the recent past have seen intermittent migrations and fewer congregations at Lake Nakuru. Pictures of dense swathes of thousands of flamingos feeding in or flying over the lake are amongst the best known wildlife photos in the world.

Despite its worldwide recognition and importance for Kenya's tourism, Lake Nakuru National Park

faces critical challenges in protecting itself from growing pressures around the Park, in managing tourism within the Park, and in ensuring that tourism is used to its full potential.

The lake is situated in a shallow basin in the Great East African Rift Valley. It is unusual in that it has no outflow and only loses water by evapotranspiration from its surface. It is fed by seasonal rivers (Njoro, Nderit, Makalia, Naishi and Larmudiak) and the permanent Baharini springs. Because the lake has no outflow, it accumulates all that the rivers bring into the lake. Over the centuries, this has led to the development of strongly alkaline conditions in the lake, creating harsh conditions that limit the range of species that can inhabit the site. One of these is the blue-green algal species *Arthrospira fusiformis* that is a major food source for flamingos.

Among the inflows is partially-treated sewage and industrial effluents from the nearby Nakuru Town – a major commercial and industrial centre and Kenya's fourth largest town. A study in 1994-95 linked pollution to massive deaths of flamingos mainly due to heavy metals and nutrients that promote the growth of toxic cyanobacteria. The expansion of agriculture has also resulted in loss of forests on the slopes around the lake, combined with increased erosion, fertilizers and other agro-chemicals leading to more silt being carried into the lake.

Combating these threats to the Park is a long-term challenge that is linked to demonstrating the value of the Park for the region and nationally for Kenya, and to increasing understanding and awareness about the lake and its wildlife amongst the local communities and the residents of Nakuru Town.



Kenya, Lake Nakuru, Tourists viewing wildlife © Amos Rono, KWS

Lake Nakuru National Park receives around 245,000 visitors each year – including 149,512 international tourists and 95,518 domestic visitors. As a 'Premium Park', international tourists are charged an entrance fee of USD 80, while domestic visitors must pay 1,000 Kenyan shillings (USD 11). Entrance fees and concession fees from the lodges generated

revenues of nearly 800 million Kenya shillings in 2010, which helped to pay for the costs of park management, with Kenya shillings 4 million each month being used for conservation activities within the Park.

There are two privately-run lodges in the Park, providing a total of 240 beds. They are leased as concessions from the Kenya Wildlife Service

(KWS) which runs the Park, and they provide revenues of around 17 million Kenyan shillings for the Park each year.

Lake Nakuru National Park and its catchment have a high tourism potential. Tourist attractions include the dense flocks of flamingos already mentioned – which can exceed 1 million birds – which feed on the lake, and the picturesque landscapes of woods and grassland around the lake. Features like Baboon Cliff, Honeymoon Hill, Lion Hill, Hyrax Hill, Makalia Falls, Menengai Crater and prehistoric sites and caves are also great attractions for tourists, as are the Park's other wildlife.

The main tourism activities offered in Lake Nakuru National Park are game drives and bird watching, accessed via a network of all-weather roads and tracks that are maintained within the Park. These take tourists to see more than 56 mammal species and over 450 species of birds, including 70 species of waterbirds.

The Park's impressive array of wildlife has been built up by careful management for over 50 years since it was gazetted as a national park in 1968. In 1974, Rothschild's giraffes were introduced to the site, and following efforts to increase its rhinoceros population with introductions of black and white rhino from elsewhere in Kenya and from South Africa, the Park was declared a rhino sanctuary in 1987. Lions and leopards have also been introduced from other areas.

The Park's visitor management strategy includes: information about the site and the importance of conservation; extensive signage and interpretation; use of trained guides; monitoring by park rangers; and zonation to protect its wildlife and fragile habitats. The Park is divided into four zones: tourists are not allowed in the most fragile zones, and their access to the other zones is managed to ensure that negative impacts from tourism – such as disturbance of wildlife, physical damage, or littering – are kept to a minimum. The Park's network of roads and trails and its visitor infrastructure have been developed in accordance with the zoning system. Well-

planned siting also helps to minimise negative impacts from tourism.



Kenya, Lake Nakuru, © Amos Rono, KWS

Maximising the potential of tourism in the Park and region is particularly important for a site that is so prominent in Kenya. In 2005, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) used funding from the Ramsar Small Grants Fund and Australia's Banrock Station to make a study of tourism stimulated by visits to Lake Nakuru National Park. The study found that most tourists stayed for a maximum of two days in a limited, sometimes overcrowded area due to lack of facilities, with little diversification and poor promotion of the area's attractions. Although significant revenues were being generated from tourism to Lake Nakuru National Park, local communities received little if any benefits from this, and so tourism did not provide them with any incentives for protection of the National Park's resources.

The study highlighted the need to establish a framework for sustainable tourism at Lake Nakuru and its surrounding region, incorporating benefit sharing with local communities and measures to avoid negative impacts from tourism. It also identified opportunities to develop and promote Lake Nakuru National Park along with other attractions in the region, such as other nearby lakes and the Menengai Crater, as well as establishing nature trails, viewing points and visitor centres. These facilities help to diversify



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tourism options and attract visitors to stay longer in the region, and spend more in the local economy.

The Park also runs a major awareness raising and conservation education programme for schools and local residents. This includes two education

centres for school visits and tailor-made training, which are managed by Kenya Wildlife Service and Wildlife Clubs of Kenya, and these receive more than 100,000 students every year. It also operates a bus to provide low-priced guided tours to the Park for Nakuru residents, enabling them to experience the Park's exceptional wildlife.

Sources:

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