

COMMENT 27

Flower farms destroying Lake Naivasha

BY FRANCIS MWAURA

The recent report on Lake Naivasha by foreign scientists indicating that the flower industry is innocent concerning the environmental woes facing the lake is very suspicious.

It is obvious the flower industry is a major consumer of water in the lake and a significant cause of the decline in water levels whose scars are visible all the way from the Nairobi-Nakuru highway.

Unlike the flower farms, Naivasha municipality with estimated population of over 300,000 people does not get water directly from the lake but relies on a few boreholes whose number is negligible compared to the mega boreholes operated by some flower farms. Allegations of overuse of water by the local people in the area by the foreign scientists is an exaggeration as the people in Naivasha are always water thirsty.

It is difficult to believe the high environmental compliance record, which the foreign scientists seem to project for the flower industry in Kenya and Lake Naivasha in particular.

As the closest neighbour to the lake, these farms are accountable to all Kenyans to ensure good custodianship of the lake as a national heritage. However, most of the farms have continued to behave very badly in environmental management to the point of making other players such as those in the tourism, fisheries and livestock sectors very angry.

This is well demonstrated in the controversial management plan for Lake Naivasha which was adopted and subsequently gazetted under EMCA (1999) in 2004 through legal Notice No.108 and legal supplement No. 39 before it was challenged in court.

Under this plan, riparian land owners are prohib-

ited from undertaking human activities below the 1892m or 6210ft contour around the lake which marks the sensitive lake riparian zone. This is the "no man's land" between private land surrounding the lake, the buffer zone, and the open water.

A casual check through a boat ride around the lake will clearly show that most flower farms have violated this requirement by extending and ridiculously deepening their water abstraction canals during periods of low water levels thereby disturbing the ecohydrological integrity of the lake and making the movement of wildlife such as buffaloes very difficult.

Recent studies have also shown that intensive flower farming to the north of the lake is using boreholes whose heavy abstraction has reversed groundwater flow from the traditional direction into the lake to out of the lake. Several flower farms have now been established in upper catchments areas such as Kipiriri which is hydrologically a very bad idea.

It is unwise to only consider the revenue generated by flower farms without thinking about their environmental costs. The relevant arms of government should therefore monitor and tame the flower industry like other sectors instead of waiting for the flower consumers in Europe to regulate them.

Most of flower owners in Africa are well known for messing the environment in one country and then moving to other countries leaving the citizens in permanent dilemma.

Finally, an assessment of the impact of flower farms on Lake Naivasha undertaken by foreigners cannot be truly considered as independent because most flower farms in the region are known to associate with the foreign scientists such as those who wrote the recent report.

The owners of the flower farms have adopted the bad attitude of undermining the opinions of local scientists and have usually refused young scientists from Kenyan universities to undertake research in their farms. Do they have something to hide?

Lake Naivasha has produced a large crop of indigenous experts who could give a more balanced opinion instead of solely relying on foreigners. It's also not very wise for the government to continue issuing research permits to foreigners whose agenda is to confuse the country and cover up the misdeeds of their paymasters at the expense of all of us.

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