



LEON MARSHALL

# Top bird man grounded

As Mark Anderson receives international acclaim for saving the lesser flamingo, he is suspended from his job

What a bizarre turn! There Mark Anderson is getting international acclaim for his work to save the lesser flamingo and, next moment, he, and two of his colleagues, get suspended from his Northern Cape provincial government job by Patience Mokhali, the deputy director-general of the province's department of tourism, environment and conservation, for what appears to be much the same reason.

A further ironic twist is that the action taken by Mokhali happened on the day that Anderson was going to be announced as the new executive director of BirdLife South Africa, which serves further to underscore the esteem in which he is held as a conservationist.

A webcam (web camera) is to be installed next week at Kimberley's Kamfer's Dam that will allow viewers across the globe to enjoy the pink wash of the thousands of flamingos and the sight of chicks now for the first time abounding there, thanks largely to Anderson's efforts.

The main reason for the international interest in his conservation work has been his idea to create an artificial island in the dam where the flamingos now gather in large numbers to breed. It has been described as one of the biggest success stories in bird conservation in recent times.

The island has given the birds, marked as "near-threatened" on the World Conservation Union's Red Data List, a valuable new breeding site to add to only five they have across the world, three of which are in Africa - at Etosha Pan in Namibia, Sua Pan in Botswana and Lake Natron in northern Tanzania - and two in Asia.

Anderson is the specialist nature conservation ornithological scientist of the province's tourism, environment and conservation department. The other two officials are Julius Koen, head of the same department's scientific section, and Eric Herrmann, another scientist.

The main reason for the extraordinary action against them seems to



Pretty in pink: The lesser flamingo, marked as 'near-threatened' on the Red Data List, is declining in numbers, largely due to development and human activities

PHOTOGRAPH: MARK ANDERSON

be their part in a campaign to get the Kimberley municipality to stop the spillage of large amounts of sewage into the dam, as well as their questioning of a housing development the municipality has allowed on the northwest bank of the dam, apparently without properly assessing the environmental impact it will have.

A Save the Flamingo Campaign has been launched on the internet to get people to sign a petition calling on the municipality to stop the harmful practices. The polluted water is said to be causing lesions

on the flamingos' legs and to affect their health generally.

The campaign has the support of BirdLife South Africa. Duncan Pritchard, its acting executive director, said in an e-mail circulated on the sabidnet internet forum recently that it has appealed to Marthinus van Schalkwyk, the minister of environmental affairs and tourism, and the department of water affairs and forestry to do something about the serious threats to the site.

It has also alerted the international conservation fraternity

through BirdLife International, the powerful world partnership of birding bodies to which BirdLife South Africa belongs, and which has been taking a keen interest in the South African project.

Apparently, on Monday, a director of their department and a human resources official walked into the offices of the three officials bearing a letter of suspension from Mokhali.

They were told to pack personal belongings and to leave within an hour. Their computers were confis-

cated and the locks of their office doors were changed behind them. The three were still awaiting the official charges against them this week.

Anderson said they would rather not comment for fear it might compromise the legal proceedings that are bound to ensue.

Mention was apparently made in Mokhali's letter about a complaint that had been received. However, when contacted on her cellphone this week for an explanation, she said she would prefer to have ques-

tions put to her in writing. But she was about to go abroad and would be back only on September 8.

Anderson first came up with the idea of creating an artificial island for the flamingos in 1995 because of the way the birds' attempts to breed were thwarted by people and dogs, and by the rapid way in which the dam's water levels rise and recede, either submerging their eggs or leaving them high and dry. The birds normally breed in vast, isolated pans or lakes covered with only a few centimetres of water.

Although there are estimated to be about 2 million of the birds in the world, their number has been declining alarmingly. The major cause is the growing impact of development and human activities, such as off-road driving.

The plan to give them an artificial island at Kamfer's Dam came to fruition only about two years ago when Peter Hohné, a director of Ekapa Mining, agreed to get the mine to move 26 000 tons of rock into an S-shape in the middle of the dam. In an article Anderson recently wrote for *Birds & Birding* magazine, he explained that the island had four large ponds that were fed by a submerged water pump powered by three large solar panels. This was to provide the wet clay that the flamingos needed to construct their nest turrets.

To further encourage breeding, about 1 000 artificial turrets, looking much like sandcastles, were built with the help of Kimberley's Boy Scouts and Girl Guides and a large contingent of other schoolchildren. In January this year for the first time, the dam had thousands of the birds nesting on the island.

Anderson said in the article that it was hoped to reverse current negative breeding trends.

He added: "It [Kamfer's Dam] also offers a unique opportunity to conduct scientific studies of lesser flamingos: as breeding usually takes place at massive, inaccessible pans and lakes, observations are virtually impossible, and little is known about the breeding biology of these threatened birds. Flamingo-watching is an important ecotourism activity in East Africa. The tourism potential of this wetland gem is waiting to be harnessed."

The action against Anderson and his colleagues has caused puzzlement and outrage in conservation circles. Chris Liebenberg, the spokesman for the Democratic Alliance in the Northern Cape, has been quoted in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* as saying: "The DA would like to question the motives for these suspensions. The question is: was their suspension politically motivated and, if so, why?"

## Shaping eco-leaders of the future

ELEANOR MOMBERG

Previously disadvantaged youths are to benefit from the donation of thousands of hectares of land to the Maharishi Institute by the Oppenheimer family.

Prominent conservationists and philanthropists Nicky and Strilli Oppenheimer, of E Oppenheimer and Son and De Beers, this week donated the 4 500-hectare Ezemvelo nature reserve to the institute with the aim of promoting environmental and conservation-related education among South Africa's youth.

Nicky Oppenheimer said at the hand-over ceremony in Johannesburg that this was the fulfilment of a dream for the couple who had wanted to share "something special" since their purchase of the adjoining property 35 years ago.

"We believe this will make a difference to the whole of South Africa," he said.

The reserve will be used to develop a rural eco-campus as well as promote ecotourism and conservation of the area situated on the Bankenveld, a transition ecozone between the grassland and savanna biomes, about 20km from Bronkhorstspuit.

"Ecologically this is valuable as elements of both biomes occur within the reserve, creating a rich biological diversity," said Duncan MacFadyen, manager of research and conservation at E Oppenheimer and Son.

School-leavers attending the institute are taught not only business skills but also life skills through what is known as consciousness-based education, which includes transcendental meditation, the creation of a "safe, happy, harmonious" school atmosphere and the elimination of stress in the educational process as key elements.

MacFadyen said more than 100 students had already attended structured leadership camps at Ezemvelo, with which a partnership had developed since its opening in Johannesburg a year ago.

Although the donation of the reserve means that the land has been transferred to the institute, the Ezemvelo reserve, which boasts more than 34 species of animals and 250 bird species, will continue to remain open for business as an eco-



Nicky and Strilli Oppenheimer surrounded by students of the Maharishi Institute at the handover of the 4 500-hectare Ezemvelo nature reserve to the institute, which will be used for the environmental and conservation-based education of young people

tourism destination.

Terry Fletcher of the Maharishi Institute said the university's intention was to create a showcase of sustainability using a maximum of possible alternative energy sources to move Ezemvelo off the electricity grid and to implement fair trade practices along with community upliftment programmes, such as access to further education.

There were plans to expand the reserve to include an eco-campus where young people from previously disadvantaged communities would be trained for careers in conservation, guiding, eco-tourism management, organic farming, as well as alternative energy.

Besides the eco-campus, the institute planned to create a centre of excellence in natural law-based programmes at Ezemvelo that would include consciousness-based education, a permanent exhibition venue for the total knowledge of nat-

ural law, a health spa, training in transcendental meditation and an organic vegetable farm.

Dr Richard Peycke, the Maharishi Institute's national director, said the combination of the university's educational methods to develop the full potential of each person, combined with the beauty of the reserve, promised to create great future leaders for South Africa.

Strilli Oppenheimer said she was confident that the institute would be successful in training future conservationists and environmentalists as the founders of the organisation had been with the training of business managers.

"Ezemvelo Nature Reserve will be used as a tool, a rural, outcomes-based university, to allow these young men and women to connect and build their relationship with the environment we all so desperately want to conserve for future generations," she said.

## Power in words and pictures at Ruth First lecture

OWN CORRESPONDENT

The seventh annual Ruth First Memorial Lecture will be held at Atlas Studios, 33 Frost Avenue, Milpark, Johannesburg at 6pm tomorrow.

The public event commemorates the work of journalist, activist and feminist Ruth First, a Wits graduate who made her name in South African journalism through courageous and well-researched exposés of social conditions, notably among farm workers and migrant labour.

This year's lecture marks the 26th anniversary of First's assassination in 1982 by the apartheid regime and will explore the causes and effects of the recent energy crisis in South Africa. It is organised in partnership with the Ruth First Memorial Trust, the Wits Journalism Programme, the African Studies Journal and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

The 2008 Ruth First Journalism Fellows are Hilary Joffe, a financial journalist and award-winning photographer Alon Skuy, who will present his photographic exhibition *Power and Powerlessness: Life under*

*the Bridge*. Joffe has undertaken substantial research behind the scenes of South Africa's current power crisis and will speak on *Power and Powerlessness: The South African Energy Crisis*.

Skuy spent six weeks living inside a concrete highway bridge in Johannesburg and will exhibit photographs of a community living there. He will lead a walk-around of his photographic exhibition at 5.15pm and again after the programme. Secure parking is available.

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