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THE PRICE OF KENYAN ROSES AND THE TRAGEDY OF LAKE NAIVASHA



As a teenager, Lake Naivasha was somewhere we used to go camping. I had friends who lived on the shore, and we used to go cycling or take their old tin boat out, or catch crayfish on the mudbanks. It's a beautiful spot, and a great place to watch hippos and birds, as well as antelope, giraffes and zebras. It's also very fertile, blessed with lots of water and the rich volcanic soils of the Rift Valley.

Naivasha's flower industry began in earnest in the 80s, and grew rapidly in the 90s. Now there are dozens of large farms, and Kenya has become Europe's chief supplier of fresh cut flowers. On Valentine's Day, one in three Roses sold will be from Kenya, most of them grown on the shores of Naivasha. They can be cut in the morning, and in British florists by the evening.

On one level Naivasha is a success story, a profitable export business that has brought jobs to the area and wealth to Kenya. From a different perspective, it's a disaster. The farms rely on the lake for irrigation, and pipes run straight from the lake into the greenhouses. It is being drawn out faster than it can be replenished, and water levels have dropped considerably. That's bad news for the declining hippo and bird populations, but also for the farmers and the Kenyan economy. In time, there just won't be any water left to drain out.

A second problem is population. In 1969 there were 7,000 people living around the lake. Today there are 300,000, but infrastructure has not kept level with development. The farms get all the water they need for free, but the people have no running water and have to queue, and they pay for it too. Deforestation is a major problem, as trees are cut down for firewood and aren't replaced.

50,000 jobs have been created on the flower farms, but not the kind of jobs you or I would want to do. Workers get rashes from the pesticides because they don't have protective clothing. They won't get the truth out of their doctors, because they're provided by the flower companies. Labour rights are also an issue. In 2006 workers at

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one farm complained about working conditions and pay, and the company responded by firing 1000 people at a stroke. This led to rioting, and police tear-gased the crowds.

If you were about to suggest Fairtrade, you may be alarmed to know that this was one the Fairtrade certified farms*.

The tragedy of Naivasha is not that it was developed, but that it has been developed unsustainably. If the farms had been better planned, the water managed and the pesticide runoff regulated, Kenya could have profitted for decades from the lake. Instead, it will enjoy twenty years of profit, and then be dried up, polluted and useless. And when Naivasha is no longer viable, production will switch to facilities in Ethiopia or Rwanda and the cycle will carry on - everybody loses in this kind of exploitation of the land, except the flower corporations.

- The Maasai have brought their cows to drink at the lake for generations. Their access to the lake is now restricted, and the water so polluted that their cows die if they drink it.
- Their used to be a fishing industry around Naivasha, feeding the local people and supplying nearby towns. That's gone, and those who used to fish the lake went to work on the flower farms.
- Naivasha was once considered one of the top ten birdwatching locations in the world, a paradise of wildlife that was famous in the 1960s. That's in terminal decline, and with it the profit from tourism that it could bring.

Historians have found evidence of communities on the lake going back 4,000 years. In a couple of decades it will have been all but destroyed, and who will have benefitted, except the flower corporations and their pampered European customers?

Red roses are expensive on Valentine's Day. They're not nearly expensive enough.

- [Lake Naivasha: withering under the assault of international flower vendors](#) - a great report from Food and Water Watch and the Council of Canadians.
- [Drained of life](#) - Guardian article

*update: the company in question here is Oserian. I named them in the original article, but have chosen to move that detail to this footnote to avoid singling out a company that is doing some good work in many areas. See comments.

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37 COMMENTS ON "THE PRICE OF KENYAN ROSES AND THE TRAGEDY OF LAKE NAIVASHA"

Zbyszek March 1, 2009 at 8:18 pm #

This is quite disturbing to hear. Even more to know that FT companies are also to blame. I am not sure though about the extent to which Fair Trade has failed in this case. The Guardian article says there are "more than 50 major flower farms that now line its shores". You mention Oserian, which is just one of the lot. I have been trying to see if there are other FT flower companies around the Lake but I am not sure (not all of them have websites). The Oserian company claims to protect the environment (<http://www.oserian.com/default.asp?pageid=22>), however I have no means to verify that. Anyway, this is a valid point and I will be trying to get FLO to comment on it.

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Reply

Chris April 16, 2013 at 8:09 pm #

Hi

What exactly is the issue? I am a relation of the Gaymers and their offspring. They are big land owners out there and Tanzania – 2m hectares. Barry lives on Lake Naivasha and probably owns most of it. Nearly drowned in Peter's pond (his dad) in Essex a long time ago.

What needs to be done?

Reply

Xil April 16, 2013 at 9:58 pm #

its a disgrace that locals should be charged for water!

Reply

Jeremy March 1, 2009 at 10:41 pm #

Yes, Oserian are one of the older ones. Their Fairtrade status is slightly controversial, as they're such a big company, and fairtrade is obviously more accountable with small holders and cooperatives. They were accredited by a German Fairtrade association I believe.

Ravine and Finlay are two other Kenyan fairtrade flower companies, but I'm not sure if they are in Naivasha or not.

To be fair to Oserian, they may get some things wrong, but on their energy use they're ahead of the game. Naivasha is a volcanic area, and they use geothermal energy to heat their greenhouses.

Reply

Xil April 16, 2013 at 9:54 pm #

The geothermal energy could be whats poisoning the lake together with rainfall/pesticide cycles. Are any of the companies African?

Reply

Xil April 16, 2013 at 9:57 pm #

They should consider solar and harvesting condensation for the irrigation issues and push for more manpower and less pesticides to earn the eco label

Reply

Otieno C March 4, 2009 at 10:46 am #

..I have had the chance to visit and talk to a number of farms around the Lake. Oserian is a large farm and it stands out. However, its practices are exceptional. They are founder members of the Lake Naivasha Growers Group, governed by a code of practice. They participate actively in the Lake Naivasha Riparian association. Their closest green house is more than 2 kilometers from the Lake yet they own land that borders the Lake. Their wages and benefits are almost triple the minimum wages in the industry.

They provide leadership in terms of adhering to local legislation and are one of the farms that work closely with the Water resource management Authorities and the Environment Authority including paying of water use charges and acquiring the appropriate licences. To single out Oserian, whom I believe is a good steward on environmental and worker welfare issues was unfortunate, if not misleading.

Reply

Wan July 26, 2009 at 2:13 am #

Hi Othieno,

Good to hear that you had some experience in Lake of Naivasha. I am wondering whether you can drop me an email. I would like to have a further communication with you. I am leaving for my fieldwork in that area in October this year. Till soon. Wan
wfichiban@gmail.com / w.f.w.Chik@uva.nl

Reply

Ouma I February 13, 2010 at 1:02 pm #

I think Otieno is another of the flower firm sales agent. Just go take a look at Oserian wetland and just 50 metres away from it is the dirty water flowing into the main lake without being purified as they claim. Just wait gate when workers finish and follow them to their dwelling at kamere slum and see Oserian worker living without clean water and has to depend on polluted lake water. Please stop the greenwash and get the real acts together.

Reply

Jeremy February 14, 2010 at 10:06 am #

That's possible Ouma, thanks for pointing it out – so hard for us to know the truth one way or the other from the other side of the world! I would like to see Naivasha get more attention. The only report I've seen into it was a few years ago and came from Canada.

Reply

Jeremy March 4, 2009 at 11:48 am #

Thanks Otieno, I'm glad things are not as bad as they appear. As you say, perhaps because Oserian is so large, it's gets the media stories, both good and bad. I will amend the article so that future readers will not be unfairly prejudiced against Oserian.

Reply

Chris February 3, 2010 at 4:17 pm #

Hi Jeremy,

I thought you would find this of interest. It has just been broadcast BBC C4. All about the life and death of Joan Root and the Lake. My interest increased when I found one of my cousins contributes.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00qjngb>

There is a follow up programme which I will post a link too, broadcast last night, about a trial of 'you will know who' in Kenya. It is not available as yet. Both very good viewing and filming.

Problem is Lake Naivasha is the only fresh water lake in Kenya. Guess it can only run dry if it stops getting filled. So what's the chance of that? Presumably restrictions will have to be placed on how much can be taken out on a daily basis.

I love growing roses so am happy to bypass the forced ones.

Chris

Reply

Jeremy February 3, 2010 at 4:25 pm #

Thanks, that looks interesting. I will make some time to watch that.

Reply

Chris February 3, 2010 at 4:44 pm #

Hi Jeremy,

You will need 1 and 1/2 hours. Good news no adverts. Very well produced and commentated.

Chris

Reply

Hyde February 14, 2010 at 4:51 pm #

Interesting to read. I need more information on the lake. Used to work in Naivasha ages ago.

Reply

CYLU March 24, 2010 at 6:49 pm #

i have been learning about kenyan flower industries at school. My teacher says that Fairtrade industries are much better. But reading this, it has changed my mind completely. I will tell my teacher at the next lesson. Thanks for your advice.

Reply

Kelvin o April 30, 2010 at 9:47 pm #

There are also good side to the flower farms for i have been there for the last 22 years to comment something. Oserian is one of the company that houses its workers in a human way. For those not housed there is a house allowance of ksh1200 and above and also travelling allowance. Another company that takes care of its workers is homegrown. About housing that someone mentioned about kamere is not the mistake of the flower farms but do poor planning by the town council. About lake naivisia, truely it is desapearing but let us think of how to save it. One is rain water harvesting, Recycling, Controlled usage etc. For more details contact me. Thanks

Reply

Daniel November 29, 2010 at 2:12 pm #

I'm planning a documentary about the ethical consumerism and the kenyan flower industry. The documentary will look at working conditons and wages, living standards, water usage, pollution etc and basically find out if the area has benefited from the industry or not. If you live in or around Naivasha please get in touch,
danclayton75@hotmail.co.uk

Reply

vana kostayola January 8, 2011 at 7:34 pm #

I am doing a reasearch, for an art project, on the flower market in Kenya and the aricle and the comments are already helpful.

If Fair trade works for the benefit of the developping countries or not, exploitation of work, pollution, the working conditions in flower industries in Kenya, skin problems due to pesticides etc are in the core of my intersest.

With a group of people we prepare an exhibition on Valentine's Day here in Geneva(Switzerland), under the title "Violentine Day" (from the word violence) and I am looking for information on roses focusing on Kenya's difficulties.

I would appreciate any information, photo, link, comment, or time to chat on this issues.

Please contact me in this email if you have time and energy:

vanakostayola@yahoo.co.uk

Reply

Kioko E. February 10, 2011 at 12:30 pm #

I completed my field work at a settlement in LNaivasha Oct.2010. A lot of studies have been done at the entire Basin and even with participation of a sizable number of organizations of various stakeholders in management and conservation, including the human rights concerns and introduction of fair trade for farms, problems experienced by some residents of these settlements never seem to end. The farms are many and ,yes, quite different on how they ran business and treat workers, but there are some `notorious` farms, if I may say, though they appear to be very good publicly. Only the suffering workers in terms of poor pay, job security, exposure to harmful chemicals among other injustices can tell the story.I see it as a situation of profit hungriness on the part of large scale farms at the expense of those responsible for creating these profits.....kioco@yahoo.com

Reply

EcoHustler February 13, 2011 at 6:24 pm #

Hi There,

I have done an update for this seasons rose buying. Please check it out. Is it okay to use your image?

Follow this link for an update in the rose situation in Kenya.

<http://ecohustler.co.uk/2011/02/13/how-deep-is-your-love-part-2-update-from-kenya/>

Reply

Dennis Kenyoru July 7, 2011 at 8:21 am #

All the issues highlighted here are really and perhaps more gleam than actually portrayed. I stayed in Naivasha sometime back while studying for my A-levels. The lakes' shores were the most serene environment that one could dream of when in need of a place to relax and break the monotony of classwork. the waters were very clear and the melodious sounds of the birds very alluring to the visitors. the memories are sweet. i went there recently during my university vacation, the place is simply horrible. the establishment of the flower farms in the area came with its benefits- this is undeniable. from employment opportunities to the locals and also foreign exchange for the whole country. but whether thees benefits have trickled down into the whole society living around the lake and exacted the foreseen impact is a tale to be told in tears. The damage caused to the surrounding and the suffering befalling the the residents are myriad and ridiculous. As all this is happening, there are corporations and individuals smiling to banks all year round at the expense of the rich riparian lake basin, its environs and the poor populace in the area. The so called FT firms is the greatest joke that ever came to Naivasha. After all is said, honesty, sobriety and open mindedness should take their rightful places and enough energies and resources dedicated to restore the lost and still disappearing glory of Naivasha region. It can be done. the rewards will be worthy going for.

Reply

Jeremy July 7, 2011 at 10:40 am #

Hi Dennis, thanks for adding a personal perspective!

Reply

Liza Kat July 21, 2011 at 10:14 am #

There are lots of on the internet flower shops, yet number of options are dependable, dependable as well as can top quality work. If you're confused about exactly what company you should trust to supply high quality fresh flowers within the exact delivery period you've got specific, then you can definitely find them on the internet.

<http://www.floshowers.com>

Reply

Floriculture April 16, 2013 at 7:31 pm #

Good post. I definitely love this site. Keep it up!

Reply

Judith August 21, 2013 at 4:04 pm #

I'm trying to follow up stuff in this article, but the links don't seem to work - including the ones in the article about the fairtrade flower farms. Do you have the corrected links?
Thanks

Reply

Jeremy August 21, 2013 at 4:23 pm #

My apologies - this tends to happen with older articles. The most important link is the report, which is available here:

<http://documents.foodandwaterwatch.org/doc/NaivashaReport.pdf>

More recent reports include this one from WWF:

http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/lake_naivasha_report_02_2011_1.pdf

And this water management study:

<http://www.waterfootprint.org/Reports/Mekonnen-et-al-2012-WaterFootprintFlowersNaivasha.pdf>

Reply

TRACKBACKS/PINGBACKS

1. **A greener valentine's day « MAKE WEALTH HISTORY** - February 17, 2009

[...] is bad enough news, but the polluting and drying up of Kenya's Lake Naivasha is worse (more on this here). Buy a living plant from a garden centre instead of flowers. It'll last [...]

2. **Reply on Oserian's Fairtrade practices « MAKE WEALTH HISTORY** - March 17, 2009

[...] fair trade, human rights | Tags: kenya, oserian | A few weeks ago I wrote about Naivasha's flower farms, and the environmental and social impacts on the region. One of the more troubling aspects of the [...]

3. **Gilding the lily - more on the cut flower industry « MAKE WEALTH HISTORY** - March 19, 2009

[...] mentioned the flower industry a couple of times recently, with this Valentine's day post on Naivasha, and a follow-up on [...]

4. **Water: Life in every drop, by Julian Caldecott « MAKE WEALTH HISTORY** - May 29, 2009

[...] dry. These and a host of other problems are explored through examples, including the Aral Sea, or Lake Naivasha, I was pleased to [...]

5. **Roses, woad and Lake Naivasha « Midnight brambling** - June 28, 2010

[...] like cut flowers, but I don't like ones that have lowered the lakes and water tables of drought-afflicted countries, or that have been picked and sorted by workers [...]

6. **How Deep is your Love (part 2) update from Kenya | EcoHustler** - February 13, 2011

[...] have dramatically decreased the spaces that they can graze and access to the lake for water has become a source of conflict. Western style consumerism arrives in [...]

7. **How Deep is your Love (part 2) update from Kenya | www.ecohustler.co.uk** - May 19, 2011

[...] Today giant green houses occupy the banks of the lake, which has wrecked its aesthetic value as well as changed the local culture. While Maasai cattle may still be found roaming the area, private property rights and division of their traditional range lands have dramatically decreased the spaces that they can graze and access to the lake for water has become a

source of conflict. [...]

8. **Temná stránka byznysu** | - April 1, 2013

[...] bychom se nejspíš začali dívat na etikety naší kosmetiky. Po pár článcích z Keni (např. The price of Kenyan Roses) bychom možná začali přemýšlet o původu květin v našich květinářstvích. Po [...]

9. **7 principles of resilience | Make Wealth History** - August 21, 2013

[...] Loch Lomond to dry up, we'd probably notice and be concerned. But if the damage was caused to Lake Naivasha in Kenya, chances are most of us would never hear about [...]

10. **7 principles of resilience | Power & Wealth - Online | Develop your Future!** - August 22, 2013

[...] Loch Lomond to dry up, we'd probably notice and be concerned. But if the damage was caused to Lake Naivasha in Kenya, chances are most of us would never hear about [...]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeremy Williams is a writer, project developer and freelance journalist. He grew up in Africa and now lives in Luton, UK, where he reads, writes, grows vegetables and plays with his children.



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