

## **Conservation Organizations Urge Government to Save Valuable Saliña**

**Aliansa Naturalesa di Bonaire, the alliance of Bonaire nature organizations, calls Saliña di Vlijt a natural asset that may be worth more in its natural state than as a development. Aliansa calls on the government to take immediate steps to halt the saliña's destruction and assess the potential consequences before it is too late.**

Saliña di Vlijt is a critical asset for Bonaire, and its conversion to a development could result in a significant financial and environmental loss to Bonaire, according to Kris Kats, aquatic eco-technologist of Progressive Environmental Solutions and president of Aliansa.

“The site is an important wetland, recognized for its functions of flood control and run-off catchment during heavy rains,” adds Kats. “It is an essential natural ecosystem that nurtures rare and endangered species.”

Harbour Village Development N.V. obtained a long lease for the saliña and has begun work to turn it into a waterfront condominium development. According to the plans, houses will be built along the edges of the saliña, and the saliña itself will be kept full of water by pumping sea water in.

The work has already destroyed important areas of the saliña, including, according to observers, nesting habitats, eggs and at least one chick of the Least Tern, an endangered species protected under the international SPAW treaty. Such destruction is a criminal offense under national law.

The saliña is extremely important as a buffer between land and sea. After heavy rains, pollutants in run-off settle in the wetland instead of going into the sea. This is a critical function for the health of nearby coral reefs, which are very sensitive to fine particles (of dust, sand and organic material). The saliña also provides flood control by absorbing high water flows during spring tides, and provides food for both saliña and reef wildlife.

“The loss of the Saliña di Vlijt in its natural state will not only mean the loss of species of plants and animals that you will not find anywhere outside a saliña, but it will also have serious effects on Bonaire's struggling reefs,” says Mabel Nava of Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire.

STINAPA director Elsmarie Beukenboom points out that if the saliña is permanently flooded with pumped-in seawater, the entire ecosystem will change. “A thorough assessment needs to be done before we can understand whether flooding the area is a responsible decision. For instance, we are also aware that the saliña has become full of sediments over the years,” she says. “I think it's far more likely that, for Bonaire's long-term interests, the saliña needs to be restored, not further degraded, but before anything is done, a thorough assessment ought to be the first step.”

Aliansa cautions that allowing development of the salina before a careful assessment has been made of health, infrastructure and environmental effects leaves Bonaire open to a host of expensive problems. Taxpayers will ultimately bear the financial and social burden of any damages to Bonaire's infrastructure and resource assets.

The best course for the government, short and long-term, is to find a way to back up, implement a full environmental impact assessment of the possible impacts of this development, and safeguard one of Bonaire's critical natural assets.