Flamingos return to Maharloo

Wetland still clinging to life



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INTERVIEW

The return of migratory birds to Maharloo Wetland and the formation of vast expanses of pink flamingos along its waters have created an extraordinary spectacle in recent days in Fars Province, southern Iran. Yet, this natural beauty exists alongside troubling realities, including water pollution, dwindling water resources, and the desiccation of neighboring wetlands.

Maharloo, a seasonal, hypersaline wetland that has become one of the region's principal avian refuges in recent years, continues to provide invaluable services to the environment and surrounding communities. According to environmental activists, however, these services have received insufficient attention.

Mohammad Javad Sayahpour, founder of Miras Parishan wetlands conservation non-governmental organization (NGO), told Iran Daily in the following exclusive interview that the considerable ecological significance of Maharloo Wetland and the substantial presence of birds in this habitat are partly attributable to the desiccation of other wetlands in Fars Province. He maintains that protecting Maharloo depends not only on water resource management and pollution reduction, but also on raising public awareness and securing the participation of local communities. He also discussed the wetland's potential to moderate the regional climate, control certain insect populations, and sustain biodiversity. The full text of the interview follows:



Mohammad Javad Sayahpour



A single flamingo lags behind the flamboyance at Maharloo Wetland, southern Iran, on November 21, 2026.
TAHEREH ROKH BAKHSH/ISNA

IRAN DAILY: What activities do you and the Miras Parishan NGO undertake, and what are your principal areas of focus?

SAYAHPOUR: My areas of expertise are environmental law and environmental sociology. My general approach to environmental issues is primarily informed by the social sciences and humanities. The Miras Parishan environmental NGO is an organization comprising young members of the local community surrounding the desiccated Parishan Wetland. It was established in 2014 and gradually expanded thereafter. The NGO currently has active branches and projects in several provinces, including Fars, Khuzestan, Hormozgan, and Alborz. Its principal focus is the wetlands of southern Iran. In Fars Province, besides Parishan Wetland, which is the birthplace and the point of departure for the NGO's activities, we also concentrate on Maharloo, Arjan, Tashk, Bakhtegan, and other wetlands of southern Iran.

What project are you pursuing at Maharloo Wetland?

At Maharloo, our focus is on raising public awareness. We have projects based on an approach known as CEPA, an acronym for Communication, Education, Participation, and Awareness in the environmental field. The objective of this approach is to enhance public awareness, expand educational capacity, and encourage public participation in wetland conservation.

Currently, we are pursuing specialized awareness-raising initiatives at Maharloo Wetland, targeting specific groups, including experts and specialized organizations in the counties of Shiraz and Sarvestan, so that they can develop a better understanding of the wetland and assume a role in its conservation.

When did this project begin, and which organizations have you collaborated with?

We planned and launched this project within the NGO in 2022, and it remains ongoing. Awareness-raising projects are neither temporary nor short-term in nature; they must be pursued continuously.

In this process, we have collaborated with the Fars Department of Environmental Protection, the provincial Elites Foundation, schools affiliated with the National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents (NODET), civil society organizations, and environmental NGOs. Some initiatives have also been undertaken in coordination with Shiraz Municipality and the Sarvestan Governor's Office.

This project is essentially a multiyear awareness-raising process that gradually expands and matures, until we can fulfill our mission and establish groups capable of continuing the work of wetland conservation.

Which groups have you selected for awareness-raising initiatives, and why?

When we initially began working on Maharloo Wetland, we entered the area as researchers alongside a research team from the University of Tehran and conducted more than eight rounds of sampling across the watershed and within the wetland itself. This research began in 2021 and continued until 2023. Through this process, we developed a sound understanding of the wetland's condition, pollution, water resources, threats, opportunities, and future prospects.

Maharloo Wetland lies within the administrative boundaries of two counties, Sarvestan and Shiraz. In Sarvestan, some of our target audiences include non-governmental organizations, environmental activists, county officials, and local community leaders. In Shiraz, besides environmental NGOs and active environmental groups, we have also targeted students at exceptional-talent schools because these groups can serve as pioneers in raising awareness and mobilizing public participation.

Why do you consider public awareness and participation so important for wetland conservation?

For a wetland to remain sustainable, before viewing it merely as an ecological and technical phenomenon, we must also recognize it as a social phenomenon. Wetlands sustain damage, on the one hand, from human beings and human activities, while, on the other, they provide numerous services to surrounding communities. The people living around a wetland are, in fact, its social capital; a resource that can either become complicit in its degradation or contribute to its conservation.

I can confidently say that Maharloo is among the wetlands in Fars Province that provide the most services, yet it simultaneously suffers considerable damage from human activities. We strive to transform the surrounding communities into the wetland's media and voice; the voice of a habitat whose many problems and needs receive insufficient attention.

To familiarize readers with the wetland, please describe Maharloo's current condition and its characteristics during different seasons of the year.

Maharloo Wetland covers approximately 24,000 to 25,000 hectares and is classified as a seasonal, hypersaline wetland. Its water is not particularly deep, and some sources cite an average depth of approximately 40 to 60 centimeters. Consequently, its water volume is relatively small compared with the overall expanse of the wetland.

Since Maharloo lies at the end of the watershed encompassing Shiraz and its surrounding areas, its water level depends on rainfall and the inflow of seasonal rivers. In years with adequate precipitation, the wetland can become inundated across a substantial portion of its expanse, as happened last year, when its inundation level reached approximately 90% by the spring of 2026.

During summer and through late summer and early autumn, the wetland's water coverage diminishes because of reduced rainfall and evaporation. In October this year, before the onset of rainfall, its water coverage had declined to approximately 20 to 30%. These figures, however, are based on our field observations and visual estimates; a new, precise satellite assessment is required to establish the actual extent. With the onset of recent rainfall, the wetland is once again expanding its water coverage, a normal occurrence in a natural seasonal wetland.

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How has Maharloo's inundation during the current water year compared with previous years?

We use two indicators to assess the wetland's inundation: the first is measured at the peak of the rainy season, usually at the end of winter and in March, while the second is measured at the end of summer and in early autumn, when the wetland generally experiences its lowest water levels.

In March 2026, because of the 40-day war on Iran, we had no access to remote sensing and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) that would have enabled us to measure the wetland's precise extent. However, based on field observations, I can say that more than 90% of the wetland had been saturated. At the end of summer and in early autumn, I estimate its inundation level at approximately 30%. Given that many of the country's wetlands have dried up, this is not an especially poor situation, although it is far from ideal. We hope that continued rainfall will ensure favorable inundation conditions for the wetland this year.

The considerable presence of flamingos and other migratory birds at Maharloo has been particularly striking in recent days. Where do these birds come from, and why do they choose this wetland?

Iran lies along a migratory flyway for birds, and many migratory species travel from northern geographical regions, including Siberia, toward warmer areas, with some passing through Iran on their way to Africa.

Currently, flamingos, egrets, duck families, and other species are present at Maharloo in considerable numbers. However, I cannot provide precise population figures or specify the proportions of migratory and resident birds.

Regarding flamingos, however, existing observations suggest that a considerable proportion of their population, possibly as much as 60 to 70%, has established a permanent presence at Maharloo. These birds primarily feed on the brine shrimp found

The photo shows an aerial view of Maharloo Wetland, Fars Province, Iran, on November 21, 2026.
TAHEREH ROKH BAKHSH/ISNA

