

Conserving South Asia's vultures

Title

No vultures will be left in India and the rest of South Asia if immediate steps are not taken for their conservation, NGOs have warned at the CBD CoP 11 currently being held in Hyderabad, India. South Asia once had millions of vultures but over the last decade, 99% of three species have disappeared.

"This is the fastest decline of any bird species ever reported anywhere in the world", said Dr Asad Rahmani, Director of the Bombay Natural History Society (BirdLife in India).

Unlike some bird species which face extinction because of poaching and habitat destruction, vultures are disappearing because of a drug called diclofenac. Although the Indian government banned the drug for veterinary use in 2006 to save vultures, it was still being used. The same painkiller for humans is now being diverted for veterinary use. Demanding that the government make it a prescriptive drug, Rahmani said vultures feeding on carcasses of cattle given diclofenac die in three to 10 days.

"The study by Indian Veterinary Research Institute has shown that kidney failure occurs in such vultures and they don't recover," he said. "For vultures, this drug is as lethal as cyanide," he stressed.

One side event at the CBD CoP meeting "*Conserving Endangered Gyps Vultures in South Asia*" described the activities of SAVE (Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction), a consortium of 10 national and international NGOs, which is spearheading efforts to phase out diclofenac, launch conservation breeding programmes and create "Vulture Safe Zones" - 100km radius areas in which intensive efforts are made to remove diclofenac, in preparation for future vulture releases.

India once had four to five million vultures but only a few thousand of them are left now. All South Asia's three *Gyps* species of vulture are listed as Critically Endangered by BirdLife on behalf of the IUCN Red List. A second side event "*The South Asia Regional Vulture Recovery Programme*" highlighted the vulture conservation efforts of South Asian Governments, including an ongoing initiative facilitated by IUCN to develop a South Asia Regional Vulture Recovery.

This builds on the recent adoption in 2012 of a Regional Declaration on vulture conservation by the Governments of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, which has provided an

unprecedented opportunity to foster co-ordination and collaboration among the four countries.

SAVE is highlighting the loss of vultures as the loss of a critically important ecosystem service. Animal carcasses are now being left to rot, leading to an enormous waste disposal problem and to a number of health concerns. Feral dogs, dog attacks and the risk of rabies have all increased. Other impacts include groundwater contamination and loss of income for farmers, whose fields can become unusable for up to three weeks as a result of rotting carcasses.

The loss of vultures has also had severe social impacts on some communities, such as the Parsis, who traditionally offered their dead to the vultures in “Towers of Silence”, and the Jains, whose “Panjrapores” also relied on vultures.

For more information, please visit: www.save-vultures.org, www.bnhs.org, www.iucn.org

The BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme is saving the world's most threatened birds