Title

The rate of population decline of resident vultures in India and Nepal has slowed, but populations remain low and vulnerable

Populations of three Asian vulture species (White-rumped Vulture, Long-billed Vulture, and Slender-billed Vulture) have declined by more than 99% in South Asia since the early 1990s due to use of veterinary drug diclofenac, prompting BirdLife to classify their status as Critically Endangered. The governments of India, Nepal and Pakistan banned veterinary use of the painkiller diclofenac in 2006 because of its lethal effects on vultures that feed on the carcasses of cattle and buffaloes that had been treated with the drug shortly before they died. This initiative was essential for protecting the region's endangered vultures but until now the effectiveness of this ban at reversing the vulture declines is unknown.

Good news for vultures?

In a new study in the science journal, PLoS ONE, researchers report the results of long-term monitoring of vulture numbers from surveys across India and Nepal. The latest surveys show that for both India and Nepal and for all three critically endangered species that vulture numbers have remained stable in the last few years. Prior to the ban on veterinary diclofenac the vulture population was decreasing at a rate of up to 40% a year. While the stabilisation in vulture numbers is encouraging only small numbers of the birds remain and they are still vulnerable.

Surveys for vultures were undertaken across more than fifteen thousand kilometres of roads in western, central and eastern states of India and across one thousand kilometres of roads in the lowland regions of Nepal, following the same routes and methodologies of earlier surveys in both countries. Surveys were undertaken by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) in India and Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) in the lowland regions of Nepal.

In India: The study's lead author, Dr Vibhu Prakash from BNHS (BirdLife in India) commented: "The slowing of the decline in vulture numbers across India for all three Critically Endangered species is the first sign that the government's ban on veterinary diclofenac is having its desired impact. Continued efforts is still required to protect the remaining small populations including halting the illegal use of human forms of the drug in the veterinary sector."

Taken in India during the 1980s, when White-rumped Vultures were very common (Goutam Narayan/BNHS)

In Nepal: One of the studies authors, Khadananda Paudel from BCN (BirdLife in Nepal) commented: "The slowing of the decline in vulture numbers across Nepal and India is the first sign that the government's ban on veterinary diclofenac and local initiatives to prevent the use of diclofenac within vulture safe zones is having its

desired impact. However we need to maintain the strength of this ban and ensure that the whole Nepal can become a vulture safe area."

Co-author Dr Richard Cuthbert from the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) said: "The stabilisation in numbers of these three Critically Endangered vulture species in Nepal and India is really encouraging as previously populations were nearly halving in number every year. A lot of hard work still remains to ensure the small surviving populations can now begin to recover across South Asia and that other toxic veterinary drugs do not cause similar impacts to diclofenac."

Efforts to reverse the decline in vulture populations are being coordinated by a consortium of national conservation organisations and multi-national vulture experts. This initiative, Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction (SAVE), was launched in 2011 to help coordinate research, advocacy and implementation of the actions needed to prevent these birds from disappearing for ever. The second annual SAVE meeting was held in Kathmandu on the 5-6 November 2012 and included representatives from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The paper is available from PLoS ONE at: http://www.plosone.org/home.action

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