

India's pharmacies flout diclofenac ban but vulture breeding centres have best year yet

Title A study published in the journal *Oryx* has found that over a third of Indian pharmacies continue to sell diclofenac to livestock farmers. Manufacture and sale of the drug for veterinary use has been banned in India since 2006, because of its toxicity to Critically Endangered vultures. Farmers are purchasing widely-available human diclofenac illegally in conveniently large bottles to treat their cattle. But some diclofenac on sale was formulated for veterinary use, and had been manufactured illegally after the 2006 ban. Diclofenac is responsible for bringing three South Asian species of *Gyps* vultures to the brink of extinction. The population crash was first noted in the late 1990s. Nepal and Pakistan also banned diclofenac in 2006. Further measures in India, in 2008, placed additional restrictions on diclofenac for animal use, with contravention punishable with imprisonment. The research was conducted in over 250 veterinary and general pharmacy shops in 11 Indian states from November 2007 to June 2010. The surveyors asked if they could buy non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for treating cattle. Diclofenac was recorded in 36% of shops. Lead author and principal conservation scientist at the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), Dr Richard Cuthbert said, "The ban is still quite easy to avoid because human formulations are for sale in large vials, which are clearly not intended for human use. Preventing misuse of human diclofenac remains the main challenge in halting the decline of threatened vultures." Encouragingly, the research also shows an increase in meloxicam (in 70% of pharmacies), a drug with very similar therapeutic effects to diclofenac on cattle, but which has been proven to be safe to vultures. There is also evidence that untested drugs such as nimesulide are more widely available in the market. The effects of these drugs on vultures are as yet unknown. Ketoprofen, an alternative that has been tested and shown to be deadly to vultures, has still not been banned. It was on sale for veterinary use in 29% of pharmacies. The report's co-author, Dr Vibhu Prakash of BirdLife Partner the Bombay Natural History Society said, "While the increase in meloxicam brands and availability is encouraging, firm action at Government level against pharmaceutical companies and pharmacies that are breaking the law by manufacturing and selling diclofenac for veterinary use is urgently needed if we are to save vultures from extinction." In contrast to these disheartening results, 2011 has been the most successful year yet at the Indian captive breeding centres. The number of fledged chicks is almost double last year's. Eighteen vulture chicks were successfully reared, 15 at the Pinjore centre in Haryana, and the remaining three at Rajabhat Khawa in West Bengal. Four

fledged birds were a direct result of 'double clutches': some pairs produced a second egg after the first was removed, hatched in incubators and reared by BNHS staff. BNHS, with support from the RSPB and newly-formed consortium Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction (SAVE), manages three conservation breeding centres in India, where 271 vultures are housed, and successful breeding of all three species has now occurred. There are also conservation breeding centres linked to the SAVE programme in Nepal and Pakistan. Chris Bowden, Head of the RSPB's vulture programme and SAVE spokesperson said, 'With the latest success at the breeding centres, we're more confident than ever that there will be sufficient numbers for reintroduction to the wild as soon as it's safe. But until production and sale of veterinary diclofenac is stopped, we cannot guarantee these birds have any future in the wild.' If you would like to become a BirdLife Species Champion and help threatened vultures you can do so through the [BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme](#). Contact species.champions@birdlife.org for more information