

Indian Partner to establish Vulture Safe Zone in Madhya Pradesh

Title

In a significant expansion of its vulture conservation programme, BNHS (BirdLife in India), in association with Rio Tinto and BirdLife International, is to establish a 30,000 km² Vulture Safe Zone in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for this joint project was signed on the 23 January in the presence of BNHS and Rio Tinto officials at BNHS's headquarters, Hornbill House in Mumbai.

In the late 1990s, the Indian populations of White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Indian Vulture *G. indicus* and Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris* crashed, with dramatic declines also observed in Nepal and Pakistan. All three species are now classified as Critically Endangered, having lost up to 99% of their population across the Indian subcontinent. BNHS took part in the research which eventually identified the cause as diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory drug. Studies found that a single cattle carcass treated with diclofenac was enough to induce renal failure and visceral gout in the entire vulture population of the surrounding area. Despite a government ban, cattle are still being treated illegally with diclofenac intended for human use.

“Although a safe alternative drug, meloxicam is available, the wild population continues to be under constant threat of diclofenac poisoning, because people are unaware of the link with the disappearance of vultures. These birds provide an essential service by keeping towns and countryside clean and free from diseases, including rabies”, said Samir Whitaker, the Rio Tinto-BirdLife Programme Manager.

“It is therefore important that concerted efforts are made in the areas where there are extant populations of vultures, to raise awareness and save these very useful birds from extinction. The concept of Vulture Safe Zones will play a vital role in the long-term survival of vultures in South Asia.”

Rio Tinto's Bunder Diamond Project in Madhya Pradesh is joining BNHS in a five-year partnership that will conduct targeted awareness activities and cattle carcass sampling in the area around the Bunder site, including parts of the Chattarpur, Tikamgarh, Ashoknagar, Vidisha, Sagar, Damoh, Panna and Satna districts. This will help ensure that no diclofenac or

other veterinary drugs toxic to vultures are administered to cattle. With the help of local people, the partners will assess the success of the project and any new threats by monitoring the vulture population of the entire area.

In future, adjacent areas could be converted into similar Safe Zones, creating a much larger diclofenac-free zone and enabling the vultures to once again establish self-sustaining populations. A dedicated team will work for the creation of further Safe Zones in close association with local NGOs and the government.