

Vultures fly off with awards

Title

Bird Conservation Nepal's (BCN, Birdlife Partner) Vulture Conservation Programme has won three of the eight awards established by the WWF to recognise and honor people and organisations at the grass-root level that have made significant contribution to conserving Nepal's rich biodiversity.

The Community Managed Vulture Safe Zones of Nawalparasi and Rupandehi, both projects of BCN, shared the Abraham Conservation Award (organisation). Similarly, Mr. Hirulal Dangaura, Monitoring and Education Assistant, BCN won the Abraham Conservation Award (individual).

Mr. Anand Chaudhary, Vulture Conservation Programme Officer at BCN won the Mathew Preece and Yeshi Choden Lama Young Conservation Leader Award. This award was established in 2007, in memory of two young conservationists who passed away along with 24 other conservation leaders in a helicopter crash in 2006.

"These Awards are like the Oscars for the conservation sector in Nepal", said Dr Hum Gurung, Chief Executive Officer of BCN. "This year's awards recognise the good work being done in the Vulture Safe Zones by BCN with the collaboration of Nepal Government, local community, veterinary professionals and international community."

South Asia's vulture population has crashed dramatically since the 1990s. Half of the eight species of vultures found in Nepal are in danger of disappearing. Once observed in their thousands, they have already disappeared from large parts of eastern Nepal. A few remaining sites with nests are being monitored by scientists and show gradual declines.

White-rumped Vulture has declined by 99.9% in India over a period of 15 years. "Scientific studies carried out since 2002 show a decline of 91% for this species in Nepal", said Dr Richard Cuthbert, a Senior Conservation Scientist at RSPB (BirdLife in the UK).

The cause of the decline has been identified as a veterinary drug 'diclofenac'. Vultures die when they consume carcasses contaminated with this drug.

Both Vulture Safe Zones (VSZ) have been a model for community-based conservation of threatened species. These communities collect old cattle, sacred in Hindu culture, in a cow rescue centre, where they are provided good care. Once these animals die a natural death, they are fed to vultures. Number of vultures coming to the safe feeding areas and number of nests at these sites have increased every year since their establishment. Sensitisation of local community to conservation as well as livelihood support for the community members such as tourism promotion, bee keeping and organic farming activities are supported to sustain the

conservation effort.

These communities also actively exchanged remaining diclofenac stocks with vulture safe drug meloxicam. On 31 March 2010, a large stockpile of the drug diclofenac (51.7 liters injectable and 13,064 bolus) was destroyed in a ceremony widely covered by the media.

"We established the first community managed vulture safe zone in the world", claimed Mr Chaudhary, coordinator of Nawalparasi VSZ. Both sites were used as a model for Nepal Government's 'Vulture Conservation Action Plan for Nepal 2009-2013'. A wider vulture safe zone covering these two districts along with 11 others will be established by February 2011 and expanded further, with trans-boundary replication in India in the coming years. This year's other individual Abraham Conservation Award winners are Mr Kishore C Gautam (Forest conservation), Mr Rupak Maharjan (anti-poaching), Mr Bhakta Raskoti (Orchid research and conservation), and Mrs Renu Shah (conservation leadership in the buffer zone).

On the day, WWF Media in Conservation Award was shared by Mr Umid Baghchand of BBC Nepali Service and Mr. Ramesh Bhusal of The Himalayan Times. "As District Forest Officer of Dang, Mr. Gautam has been very supportive in vulture conservation work in the district. He has handed over a patch of government forest as 'vulture protected forest' to the local community for management, perhaps the first of its kind in the world" explains Mr. Anand Chaudhary, this year's award winner. "Both the award winning reporters have extensively covered vulture conservation issues". On the occasion, two young scientists received the 'Jatayu Scholarship' for conducting research on vultures. One of them will be continuing the work started by last year's winner on a Himalayan Griffon Vulture colony in a remote mountain district and the other will be studying ecology and behavior of vultures that gather at a rubbish dump. Image credit: Marek Jobda; www.theworldsrarest.com