



Conservationists launch appeal on Vulture Awareness day: “Ban killer drug or Europe’s birds face extinction”

BRUSSELS (4 September, 2015) – There are warnings tomorrow’s International Vulture Awareness Day [Saturday 5 September] could be one of the last to see these birds in Europe.

A number of conservation organisations say it’s because European countries are failing to tackle the use of a dangerous drug which could cause the extinction of vultures across the continent.

Their future is grim, according to BirdLife International, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Vulture Conservation Foundation and the Wildlife Conservation Society, unless the European Commission moves to ban the veterinary use of diclofenac now.

A ban in some Asian countries, including India and Pakistan, has helped to arrest the catastrophic effects on vulture populations there. Disappointingly, EU member countries decided, following a meeting this summer, that the drug can instead be ‘controlled’ through vague action plans. Veterinary diclofenac is still legally available in countries such as Spain, which is home to 95% of Europe’s vulture population. That’s despite the European Medicines Agency earlier this year identifying the serious risk the drug poses to vultures.

Asunción Ruiz, CEO of SEO/BirdLife Spain said: “Spanish authorities are choosing pharmaceuticals over the environment.

“Vultures provide services to our farmers that are far more valuable than the benefits of this product. A product that can easily be replaced by safer drugs.

“Our responsibility” - added SEO's Ruiz – “is to protect vultures at national AND global level.”

Jose Tavares, Director of the Vulture Conservation Foundation, believes that “India is again leading the way, with the recent ban on multi-dose vials of human formulations of diclofenac. This is a breakthrough to eliminate this vulture killing drug from the ecosystems.

“If only Europe could follow the way and ban the veterinary formulations now legally sold in Spain, Italy and a few other EU countries”

Janice Weatherley-Singh, WCS Director of European Policy, said: "The scientific community is united in warning of the dangers of diclofenac to vultures. We are asking the European Commission to enact a ban on veterinary use of diclofenac because ‘Action plans’ and further study are not enough.

"We need to stop the harmful use of this drug in livestock immediately. There should be widespread support for a ban since the existence of a safe alternative drug essentially eliminates any hardships that would be caused."

Diclofenac is an anti-inflammatory used in animals such as cattle and pigs, but it is highly toxic to vultures and kills them hours after they have eaten a contaminated carcass.

A safe alternative to diclofenac exists and is widely available, which would limit any adverse effects of a ban.

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Notes to editor

- Diclofenac use in livestock was linked to the near-extinction of vultures in Pakistan, India and Nepal in the 1990s. Residues of diclofenac remained in livestock carcasses, that were then eaten by vultures. In 2006, the government of India enacted a ban on production, importation and sale of veterinary diclofenac products, followed soon after by Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Since then, vulture population declines in South Asia have slowed or been reversed.
- Spain's plan to mitigate the effects of diclofenac on vultures is wholly inadequate. It offers to add a label that says carcasses of livestock administered diclofenac should not be fed to wildlife, providing information to veterinarians and sampling carcasses. This plan will do almost nothing to protect Spain's fragile vulture populations. Evidence that such mitigation is unlikely to be effective is already available within Europe, where the carcass of a Griffon vulture collected in Spain was shown to contain toxic residues of another veterinary drug (flunixin), likely to have come from a contaminated cattle carcass. Even infrequent lapses could have dramatic consequences, with scientific modeling showing that contamination of less than 1% of carcasses would have been sufficient to cause the declines seen in South Asia.
- The Convention of Migratory Species, an important treaty to which both the EU itself as well as all EU Member States are parties, adopted guidelines in 2014 to prevent the risk of poisoning to migratory birds. It recommended banning the veterinary use of diclofenac, as it is one of the most severe causes of poisoning worldwide. In its November 2014 meeting, the World Organisation on Animal Health (OIE) working group on Wildlife Health expressed concern about Spain's decision to allow the use of veterinary diclofenac and also recommended a ban.
- The European Medicines Agency, responding to a request by the European Commission, has confirmed that diclofenac poses a threat to Europe's vultures and recommended that measures be put in place to better protect the birds.