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To the members of the press – for immediate release

Veterinary drug could cause major drop in vulture numbers in Spain, new study confirms

Scientists and NGOs are calling for an immediate ban of veterinary diclofenac after finding it could kill as many as 6,000 vultures per year in Spain, home to 95% of the Griffon Vulture population. A safe alternative exists but the Spanish government and the EU have rejected a diclofenac ban, instead approving 2 new drugs that contain it.

Brussels, Madrid [25 April]: According to a new study^[1], published in the Journal of Applied Ecology today and analysing the potential effects of the use of veterinary diclofenac in Spain, the approval in that country of the use of these two new veterinary drugs containing diclofenac – Diclovet and Dolofenac – could jeopardise the viability of Europe’s most important breeding population of Griffon Vultures.

Addressing a knowledge gap specifically identified by the Spanish government regulatory agency (Agencia Española de Medicamentos y Productos Sanitarios: AEMPS), the authors of the study^[2] estimated the number of vulture deaths caused by diclofenac in Spain at between 715 and 6,389 per year. This research indicates a potential decline of 0.9 - 7.7% per year in the Spanish population of Griffon Vultures^[3].

The approval of these drugs in Spain is especially threatening as Spain is home to more than 95% of the European breeding population of the Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* (about 26,000 pairs) and other threatened scavenging birds (Red Kite *Milvus milvus*, Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* and Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*).

Veterinary diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory and analgesic medication, has already provoked near extinction (~99%)^[4] of three vulture species on the Indian subcontinent in the '90s. Vultures are exposed to the drug – toxic to them but not to livestock – when they feed on carcasses of animals previously treated with it. Diclofenac causes kidney failure and death in vultures within a few hours of consumption.

The decline of vulture populations is bad news for people and the environment: vultures provide important ecosystem services by removing carcasses from the environment. This even contributes to a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions that would otherwise result from the physical removal and incineration of carcasses.

The study’s leader, Professor Rhys Green, stated: “Because of the possibility of causing a major impact on vulture populations, our findings justify a precautionary ban on the veterinary use of diclofenac in Spain and encouragement of the use of meloxicam, a vulture-safe alternative drug.”

Asunción Ruiz, SEO/BirdLife’s CEO, stated: “The Spanish government has a big

responsibility to ban the use of diclofenac on farm animals, as well as responsibility for the conservation of the biggest populations of scavenging birds in the EU and one of the most important in the world. We just cannot afford to allow an environmental disaster to occur like it did in Asia.”

Professor & co-author Antoni Margalida stated that *“animal carcasses favoured by vultures and carrion-scavenging birds found dead or dying at recovery centers are also monitored for NSAID (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug) contamination”.*

Iván Ramírez, Head of Conservation for BirdLife Europe^[5] stated: *“Science has put numbers to what we had already expressed to both the European Commission, the European Medicines Agency and the Spanish authorities: allowing the use of veterinary diclofenac in Spain is both illogical and irresponsible. European countries must take this evidence seriously and follow Asia’s lead.”* **ENDS**

For further information, please contact:

Professor Rhys Green, Honorary Professor of Conservation Science, Cambridge University and Principal Research Biologist, RSPB: reg29@hermes.cam.ac.uk; +44 (0) 1223 (7) 62840

Professor Antoni Margalida, Ramón y Cajal researcher, University of Lleida (Department of Animal Science): amargalida@ca.udl.cat; +41 (0) 31 631 3009

Roger Safford, Senior Programme Manager, Preventing Extinctions, BirdLife International: roger.safford@birdlife.org; +44 (0) 1223 747 576

Ivan Ramirez, Head of Conservation, BirdLife Europe: ivan.ramirez@birdlife.org; +34 (0) 6464 77962

Notes:

[1] The paper can be cited as: Rhys E. Green, José A. Donázar, José A. Sánchez-Zapata & Antoni Margalida. 2016. The threat to Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* in Spain from veterinary use of the drug diclofenac. *Journal of Applied Ecology*. The link to the paper can be found here: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.12663/full>. This paper will be published directly on EarlyView on 25 April.

[2] This included researchers from the University of Cambridge, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds [RSPB; BirdLife International Partner in the UK], Doñana Biological Station [CSIC], Miguel Hernández University and University of Lleida.

[3] Researchers assessed the potential impact on vultures of medicated livestock (mainly cattle and pigs) carcasses per year. They first determined how much diclofenac was digested and how much left behind in medicated livestock between dosing and death. Secondly, they estimated the probabilities of the death of a vulture after feeding based on experimental studies of diclofenac toxicity. Finally, these figures plus data from the government on expected numbers of medicated carcasses was used to calculate annual numbers of vulture deaths expected to be caused by diclofenac.

[4] <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sowb/casestudy/113>

[5] BirdLife Europe is a Partnership of nature conservation organisations in 47 countries, including all EU Member States, and a leader in bird conservation. Through its unique local to global approach BirdLife Europe delivers high impact and long term conservation for the benefit of nature and people.