



# European vultures severely threatened by legal approval of Diclofenac in Europe

## We need action NOW to avoid a vulture crisis similar to the one in the Indian subcontinent

---

### Executive summary

**Veterinary diclofenac kills vultures and caused a dramatic (99%) and rapid decline in the vultures in the Indian subcontinent – significant effort has been spent to successfully ban the marketing of this drug in that region, as non-toxic alternatives exist. The appearance of this drug in Europe – it is now legally on sale in Spain and Italy – represents a new and significant threat to the European vulture populations, and creates a precedent that can have global impact on the world’s vultures. The Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF) and BirdLife International ask now the EU and members states to take decisive actions to ban this veterinary drug.**

Vultures are scavenging birds that perform important ecosystem services: by fast recycling of corpses and carcasses in the countryside, vultures reduce the propagation of diseases, emissions of Greenhouse gases and prevent costs associated with the collection and processing of carcasses. Europe has four species of vultures - the globally Endangered Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), the globally Near-Threatened Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), and the globally Least Concern Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) and Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*).

Veterinary diclofenac is a non-steroid anti-inflammatory drug that could be used to treat cattle. However, diclofenac causes acute renal failure in vultures. In the last 3 decades, the appearance of veterinary diclofenac in the Indian subcontinent led to the massive decline of several species of vulture there – now only 1% of the tens of millions of vultures that occurred in South Asia remain. Population declines in India over the period 1992-2007 ranged between 97,5% and 99,9%, depending on the species .

Vultures die from kidney failure within two days of eating tissues of cattle treated with a veterinary dose of diclofenac. In India, less that 1% of cattle carcasses available to vultures

would need to contain a lethal level of diclofenac to account for the observed rapid rates of decline. Cost for the Indian society of the vulture crisis there was estimated at 34 billion US\$. A vulture-safe alternative anti-inflammatory drug exists, meloxicam.

The licensing of veterinary diclofenac drugs for livestock farming, in Italy and recently in Spain (since 2013), poses a significant new threat for these species in our continent. Unfortunately the necessary risk assessments done in the national approval process did not include the potential significant impact on vultures. The situation in Spain in particular is of high risk, as this country hosts the bulk of the European vulture populations - 90% of the European griffons, 97% of the black vultures, 85% of the Egyptian vultures and 67% of the bearded vultures in Europe. These, and in particular griffons and black vultures (the most common), feed often on carcasses of domestic animals left in the fields, or at dedicated vulture feeding points that offer them large amounts of cattle and swine from extensive and intensive unit.

Considering the proven impacts of diclofenac on vultures, the feeding habits of European vultures, and the distribution and the status of vultures in Europe, it is clear that we are facing a potential crisis. This also sets dangerous precedents for African and Asian countries, which could import diclofenac from Europe.

For the VCF and BirdLife International, the case is crystal-clear – it is really a question of learning from what happened in India! In case of risks to the environment or human health, Member States and/or the Commission can launch a Referral procedure to eventually ban a certain drug. The fact that a safe alternative exists, that the EU nature conservation legislation protects these birds, and the EU has already invested millions of Euros in the conservation of European vultures, should offer no doubt.

The VCF and BirdLife International ask environmental and veterinarian agencies to work together with national government and with the EU Commission to avoid another vulture crisis in Europe. Veterinary diclofenac must simply be banned from Europe!