As we begin to reset our interaction with nature, the question is how to build back better post COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of nature in ensuring our wellbeing. We need a Green Recovery pathway that ensures the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems, to build back from the impacts of the pandemic. As a new deal on biodiversity is negotiated in Kunming China later this year, efforts must be redoubled to protect nature.

We hope you will take time to enjoy our partners’ stories from around the continent, and that you will share this newsletter with your friends and supporters. Happy reading and thank you for your continued support.

Ademola Ajagbe
Regional Director, BirdLife Africa
GRIFFON VULTURES ARE BREEDING IN MOROCCO AFTER 40-YEAR ABSENCE

By Elena Serra Sánchez & Hicham Elgatem

The griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) is once again breeding in Morocco after 40 years thanks to a reintroduction program undertaken by the Water and Forestry Department in partnership with GREPOM/Birdlife Maroc.

The first step towards the reintroduction of the Grifon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) into the wild in Morocco dates back to 2017 with the release of five vultures by the Water and Forestry Department. Since then, the department, in partnership with GREPOM/BirdLife Morocco (BirdLife Partner), has made tireless efforts which have helped achieve today’s success.

“It is a real pleasure to see griffon vultures mating and breeding for the very first time at Jbel Moussa. Griffon vultures had been breeding in Morocco until the 1980s, but known colonies left and the species most likely disappeared from the country thereafter,” says Khadija Bourass, Executive Director of GREPOM/Birdlife Morocco.

The successful project was undertaken at the Vulture Rehabilitation Centre, situated in the northern part of Morocco, on the southern shore of the Strait of Gibraltar, right on the summit of the majestic Mount Jbel Moussa, a biological and ecological site. The centre, co-managed by GREPOM / BirdLife and the Water and Forestry Department, was opened in May 2020 and a month later, it hosted the launch of the griffon vultures’ reintroduction program. Through this program, vultures in distress rescued during annual migration periods are placed in specialized facilities where they are provided with necessary care until their recovery.

It is within this framework that for the first time, in June 2020, 10 adult vultures were transferred from the Dream Village Park in Mohammad to the *Jbel Moussa Vulture Rehabilitation Centre* (the CRV) to help them adjust and get trained before being released into the wild.

During this period the WFD and GREPOM/BirdLife teams closely monitored the vultures’ adaptation, pair formation attempts, and nesting behaviour, while regularly providing them with food.
Six months later, in January 2021, 8 of the 10 griffon vultures were released into the wild during their breeding season in the hope that they would breed in the wild and encourage wild vultures in the region to resume this behaviour. As it turned out, the efforts came to bear fruit! The team continued to monitor the released individuals and observed evidence of breeding in the wild by the end of January, with pair formation and mating.

“Our next challenge is to observe the rate of integration of these vultures in the wild, successful breeding and ability to survive and search for food outside the reintroduction site,” says Rachid El Khamlichi, head of the Vulture Rehabilitation Centre.

In this regard, the team is considering diversifying the locations of feeding stations to encourage the released vultures to get used to going into new areas in search of food. “Even though we need to celebrate the success achieved so far, our aim is to ensure the sustainability of colony survival in the medium and long term,” says Rachid El Khamlichi.

“The current success of this program is largely related to the synergy between GREPOM and the Water and Forestry Department. Nevertheless, we require financial support to help us sustain the program” says Kadhija Bourass.

**Vultures in Morocco**

Of the five species of vulture that once bred in Morocco, only two still remain: the Bearded Vulture (Gypaetus barbatus - Near Threatened) and the Egyptian Vulture (Neophron percnopterus - Endangered), which continue to breed in the Middle and Upper Atlas regions. The other three: the Lappet-faced Vulture (Torgos tracheliotos - Endangered), Cinereous Vulture (Aegypius monachus - Near Threatened) and Griffon Vulture, disappeared from Morocco during the 20th century mainly due to lack of food, poaching, poisoning and loss of habitat.
NATURAL COMPOST HELPS WOMEN FARMERS IN BURKINA FASO GET BETTER YIELDS

By Seydou Nacro

Natural compost is a reliable alternative to chemical fertilizers in improving agricultural yields for women farmers in Burkina Faso, while promoting conservation of micro-organisms and insects, ensuring the survival of migratory birds and optimal pollination of crops.

Alizèta Biyen, a farmer in Léo, a town situated about 160 km south of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, strolls calmly across her family’s two hectares of land. The morning breeze sweeps across her face and the chirping of birds can be heard through the surrounding trees. With a daba (a tool similar to an adze) perched on her shoulder, her eyes gaze into the distance, inspecting her piece of land. For some time, like many farmers in the region, she has been experimenting new agricultural practices based on natural compost.

Back from the fields, the sun’s rays slowly creep through the foliage and the temperature begins to rise. But Alizèta certainly doesn’t care; she is more interested in the piles of freshly cut shrubs she is about to burn. She is currently a first-year preparatory student at the School of Natural Composting and is applying her first lessons. She has set up two compost heaps and proudly shows us one of them: “I can proudly to tell you that in addition to fulfilling my promise to use natural compost, I expect to get better yields, if Mother Nature is generous. My husband promised to help me transfer the first heap of compost to the piece of land he gave me sometimes next week. If some compost remains, I will donate that to my husband for the family field”, explains Alizèta.

The young woman benefited from a training programme on how to prepare natural compost. This was made possible through the initiative dubbed, “Birds - Bees - Business” initiative within the “Projet d’appui à la diversité biologique et à l’économie verte or (PADEV-BBB), a project in support of biological diversity and the green economy funded by the Dutch National Postcode Lottery (NPL) and implemented in four provinces of Burkina Faso. The four-year project is being implemented by ICCO Cooperationen in cooperation with Vogelbescherming Nederland (VBN, BirdLife Partner), and Fair Climate Fund (FCF).

Alizèta is busy preparing her farm for the planting season. Those who started using natural compost before she have been getting good yields year after year. According to her, the training was very inspiring: “The compost heap preparation technique that I learned can be easily applied by women. One doesn’t need to use cement to
stabilize the pit. The technique requires the use of large quantities crop residues and a small amount of manure. It is the easiest way for me since I know how to collect crop residues’ she emphasises.

For Alizèta, chemical fertilizers are a distant memory. “During the last season, my husband and I spent more than 150 euros on pesticides and fertilizers. We made a lot of sacrifices just to be able to buy these inputs. Despite the efforts, we did not harvest much”, says Alizèta, highly disappointed.

Chemical inputs have technically shown their limits in improving agricultural yields under the current conditions of application by small household farmers in Burkina Faso. Undeniably, these **chemical inputs have a negative impact on soil fertility in the long term** because of their harmful effects on microorganisms, consequently contributing to an increase in food insecurity risks. Moreover, the cost of these inputs remains beyond the reach of vulnerable producers: more than 25 euros for a 50 kg bag of NPK fertilizer. Even though the production and use of organic manure has long been popularized, its adoption by women is still hindered by the gruelling task of digging manure pits.

To address this challenge and improve crop yields, *Naturama* (BirdLife’s Partner) is **promoting the use of compost among small-scale farmers by opting for heap composting**. “This technique has an advantage: it requires neither much labour nor financial resources. In addition, one only requires 45 days to produce compost. This is in line with the reality of small-scale household farmers, especially women and young people”, says Adama Nana, head of the PADEV-BBB project. The project subsidized training of farmers in the use of this technique. Participants were provided with farming kits to help in the implementation of the technique on their farms.

Through this initiative, 2,659 small-scale subsistence farmers were trained in the first year of the implementation, including approximately 1,128 women who were trained in production of compost heaps. With the application kits they received, **1,600 farmers managed to produce compost for the current season**.

This project activity falls within the “Trees-Insects-Birds” strategy where the use of compost plays a key role in improving crop yields, conserving micro-organisms and preserving insects, thereby ensuring the survival of migratory birds as well as optimal pollination of crops and production of non-wood forest products.

The participants in the activity clearly understood how easy it was to produce organic manure: “We understand that we must always put manure in our fields if we want to maintain the fertility of our soils for a long time in order to bequeath them to our offspring and also to improve production,” said Alizèta Biyen.

In the subsequent farming seasons the beneficiaries will be retrained to act role as models in the villages where the project is being implemented and another group will benefit from the same training to ensure promotion of this good practice within the villages.

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*Alizèta Biyen proudly showing off the natural compost for her farm © Seydou Nacro*

*Up to the right: A farmer training session in natural compost production technique © Seydou Nacro*  
*A model farm implementation that uses natural compost (without chemical inputs) © M.Seydou Nacro*
Off the Southern African coast are some of the most productive waters in the world. The waters are home to a wide array of biodiversity including dolphins, whales, sharks in addition to seabirds including albatrosses and petrels. Many of these birds are increasingly under threat from human activities including fishing, oil spills and development as well as climate change.

Such is the case of the African Penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*), also known as the Cape penguin, only found on the south-western tip of Africa in South Africa and Namibia. Unlike other penguins, this species bucks the cold climate trend, surviving in temperatures of over 30° C.
In the last few decades, the population of African Penguins has dramatically decreased. Once numbering about 1.5-3 million individuals, the African Penguin population dropped to 300,000 by 1956, and the numbers kept on falling. “Last year, there were fewer than 13,000 pairs in South Africa”, highlights Dr Alistair McInnes. Seabird Conservation Programme Manager at BirdLife South Africa (BirdLife Partner). With only 1% of the size of their population in the 1900s, the species is classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

According to a 2018 study, African Penguins would be extinct from the west coast of South Africa by 2035 if current patterns are maintained.

In addition to egg collection and guano harvesting for fertilizer, reduced availability of this species food, mainly anchovy and sardines, has led to this massive population decline. Decades of overfishing have decimated fish stocks, thus threatening the survival of African Penguins. Growing penguin chicks need a diet very high in lipids—something that sardine and anchovy provide. As if conditions for the penguins weren’t bad enough, research suggests that when seabird chicks are fed on lower quality “junk food”, they are slower to develop and can experience decreased cognitive ability, making it harder for the young birds to find food once they have fledged.

African Penguins generally breed on islands where they are safe from predators. Due to shifts in the distribution of their prey, there is now a mismatch between penguin breeding islands and the fish stocks, as breeding penguins can’t hunt farther than 40km, at most, from the breeding nest if they are to feed their young regularly. “There is a 600 km stretch of coastline between Dyer Island and Port Elizabeth where there are no islands, and therefore no breeding penguins, which effectively splits the South African population in two”, explains Dr Alistair McInnes.

To counter this situation, BirdLife South Africa is investigating options of creating new penguin colonies on a stretch of the south coast of South Africa that has no offshore islands but high fish abundance.

The aim is to create resilience in the penguin population by increasing the number of colonies and to bridge the gap between the west and east populations and enable penguins to breed in a region that has healthy prey supplies. “Working with CapeNature and other penguin experts, we identified the De Hoop Nature Reserve on the southern coast, 300 km east of Cape Town, as a suitable place to start”, explains Dr Alistair McInnes.

Previous penguin breeding attempts were unsuccessful due to predation, leading to abandonment of the colonies. To prevent this from recurring, BirdLife South Africa has installed a predator-proof fence—designed in conjunction with a wildlife fence expert—along the perimeter of the site. The site has also been equipped with a remote monitoring system with cameras that send alerts to project staff when predator motion is detected.

De Hoop Nature Reserve was identified as a suitable place for establishing a new colony of penguins © BLA

African penguin (Spheniscus demersus), near Boulders Beach in South Africa © Paul Mannix
Because penguins breed in colonies, they are less likely to adopt a new site with no penguins already breeding there. Consequently, BirdLife South Africa is using decoys and playing penguin calls to attract birds from sea. BirdLife South Africa is also planning to release young penguins from the Hoop, to encourage them to return and breed. Once penguins start breeding in a colony they return there annually – a trait which helps them find the same mate again. It is hope that through these strategies, penguins will colonize Hoop, thus helping increase the populations numbers.

Collaborations are critical in advancing penguin conservation. To this end, BirdLife South Africa’s Coastal Seabird Team is working with the government and the fishing industry, advocating for an ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF) management, that incorporates ecosystem and socio-economic concerns into the fisheries management framework rather than the conventional approach that is centered around a single species.

An example of this approach is the African Penguin Island Closure Experiment BirdLife South Africa has been working closely with other NGO’s, seabird scientists and the government, to assess the impact of purse-seine fishing closures around four of the largest African Penguin breeding colonies since 2009. Results of this study will be used by the government fisheries management to decide to limit resource competition in sensitive penguin habitat.

Further, the Coastal Seabird Team is working on different approaches integrating ecosystem concerns into the way catch limits are set for sardine and anchovy – key prey species for three of four most threatened coastal seabird species in South Africa.

To understand the foraging distribution of the African Penguins, the team has identified areas where breeding penguins go to forage. Additionally, it has tracked non-breeding African Penguins since 2012 from major colonies such as Dassen Island, Stony Point and Bird Island. Currently, BirdLife South Africa is in the process of analysing this, which will be critical to Marina Protected Area expansion assessments.

The African Penguin is facing an uncertain future, but by moving penguins closer to their food and trying to ensure there are more fish in the sea, it is hoped their populations will thrive again.
STRONG HIGH SEAS PROJECT HOLDS 3RD DIALOGUE WORKSHOP

By Lewis Kihumba

On February 16th and 17th 2021, the Abidjan Convention Secretariat and the STRONG High Seas team co-hosted the 3rd Dialogue Workshop. The workshop themed ‘Enhancing the Knowledge Base for Cross-Sectional Management and Ocean Governance in ABNJ of the Southeast Atlantic’ was held online and drew more than 40 participants including representatives from Abidjan Convention states, scientific institutions, academia, civil society, in addition to global and regional organizations.

This workshop, part of ongoing engagements with stakeholders in the South East Atlantic region focussed on deliberations on the challenges facing ocean governance in the region, particularly focussing on High Seas. High seas or Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ) fall outside jurisdiction of states and account for more than 64% of the world oceans. Additionally, 90% of world trade crosses through these areas, which also hold more than 90% of global fish stocks and play a key role in climate regulation. Today, High Seas are under threat from human activities including overfishing, emerging deep-sea mining and pollution, with ecological impact of these activities being felt across borders.

Speaking at the dialogue workshop opening, the Executive Secretary of the Abidjan Convention Amb. Abou Bamba noted the importance of this workshop stating that, “This workshop is instrumental in helping develop a unified voice in ocean governance negotiations.”

The workshop provided a platform for participants to discuss important issues relevant to marine conservation and sustainable use of Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ). Some of the key topics discussed included status of the BBNJ negotiations which began in September 2018. The second session revolved around the STRONG High Seas project’s socio-economic assessment on the importance of high seas biodiversity for the region. This study seeks to characterise and assess the costs and benefits associated with human activities in ABNJ. Some of the highlights of this session included fishing profitability in ABNJ, Access and Benefit sharing of Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs), in addition to Environmental degradation and erosion due to increased levels of port infrastructure in the South East Atlantic Region.

Additionally, a presentation on options for strengthening Monitoring Control and Surveillance (MCS) of human activities in the region was also made. The workshop included an interactive session on conservation, sustainable use, and integrated management of BBNJ focussing on the various Areas Based Management Tools (ABMTs) and approaches available to regulate activities in these areas.

‘Marine ecosystems are interconnected hence the need to strengthen ocean governance. There is need to further the debate at national, regional and global levels,” said Ben Boteler, STRONG High Seas Project co-lead. Concluding, the successful workshop, the project team highlighted key activities planned for 2021 including a report on options for strengthening MCS for ABNJ in the South East Atlantic, a report planned on conservation measures for BBNJ in the region, a workshop on MCS as well as a capacity building workshops. Further, a stakeholder website providing information on the conservation and sustainable use of BBNJ, and ongoing BBNJ negotiations, has been developed by the project.
Poisoning – both accidental and deliberate – has driven Africa’s vultures to the brink of extinction. But hope is at hand: a new series of poison-free safe spaces are protecting vultures, raising awareness and advancing research in Zambia.

Dressed in green, Kelvin Mkandawire is part of a group of researchers carrying out patrols across the sweeping plains of the Kafue Flats. On this hot windy afternoon, they are conducting ground nest surveys of vultures within this Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, which is home to over 450 animal and bird species, including vultures.

Over the last 30 years, vulture populations in Zambia have declined catastrophically. This situation is replicated across Africa, where vulture populations have declined by up to 97%. Zambia is home to seven vulture species, four of which are Critically Endangered and two Endangered. Like the rest of Africa, Zambia’s vulture populations have suffered a human-induced population decline of up to 98% in some species, such as the White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis* and White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*. The main culprit is poisoning: either accidentally, through ingesting livestock carcasses that had been treated with painkillers that are toxic to vultures, or deliberately.

“Although vultures play a critical role in the environment, their numbers have declined greatly over the last three decades, posing a challenge to the delicate ecological balance,” notes Kelvin Mkandawire, project research assistant at BirdWatch Zambia (BirdLife Partner).

To save the country’s dwindling vulture populations, BirdWatch Zambia is creating a poison-free environment through establishment of **Vulture Safe Zones** – a system that has previously proven successful across Asia.

The Vulture Safe Zones are being set up in partnership with farm owners, and with support from the National Geographic Society. These areas provide safe feeding and roosting sites for vultures, with no risk of poisoning. Since the start of the initiative in 2017, BirdWatch Zambia has expanded it to cover three farms in Chisamba. Today, the Vulture Safe Zones cover over a thousand square kilometres of land, including farms and a game reserve.

“It’s always exciting to work with BirdWatch Zambia, and I’m glad to be part of the team that drives the conservation and protection of Endangered bird species such as vultures,” says Nicola Carruthers, ecologist at the Munyamadzi Game reserve, the only game reserve with a Vulture Safe Zone so far.

We hope that the success of these sites will go a long way in stemming Zambia’s vulture population decline. Since the Establishment of Vulture Safe Zones...
Zones. BirdWatch Zambia has been able to facilitate consistent research on vultures and several other bird species within the sites. Therefore, as well as being safe havens for vultures, Vulture Safe Zones have become **important outposts for monitoring vulture populations** outside of protected areas. The birds are now regularly surveyed, threats are analysed, and vultures have even been tagged to study their movement.

“**These Vulture Safe Zones are a boost in protecting vulture populations** and are a critical strategy in the long-term survival of vultures in the country and across the country,” adds Mkandawire.

As well as annually monitoring species’ populations, BirdWatch Zambia checks that Vulture Safe Zones are operating within the correct criteria, and whether there are any threats to vultures in the area.

A vital aspect of conservation is the **involvement of local communities**. To this end, BirdWatch Zambia engages nearby residents, raising awareness on the ecological importance of vultures and the need to save them. Farm owners, managers and workers who operate within the Vulture Safe Zones are educated the importance of protecting natural habitats from man-made threats.

An education and awareness campaign around the area has also targeted school children and their parents who own, manage or work in these farms. This dialogue seeks to **change local perceptions about vultures and influence farm management practices**. This can lay the groundwork for future expansions, working with partners. BirdWatch Zambia is seeking to increase the area of Vulture Safe Zones in the country to at least 2,500 square kilometres by 2025.

**Vultures may not be the most beautiful-looking birds**, but their presence is now starting to be appreciated within the Vulture Safe Zones. At Fringilla farm, where BirdWatch Zambia commemorated International Vulture Awareness Day in previous years, the local community is beginning to acknowledge and appreciate the importance of these Critically Endangered birds.

“I never knew I could see vultures in these areas. It would be nice to have excursions into Vulture Safe Zones more often to appreciate these birds,” says Mirriam Chanda, a pupil from Mwayasunka school, who has taken part in BirdWatch Zambia activities. “Vultures are unappreciated yet extremely important. I have seen how fast they are able to clear up carcasses. Not only is this process quick and cost-effective when it comes to waste disposal, but it also helps reduce the spread of diseases among animals here on the farm,” says Joleyza Mboozi, a supervisor at Fringilla farm.

“For this to happen, we need more resources to expand this vulture conservation model elsewhere across the continent,” concludes Mkandawire.
AFRICAN BIRD CLUB CONTINUES DEVELOPMENT OF THE BIRDS OF AFRICA APP

The African Bird Club is continuing development of its birding app called Birds of Africa. This is a field guide app which is also intended to be an aid to conservation and accessible to all. The latest version of the app can be downloaded, for free, from the Apple App or Google Play Store.

The app now includes text, maps, photos and calls for some 1,200 bird species on the checklists of the following countries and islands: Annobon, Benin, Bioko, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Togo.

Over time, the app will be developed to include all species and countries in continental Africa and associated islands. The next phase of the app is covering East Africa, starting with the Horn of Africa for which a limited Ethiopia list of the more common birds is already included. An initial Kenya list, aimed especially at younger and new birders, is nearing completion.

The app has been piloted successfully in Nigeria and the A P Leventis Ornithological Research Institute has produced a short video showing how bird clubs in that country are using the app. Users of the app have fed back that it is “an incredible resource that transforms birding in Africa”, it is “easy to use”, and it has “every detail a birdwatcher in Africa could use or require at any time”. Try it yourself and let us know what you think by leaving a review of your own.