



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargo: Saturday 6 September 2014

Vultures in Africa and Europe could face extinction within our lifetime warn conservationists

Johannesburg, 6 September 2014: BirdLife International, the world's biggest conservation Partnership, has announced this week that vultures are declining and rapidly becoming one of the world's most threatened groups of birds. In a bid to stop this important family of birds slipping towards extinction in Europe and Africa, they have launched a global campaign asking for public support to "Stop Vulture Poisoning Now".

The crash of vulture populations in Asia was shockingly fast – quicker than any other wild bird, including the Dodo. Within a decade, species such as the White-rumped Vulture declined by 99.9% in India alone as a result of veterinary drug *diclofenac* that is lethally toxic to vultures. Despite the tragic experience in Asia and the availability of safe and inexpensive drug alternatives, BirdLife has confirmed that, worryingly, veterinary diclofenac is now commercially available in Spain and Italy. Both these countries are strongholds for vultures in Europe.

"We know what we need to do in Europe – ban veterinary diclofenac", said James Lawrence, BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme Manager. "We also know what we need to do for Africa – urgently understand fully the threats and extinction risk so we can act quickly, with priority".

Eleven species of vultures occur on the African continent, and threats to these vultures include deliberate and accidental poisoning, habitat loss, energy infrastructure and persecution for body parts to be used in traditional medicine.

"Recent news reports contain multiple examples of deliberate and accidental poisoning such as the up to 600 vultures found deliberately poisoned in the Kwando region in northern Namibia and 60 dead vultures which were found on a farm in the Swartberg area of KwaZulu-Natal", said Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Manager of BirdLife South Africa's Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme. Vultures are often accidentally poisoned by farmers targeting animals that prey on their livestock. Poachers also have a role to play, as they poison carcasses to kill vultures, to ensure that vultures do not circle above these carcasses, alerting rangers of the poaching event that took place.

Seven of the 11 vulture species that occur in Africa are listed on the IUCN Red List and these species are facing a complexity of multiple threats. Worryingly, five of these species joined the Red List of threatened species only in the last seven years. According to Kariuki Ntanganga, BirdLife Africa's Species Programme Manager, "unless the threats are identified and tackled quickly and effectively, vultures in Africa and Europe could face extinction within our lifetime."

Only two years ago, the White-backed Vulture, the most widespread and common vulture in Africa, was globally uplisted by the IUCN by two categories: from Near-Threatened to Endangered. The Hooded Vulture, a species that has historically been widespread in Africa, was listed as Endangered in 2011.

During 2014, BirdLife International, the custodian of the IUCN global Red List process, uplisted the Bearded Vulture to Near Threatened, a vulture species confined in southern Africa to the Maloti/Drakensberg mountains in Lesotho and the Free State, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Bearded Vultures, listed as Critically Endangered in the pending update of *The Eskom Red Data Book of birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*, is the only vulture species listed in this category, representing the highest risk of extinction in the wild due to the current threats of poisoning, disturbance and collisions with powerlines. Although the species is recovering in Europe, due to focused conservation efforts, it is declining across its global range.

Conservationists are concerned that the controversial wind farm proposed for Lesotho's Maluti-Drakensberg, which received the go-ahead from the Lesotho Government in October 2013, will have severe impacts on both Cape and Bearded vultures. The decision to grant environmental authorisation to this project does not bode well for the future of vultures in the region or for the reputation of the fledging wind energy industry in southern Africa.

Vultures are essential for our health as they provide vital ecosystem services, disposing of animal carcasses and thus reducing the spread of diseases, and they are therefore a critical component of ecosystems.

BirdLife South Africa will be celebrating the importance of vultures on International Vulture Awareness Day on Saturday 6 September, including at an event at Colleywobbles in the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape. Colleywobbles is home to the largest colony of Cape Vultures in the Eastern Cape, with up to 200 breeding pairs. According to Nick Theron, BirdLife South Africa's Regional Conservation Manager in KwaZulu-Natal "this site is therefore recognised globally as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA)".

"Please think about the plight of vultures in International Vulture Awareness Day and support the urgent work needed to save Africa and Europe's threatened vultures by generously supporting our appeal", concluded BirdLife International's James Lawrence. "Your support is vital to this work and will make a real difference to its success. So please, dig deep, donate generously now and help us keep vultures flying as high as they should be". Details are at www.justgiving.com/stop-vulture-poisoning-now.

For more information, images or interviews please contact:

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Notes for Editors

- 1.) **BirdLife South Africa** is the local country partner of BirdLife International. BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership with 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide and growing, with almost 11 million supporters, 7000 local conservation groups and 7400 staff. Find out more at www.birdlife.org or www.facebook.com/BirdLifeInternational.
- 2.) Vultures appear to be particularly prone to colliding with blades of wind turbines and high collision rates have been observed in Griffon Vultures at **wind farms** in Europe, most notably in Spain. In order to determine if mitigation will be effective and feasible at the proposed wind farm development in Lesotho's Maluti-Drakensberg, more research is needed to understand how often, at what height and under what conditions the birds move through the site. The Department of Environment in Lesotho recognised this and issued the environmental clearance for an initial period of one year in order to assess the bird mortality risks associated with the project. The Department also reserves the right to revoke the authorisation if there are environmental concerns caused by the project that are beyond mitigation. For more information on BirdLife South Africa's work on "vultures and renewable energy", contact Samantha Ralston, Birds and Renewable Energy Manager at BirdLife South Africa energy@birdlife.org.za
- 3.) The **Cape Vulture**, which is only found in southern Africa (endemic to the region), is currently listed as *Vulnerable* in the Red Data Book. It will be listed as Endangered in the updated *The Eskom Red Data Book of birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*. The southern node of the Cape Vulture population is centred on the Drakensberg Mountains and comprises 44% of the South African and Lesotho population, and 41% of the global population (which includes the colonies in Botswana). The Lesotho Highlands is of global significance for the Cape Vulture as the area is used for breeding, roosting and foraging. Cape Vultures nest on cliffs, with the largest colonies numbering more than 500 pairs.
- 4.) The *Critically Endangered* **Bearded Vulture** occurs in two isolated populations in Sub-Saharan Africa, one in the Ethiopian Highlands and the other in South Africa and Lesotho (primarily in the Lesotho Highlands and the surrounding escarpment of South Africa). The population of Bearded Vultures in southern Africa is small and declining. There are only approximately 100 breeding pairs, and approximately 60% of the population occurs in Lesotho.
- 5.) **BirdLife International and the Vulture Conservation Foundation are advocating for a complete ban on the use of veterinary diclofenac in the EU.** In parallel, BirdLife Partners are

working nationally to inform local authorities and diclofenac distributors of the risk linked to the veterinary use of this dangerous drug.

What is diclofenac?

- Diclofenac is a non-steroid anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) present in many commonly used drugs that are used for treating moderate pain. **It is extremely toxic to vultures in small doses.** Its use on cattle wiped out 99% of the vulture population in South Asia in the 90's. Vultures eating cattle treated with a veterinary dose of diclofenac will die in less than 2 days.

What is the conservation status of the species affected by diclofenac?

- **There are 21 species of vultures in the world**, five of which can be found in the American continent. The other 16 are distributed across Africa, Europe and Asia. Of these so-called Old World vultures, 75% are globally threatened or near-threatened, with the number of threatened species expected to rise in the next conservation status assessment.

Are there safe alternatives to diclofenac?

- Yes - **A safe alternative drug, meloxicam, has been identified and tested on vultures and a range of other bird species.** The meloxicam patent is more than 10-years old, meaning any pharmaceutical company can produce it at relatively low costs.

6.) The **BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme** is counteracting an increasingly diverse array of threats to birds by delivering conservation action, underpinned by science, where it is most needed. <http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/preventing-extinctions>

7.) **How can people help?**

To support BirdLife's '**Stop Vulture Poisoning Now**' appeal, people can visit: www.justgiving.com/stop-vulture-poisoning-now

Contacts

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8.) The vision of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation and enjoyment of natural birds and their habitats. BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organisation in the country, and relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work. For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za.