MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

Cape Vultures killed at wind farms

Johannesburg, 6 April 2017: African's vultures are in trouble. Most old-world vultures (vultures found in Africa, Europe, and Asia) have faced severe population declines and are on the edge of extinction. The Cape Vulture is found only in southern Africa, which means that South Africa has a special responsibility to protect this species. This vulture was recently up-listed from "Vulnerable" to "Endangered"[1], and the species faces numerous threats including poisoning and collisions with and electrocution on powerlines. Scientists predict that increased temperatures associated with global climate change may also negatively impact Cape Vultures. Ironically, a major part of our strategy to minimize climate change – wind energy – may pose a new threat to these endangered birds.

"It is with great sadness that we share news of the first Cape Vultures fatalities as a result of collisions with wind turbines" said Samantha Ralston-Paton, Birds and Renewable Energy Project Manager at BirdLife South Africa. "As far as we know, these are the first incidents of this kind for the species" she said. To date four Cape Vulture fatalities as a result of turbine collisions have been reported to BirdLife South Africa[2].

The collisions were expected and have confirmed conservationists' concerns that Cape Vultures and wind farms are not compatible. Other vulture species (e.g. the Eurasian Griffon Vulture) have experienced high fatality rates at wind farms in Spain, and the Cape Vulture is ranked as the top priority in BirdLife South Africa's list of bird species likely to be vulnerable to the impacts of wind energy.

"It is a challenge to find a balance between wind energy and bird conservation," notes Samantha. "Climate change is a significant threat to our environment and to our well-being, and healthy ecosystems are our main line of defense. We need renewable energy, but it must be developed with respect for nature," she said.

The most widely accepted strategy to minimize wind energy's negative effects is to place wind turbines outside of areas regularly used by collision-prone birds. Vultures travel many kilometers from their colonies and roosts, and according to BirdLife South Africa, this implies that large areas may be unsuitable for the development of wind farms. One of the wind farms that reported Cape Vulture fatalities is located

[1] The Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland
[2] Three fatalities occurred at one wind farm and one at another.

approximated 20 km from the nearest known vulture roost, and the other is approximately 12 km from a temporary roost.

"We have come a long way since the first wind farms received environmental approval. The impact assessments for the two wind farms where the mortalities were recorded were completed before BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Best Practice Guidelines for monitoring and impact assessment were adopted, and we also now recommend, and are seeing, much more rigorous impact assessments where wind farms are proposed within the range of Cape Vulture" notes Samantha.

"We are grateful that post-construction monitoring data are being gathered and shared with us. This is not the norm in many countries elsewhere in the world. So far only a small number of vultures have been affected, but it is important that we learn from and respond to these experiences as quickly as possible to make sure the number of mortalities stays low. Sharing this information also gives us an opportunity to engage with decision-makers, wind farms, bird specialists and researchers to try find solutions".

Both wind farms have committed to implement further mitigation measures, including actively searching for and removing any animal carcasses in the area. This will reduce the likelihood of vultures visiting the wind farms in search of food. The risk of collisions can also be minimized by stopping turbines turning when vultures are observed in the vicinity of the wind farm. This strategy has been implemented at one of the wind farms, and is being considered at the other.

BirdLife South Africa, the Endangered Wildlife Trust and VulPro have recently issued a statement highlighting their concern around ambitions to develop wind farms in the Eastern Cape. Two Renewable Energy Development Zones proposed by the Department of Environmental Affairs' draft Strategic Environmental Assessment for Wind and Solar Energy overlap with areas regularly used by Cape Vultures[3]. "A recent study by the CSIR[4] has confirmed that the wind resource in South Africa is excellent in most areas, and we believe there is no need to develop in high risk areas" notes Samantha.

Now that there is evidence the Cape Vultures are at risk at wind farms, the challenge for conservationists and environmentalists is to make sure that the number of vultures affected remains low. "One of BirdLife South Africa's roles is to make sure that birds do not get overlooked as we scramble to find solutions to the climate change crisis" Samantha concluded.

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[3] Download statement here.
[4] https://www.csir.co.za/study-shows-abundance-wind-and-solar-resources-south-africa.

Notes to Editors

For more information contact Samantha Ralston-Paton (BirdLife South Africa's Birds and Renewable Energy Manager) at energy@birdlife.org.za or 083-6733948.

More on Vultures

Vultures clean our landscapes and help to prevent the spread of disease. Many Old World Vultures are under threat of extinction. Counties are coming together address the plight of these bird and a *Multi-Species Action Plan to conserve African-Eurasian Vultures* has been drafted, launched by the Coordinating Unit of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) Raptors MOU, in collaboration with BirdLife International, Vulture Conservation Foundation and the IUCN Vulture Specialist Group. (The *CMS Raptors MoU* is the *Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Birds of Prey in Africa and Eurasia*—an international, legally non-binding agreement to protect migratory birds of prey.)

BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in more than 100 countries and territories worldwide. BirdLife South Africa works with government, scientists and industry help ensure that impacts of renewable energy on birds are understood and minimised.

BirdLife South Africa relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work. Investec Corporate and Institutional Banking (a division of Investec Bank Limited) sponsors BirdLife South Africa's Birds and Renewable Energy Project Manager.

For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za