

## MEDIA RELEASE

### An ill wind blows for vultures in Lesotho

**Johannesburg, 24 February 2018:**



Bearded Vulture flying over the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfronteir Park. Chris van Rooyen.

Conservationists are concerned that a proposed wind farm development at a site near Letšeng-La-Terae in Lesotho, just to the west of Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Park, may help drive the Maloti-Drakensberg population of Bearded and Cape Vultures to extinction. Vultures are particularly prone to colliding with wind turbine blades, and this area sits in the heart of important breeding and foraging grounds for Cape Vulture and Bearded Vulture, both of which are at risk of extinction.

“This is a classic example of where not to site a wind farm and, as it is potentially the first wind farm to be built in Lesotho, we are extremely concerned about the negative precedent this wind farm could set for what should be viewed as a sustainable source of energy” said Samantha Ralston-Paton, Birds and Renewable Energy Project Manager at BirdLife South Africa. Although Birdlife South Africa supports the development of renewable energy, it cautions that poorly sited wind farms could have disastrous impacts on wildlife.

In its latest World Heritage Outlook II Report, The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recognises that windfarm developments adjacent to the Maloti Drakensberg Transboundary World Heritage Site could have a severe impact on the values for which the site was declared. “The sad thing is the impacts are avoidable” adds Ralston-Paton. Consensus is that the most effective way to avoid negative effects is to place wind energy facilities away from important habitat of threatened species, including areas used for breeding, foraging, or commuting.



BirdLife South Africa is a partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of nature conservation organisations.  
Member of IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature).  
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An Environmental Impact Assessment process for the Letšeng wind farm was conducted in 2011, and the avifaunal study found the project to be ‘fatally flawed’. Despite strong objection from a number of conservation organisations (including BirdLife South Africa, BirdLife International, the Peregrine Fund, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the Bearded Vulture Task Force) a time-limited ‘environmental clearance’ was still issued by the Lesotho Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture in 2013, so as to allow for bird mortality risks to be further assessed. Some four years later, UK-based firm AGR-Renewables has very unfortunately resurrected plans to develop the site and initiated bird monitoring.

“In a recent meeting, the project developer could not clarify the legal status of the project, and efforts to confirm this with authorities in Lesotho have gone unanswered. We have reason to believe that the initial environmental authorisation is no longer valid, and any reputable project financier should have serious questions about the impact of this proposed development on vultures” notes Jonathan Booth, Policy and Advocacy Officer at BirdLife South Africa. “What we do know is that they are considering an unproven strategy to mitigate impacts. We believe that this is completely inappropriate, there are alternative sites and technologies that are available to help meet Lesotho’s energy needs, and Letšeng is not the site at which to be testing anything that is still unproven”, he adds.

The Bearded Vulture is Critically Endangered in the region, with just 100 breeding pairs remaining in the Maloti-Drakensberg. While Cape Vultures are Endangered and endemic to Southern Africa; wind turbines have already added to the numerous threats these birds face, with a number of fatalities being recorded in the Eastern Cape. “The Letšeng wind farm could be devastating for the Maloti-Drakensberg’s vultures, it’s simply a risk not worth taking”, Booth concludes.

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### **More on Cape and Bearded Vultures**

The Bearded Vulture is classified as Critically Endangered in Southern Africa. There has been an 82% decline in their population over the last 50 years, and less than 250 mature individuals remain in the region. The Cape Vulture, a southern African endemic, has seen a 50% decline in their population over the last 50 years. Roughly 10 000 mature individuals now remain, resulting in them being classified as Endangered. Causes of decline for both species include poisoning, persecution, and collisions with energy infrastructure.

Vultures clean our landscapes and help to prevent the spread of disease. Many Old-World Vultures are under threat of extinction. Countries are coming together address the plight of these birds and a *Multi-*



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*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 120 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 and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds sponsors BirdLife South Africa's Policy & Advocacy Programme.