

Raptors and developments

Background

South Africa is a developing country with an economic growth target of 6%. This implies a great deal more infrastructure, buildings and resource extraction in the future. Although certain areas of the country have previously been relatively untargeted for development, this is changing as we discover new minerals, new business opportunities, and continually push the boundaries. Previously rural, untransformed areas are increasingly faced by new development.

As raptor conservationists it is essential that we understand the implications of these developments and our ability to influence the manner in which they are planned and implemented.



What do developments mean for raptors?

New developments can impact on raptors both directly and indirectly. Often the direct impacts are easier to identify, but the indirect impacts may have a far greater effect in the long term.

Direct impacts include increased raptor mortality through mechanisms such as:

- Collision with fences, power lines and other above ground structures
- Electrocutions on power lines
- Road kill
- Increased predation

Indirect impacts include:

- Increased disturbance of feeding, roosting, and particularly breeding. Disturbance impacts can be broader than the site.
- Destruction of feeding, roosting and breeding habitat. Habitat destruction is generally restricted to the development site itself. Remember that since some raptors utilize alien tree species, destruction of these trees can be destruction of habitat – not many developers realize this, and think that they are benefiting the environment by removing these trees (see the BoPWG leaflet 'Raptors and alien trees')
- Changes in species range, prey or predator abundance.
- Disturbance, e.g. developments close to breeding sites
- Decline in the prey base, such as for example during the poisoning of rodents.
- On the positive side, buildings often provide nesting sites for falcons and kestrels and gardens provide food and nest sites.

Importantly, both direct and indirect impacts occur during both the construction and operational phases of the development.

Most new developments require some associated infrastructure, such as roads, power lines, pipelines and others, and it is important to consider these factors in your assessment.



What can we as raptor enthusiasts do?

The foundation for the raptor enthusiasts' involvement in developments is to have reliable, robust information on raptor distribution and abundance. Almost any input into a development, will at some point require you to provide information on the exact whereabouts of the species concerned. This information should include the habitats used by the species concerned. In certain cases, habitat that could potentially be used by certain raptors should be afforded protection, as well as those habitats known to be currently used. Habitat corridors are also important to link isolated patches of habitat.

The most proactive way to prevent developments from impacting on raptors is to ensure that raptor information is incorporated into spatial development frameworks, municipal infrastructure development plans, strategic environmental assessments, provincial conservation plans and other strategic planning exercises. This should ensure that raptors are considered from as early in the planning process as possible. In other words, if raptor information is taken into account early enough, 'no go' zones could be identified, thereby preventing applications being made for developments in those areas.

Most new developments of any significance in South Africa need to undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as per the EIA Regulations of the National Environmental Management Act of 1998 (NEMA). This is the mechanism through which to get involved with individual developments. To view the various activities that are listed as having to undertake an EIA, or for general EIA information, visit <http://www.eiatoolkit.ewt.org.za>

Tips for getting involved in EIAs

- Get involved in the process as early as possible. If you know of an upcoming development in your area watch the press for details of public meetings.
- Put your comments in writing, and ensure that you get acknowledgement of receipt of the comment.
- Substantiate your comment by using solid, defensible information on raptor distribution and abundance.
- Be professional and courteous – emotional statements can undermine your credibility and the importance of what you are saying in the eyes of others.
- Keep in mind the cumulative effects of development. One new centre pivot irrigation scheme on its own may not be too detrimental to raptors, but if they are popping up all over the place, the cumulative impact may be significant.

For more information, or any queries related to raptors and developments, contact the Birds of Prey Working Group.

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