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Raptors Round-Table Discussion

Vulture crises in South Asia and West Africa … and monitoring, or the lack thereof, in Africa

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With the lack of monitoring of vultures in Africa in mind, I convened this Round Table Discussion (RTD) optimistically entitled 'Development of an integrated and standardised vulture monitoring programme in Africa'. My concerns were founded on the following: (1) of the eleven species of vultures that occur in Africa, eight are endemic or near-endemic (and therefore not, or only marginally, found beyond the continent's borders) and thus their conservation rests in the hands of Africans (Table 1); (2) of these endemic/near-endemics, two species are classified as 'Vulnerable' (BirdLife International 2004); (3) although some vulture species have relatively large populations, the numerical status of others is precarious (Table 1); (4) the Asian Vulture Crisis has shown that without proper monitoring, a population crash can take place virtually undetected; and (5) Jean-Marc Thiollay and Guy Rondeau's study has shown that vultures in West Africa are in serious trouble. I believe that there is some urgency in initiating Pan African vulture monitoring projects, especially as we know little about spatial distribution, population sizes or breeding success for all African vultures (perhaps except for the Cape Griffon). A monitoring project should: (1) determine population trends, (2) identify problems and detect sources of mortality, and (3) evaluate the success and effectiveness of conservation measures.

The RTD was attended by 27 conference delegates, including a few prominent African and European vulture researchers and conservationists, and senior representatives from BirdLife International. As an introduction, I gave an overview of the status of African vultures and highlighted the need for an African monitoring programme. I proposed that an African vulture monitoring project should involve the following: (1) development of one (or perhaps two or three) simple, standardised, coordinated, systematic and cost-efficient monitoring techniques; (2) monitoring of the colonially nesting *Gyps* vultures (at least two visits a year to get an indication of colony size and breeding success); (3) surveillance of the health of vultures by non-invasive monitoring (e.g. collection of faeces, feathers) and opportunistic sampling of dead vultures and trapping of live birds (for example, for toxicological and parasitological studies); and (4) counts of vultures at migration entry points into Africa (such as of Eurasian Griffons at the Straits of Gibraltar and at the Middle East land bridge, and of Egyptian Vultures at the Straits of Gibraltar, the Straits of Sicily to Cap Bon, Eilat and Suez, and across the Bab al Mandab Straits to Dijibouti).

During the RTD it was revealed that some local vulture monitoring using different methodologies takes place in Africa. In southern Africa, in particular, Cape Griffons are monitored at c. 14 breeding sites, African White-backed Vultures at c. four sites and Lappet-faced Vultures in at least three countries. Thanks to Munir Virani and Simon Thomsett, some work is also being undertaken in Kenya, including the monitoring or Rüppell's Griffons at the Kwenia breeding site. In Uganda, Derek Pomeroy and his colleagues have initiated a carcass monitoring programme (i.e. counts of vultures at carcasses) and the initial results have been published in Vulture News (50: 29–33). As far as I am aware, in Tanzania and Ethiopia, no vulture work is being conducted, with the last work in the former country being a recent helicopter survey at the Rüppell's Griffon breeding site in the Gol Mountains. Some vulture work was recently undertaken by Afrique Nature International's Guy Rondeau (see Vulture News 51). Incidental records are also kept by various expatriates working in several West African countries (such as by Clive Barlow in The Gambia). Several North Africans (from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) who attended the vulture RTD (or who I spoke to at the PAOC) indicated that a limited amount of vulture conservation work and monitoring had commenced in their countries, which is of course good news. Importantly, these ornithologists and conservationists were keen to initiate additional projects.

Back to the West African Vulture Crisis, however, where there is much urgency in addressing the situation in this part of our Continent. Guy Rondeau believes that the following are priorities: (1) produce a West African Regional Vulture Alert (alert

Table 1: The status and population sizes of African vultures

Common name	Status[1]	Red Data Book[2]	Population size[3]	
			Pairs	Individuals
Egyptian Vulture	Widespread	LC	7 700	20 000
Bearded Vulture	*G. b. meridionalis* is endemic	LC	1 400	4 600–7,000
Cape Vulture	Localised endemic	V	4 400	12 000
Rüppell's Griffon	Widespread endemic	LC	11 000	30 000
Eurasian Griffon	Localised breeding resident and visitor	LC	150–200	4 400 (migrants)
White-backed Vulture	Widespread endemic	LC	100 000	270 000
White-headed Vulture	Relatively widespread near-endemic	LC	2 600–4 700	7 000–12 500
Lappet-faced Vulture	Widespread near-endemic	V	2 700	8 000
Cinereous Vulture	Sporadic visitor	NT	Non-breeding vagrant	
Hooded Vulture	Widespread endemic	LC	200 000–333 000	750 000+
Palm-nut Vulture	Widespread endemic	LC	80 000	240 000

[1] Endemic (i.e. distribution restricted to Africa)

[2] LC = Least Concern, NT = Near Threatened, V = Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2004: Threatened Birds of the World, 2004; CD-ROM, BirdLife International, Cambridge)

[3] From Mundy P, Butchart D, Ledger J and Piper S 1992: The Vultures of Africa; Acorn Press and Russel Friedman Books, Johannesburg)

local governments, regional agencies and institutions, scientific community, donors, etc. about the dire predicament of vultures in West Africa); (2) complete Jean-Marc Thiollay's census (in Senegal, northern Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, and eastern Niger) and initiate a census in southern Mauritania and northern Guinea, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria; (3) revise the global conservation status of vultures (surely some African vulture species deserve a higher status than 'Least Concern'?; (4) determine the importance of the various mortality factors (including poisons and persecution); (5) implement education, awareness and conservation actions (including the establishment of vulture restaurants); and (6) survey the relic vulture breeding colonies, especially the Rüppell's Griffon colony at the Gandamia cliffs in Mali, as well as assess the status of the very small colonies located at Pagou, Tambarga and Gobnangou (near Arli National Park, Burkina Faso), at Kotorkoshi (north-western Nigeria) and in the Tiguidit cliffs (central Niger). Easier said than done, however! Afrique Nature International plans to conduct a regional conservation programme but, unless funding is urgently obtained, this extremely important work will not get off the ground.

I was probably very optimistic when thinking what could be achieved at the RTD, but in retrospect I believe that the improved awareness created amongst the delegates was well worth the time and effort. Several conclusions were made: (1) a pan-African vulture monitoring programme should be established (possibly to be implemented by BirdLife's African partners), (2) a document that describes the recommended vulture monitoring methods (road surveys, carcass counts and breeding surveys) needs to be drafted, and (3) an African vulture e-mail discussion group should be formed. Some delegates were also of the opinion that the possibility of establishing an international vulture specialist group (perhaps under the IUCN) needs to be investigated.

So, in conclusion, the Asian Vulture Crisis, and more recently the West African Vulture Crisis, are warnings that we really need to get our act together in Africa. Several urgent actions are necessary, several of which are outlined here. Urgent conservation measures need to be implemented without delay, before the populations in West Africa (and possibly elsewhere) reach critically low levels. Vultures are far too important for us to sit back and assume that all is well. A well-planned vulture research, monitoring and conservation programme needs to be implemented without delay. After all, Africa without vultures is just too unimaginable……

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