

Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species

Half Year Report Form

Project Title	Prediction and management of <i>Gyps</i> vulture declines
Country	India, Nepal, Georgia, South Africa, Kazakhstan
Organisation	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Project Ref. No.	162/12/027
Report date	31/10/2005

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months against the agreed baseline timetable for the project (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up).

Funding previously allocated for the construction of a Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in Nepal was transferred to West Bengal in India, due to political instability in Nepal. A lease for the land has been finalised between the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and the West Bengal State Government. Construction of this centre is now underway. Three buildings for accommodation and laboratories have been renovated, an access road has been built to the site, and the elephant-proof fencing for the site is being erected. Temporary holding facilities are in place for vultures before the construction of the main aviaries begins.

Following sustained pressure from the RSPB and BNHS Dr Jakati has been reappointed as the Chief Wildlife Warden in Haryana State. Dr Jakarti was instrumental in the establishment of the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre at Pinjore and has been a vital supporter of the project from its initiation. The actions of his successor (from December 2004 to September 2005) severely hampered the progress of the project over the last nine months. The reappointment of Dr Jakarti is a great boost to the project and will enable safety testing and capture of vultures for the breeding centre to proceed with urgency.

The Indian Ministry of Environment is committed to hosting an international meeting in January 2006 to update the Recovery Plan, and this should provide a platform for further commitments both on the banning of diclofenac, and for the breeding programmes in South Asia.

Research undertaken by this project has produced two peer-reviewed articles which have recently been submitted to the journals *Biology Letters* ("Toxicity of diclofenac to *Gyps* vultures") and *Biological Conservation* ("Population trends of Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* and Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* in India"). The first paper details the results of toxicity testing diclofenac on two non-threatened *Gyps* vulture species and concludes that diclofenac is likely to be toxic to all vultures within the *Gyps* genus. The second paper analyses population trends of Egyptian and red-headed vultures from repeat road-transect surveys in India and finds that these two species are declining as rapidly as the three critically endangered *Gyps* vultures, although these declines are likely to have started more recently. The paper recommends that conservation status of both these species be reviewed.

Safety testing of meloxicam (a vulture safe alternative drug to diclofenac) has progressed at the University of Pretoria in South Africa and the final phase of safety testing is now complete. Following the visit of researchers from BNHS and the Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) to South Africa in April a protocol was developed to undertake safety testing on vultures in India. The first part of this was completed in July, when 4 long-billed and 6 white-backed vultures held at the Pinjore centre were successfully treated with meloxicam. Other raptors and scavenging bird species have recently been caught for further testing. Completion of these studies and writing this work up for publication is the priority research objective.

A successful trip to India was made in June to capture fledgling long-billed vultures breeding at Bayana (Rajasthan State), a vulture colony that has been monitored by BNHS staff for the last three years. A total of nine chicks were captured from the cliffs through abseil access and rock climbing. These nine chicks were transported by jeep to the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in Pinjore. Richard Wesley, a volunteer from the New Zealand Alpine Club, assisted with the catching. Following the success of this catching trip the capture of chicks of all three threatened species is a priority for the forthcoming breeding season.

Two veterinarians have been employed by the project to work with BNHS at the existing Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in Pinjore, and at the new centre in West Bengal once this is complete. Both new vets are being trained at Pinjore by the existing project veterinarian and from visits by Dr Andrew Cunningham and other staff from the Zoological Society of London. The additional staff will enable vets to be based at both centres as well as freeing up a vet to assist in the capture of vultures and their transport to the centre.

Surveys for vultures and monitoring of known breeding colonies has continued. Monitoring of five breeding colonies of white-backed vultures was completed in Nepal along with community surveys on local peoples attitudes to vultures and conservation. Two surveys for Himalayan griffon vultures were undertaken in Nepal as well as survey for this species in Northern India. Surveys for slender-billed vultures (the scarcest of the three critically endangered species) were completed in Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India. Small numbers of nesting slender-billed vultures were located during these surveys.

Efforts to monitor and assess the size of vulture populations in Cambodia have continued and a network of vulture feeding sites has been established by project partners in the country (BirdLife International and the Wildlife Conservation Society). Support for this program is being increased. Three birds were captured and fitted with satellite transmitters in Cambodia to track their movements and identify nesting areas.

The vulture project continues to gather news and publicity within the UK and in Asia. A sample of some of the published news stories are listed below:

“The spectre of extinction”, *The Independent*, 23 May 2005

“Pulling the drugs out”, *BBC Wildlife Magazine* June 2005

“Top job, but watch out for the vultures” *The Press (New Zealand)*, 15 June 2005

“Pared to the bone”, *Telegraph Magazine*, 9 July 2005

“Manmohan throws vultures a lifeline”, *Times of India*, 11 August 2005

“Parsi tradition dying out for lack of vultures” *The Guardian*, 6 October 2005

Several presentations and talks in connection with the vulture project have been given in the last six months. These include:

28th August 2005 - Plenary presentation at the XXVII Congress of the International Union of Game Biologists in Hannover and published extended abstract

9th September 2005 - talk to Cambridge Bird Club

15th September 2005 - talk to the Linnean Society

The project website (www.vulturerescue.org) is regularly updated with the latest news from the project.

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments that the project has

encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will effect the budget and timetable of project activities. Have any of these issues been discussed with the Department and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

India – Problems caused by the incoming Chief Wildlife Warden in Haryana State India meant that catching vultures in Haryana State and transporting vultures from other states to the Conservation Breeding Centre in Haryana has not progressed as well as planned. The actions of this Chief Wildlife Warden also slowed down the progress of the safety testing of meloxicam on vultures and other species. His replacement (as outlined above) should mean an end to these difficulties.

Nepal- Political instability in Nepal has again caused problems for the project and plans to capture and satellite track vultures in conjunction with community conservation activities in one area which still supports good vulture numbers had to be cancelled due to Maoist activities. We are assessing whether these activities can proceed in other more stable areas of Nepal.

Cambodia – Three birds were captured and fitted with satellite transmitters in Cambodia, however tracking of these birds has now ceased. One transmitter failed shortly after deployment, one bird was shot and killed over Laos and the last bird has recently been killed in Cambodia. These set backs were not anticipated but highlight the risks that vultures face, even in areas where diclofenac is not a threat.

3. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to Darwin's management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

N/A

Please send your **completed form by 31 October each year per email** to Stefanie Halfmann, Darwin Initiative M&E Project Manager, Email: stefanie.halfmann@ed.ac.uk