Recommendations of
Review meeting of Vulture Conservation Programme in India

25-26 June 2008

Venue

Timber Trail Resorts, Parwanoo,
Himachal Pradesh

Organised by

Bombay Natural History Society

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Contents

Background to the meeting

Following the recognition of catastrophic declines of *Gyps* vulture populations since the 1990s, and the identification of the main reason being diclofenac poisoning in 2003, a Recovery Plan meeting was held in February 2004 (Anon. 2004) and MoEF further convened an Action Planning meeting in Delhi, January 2006 resulting in a National Action Plan (MoEF 2006). A further meeting was held at Pinjore to review best practice for the Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme in November 2006 and Technical Advisory visits are made on an annual basis. This meeting reviewed key actions from both the breeding and advocacy programmes and has agreed some key points which are discussed in the following pages.

The attendance of key State Government officials, expert foreign advisors and the BNHS experts and programme staff made this a highly qualified meeting to bring the appropriate recommendations together and these will be important guidelines for immediate progress on the most important issues.

List of members present

Dr. R. D. Jakati, IFS, Addl. P. C. C. F. (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden, Haryana

Mr. P. K. Khanna, IFS, P. C. C. F. (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden, Gujarat

Mr. Malhotra, IFS, P.C. C. F. (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden, Andhra Pradesh

Mr. A. K. Bhattacharya, IFS, Director, Van Vihar National Park and Zoo, Madhya Pradesh

Dr. D. Swarup, Head, Medicine, Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izzatnagar

Dr. Mohini Saini, Principal Scientist, Indian Veterinary Research Institute

Mr. B.C. Choudhary, Professor, Wildlife Institute of India

Dr. Vibhu Prakash, Dy. Director/ Principal Scientist, BNHS

Dr. Nita Shah, Head, Vulture Advocacy, BNHS

Mr. Sachin Ranade, Centre Manager, Rajabhatkhawa, BNHS

Dr. Kalu Ram Senacha, Researcher, Diclofenac Monitoring Project, BNHS

Ms. Jemima Parry-Jones, International Centre for Birds of Prey, U.K.

Dr. Andrew Routh, Chief Veterinary Officer, ZSL, U.K.

Mr. Chris Bowden, Vulture Programme Director, RSPB, U.K.

Dr. Richard J. Cuthbert, Director Vulture Research, RSPB, U.K.

Prof. Dr. Rhys E. Green, Research, RSPB & Cambridge University, U.K

Mr. Andy Myles, Advocacy Advisor, RSPB

Programme of the meeting

25 June 2008

10.00 Chairperson Dr. R. D. Jakati

Overview Dr. R. D. Jakati

Introductions and opening remarks from key participants

10.30 Chairperson Jemima Parry-Jones

Remarks from technical visit – Jemima Parry-Jones

Updates from centres:
Haryana, Pinjore by Vibhu
West Bengal, Raja bhat Khawa by Sachin
Assam, Rani by Vibhu
Madhya Pradesh by Mr. A K Bhattacharya
Gujarat by Mr. P K Khanna
Andhra Pradesh by Mr. H Malhotra
Orissa by Vibhu
Nepal by Richard
Pakistan by Chris

Discussion

14.00 Chairperson Chris Bowden
Discussion and key recommendations for breeding programme

15.30 Cattle carcass sampling programme update
Advocacy and diclofenac issues

26 June 2008

10.00 Chairperson Mr. P.K. Khanna
Discussion and key recommendations for programme including diclofenac issues

12.15 Concluding remarks Dr. R. D. Jakati

13.00 Close and visit to VCBC, Pinjore

Recommendations

Diclofenac Issues

1. More support is needed from both central and state governments for the vulture conservation activities identified in the 2006 Action Plan. Consideration should be given by a group of responsible agencies convened by BNHS for the best way to co-ordinate, support and fund a national vulture programme. Support is needed for the formulation of projects, research, policy development & implementation, co-ordination and the financing of capital and running costs of centres and other vulture programme activities.

2. A focused inter-ministerial group should be formed, including secretaries from MoEF, Agriculture, Health, Drug Controller General of India, Chemicals and Fertilizers and Commerce (DGFT). It should be chaired by Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. Its objective will be to remove diclofenac from the food supply of wild vultures in India and to ensure that it is not replaced by toxic alternatives.

3. Substantial quantities of diclofenac are still being used for veterinary purposes and are continuing to contaminate the food supply of vultures in spite of the ban on manufacture of veterinary formulations. Monitoring of the provenance of diclofenac offered for sale indicates that much of it is from unlicensed manufacture or involves redirection of products formulated for human use. Much diclofenac is sold by unlicensed quacks. This problem should be addressed by the group mentioned above (point 2)

4. At the state level, secretaries/directors of Animal Husbandry, state Drug Controllers and Chief Wildlife Wardens should work together to evaluate monitoring information on vultures and diclofenac prevalence and to discuss progress with implementing actions to promote vulture conservation. The objective of this interdepartmental process is to expedite the removal of diclofenac from the food supply of vultures in the state and to bring forward other measures that may be required to achieve vulture conservation. There should also be a national workshop of all vulture range states, convened by MoEF, to

report the findings from all states and to discuss further actions needed at both state and central government levels.

5. The lower availability of vulture-safe alternative NSAIDs is holding back the uptake of alternatives to diclofenac, and keeping their prices higher. State Animal Husbandry departments need to tender for stocks of meloxicam in 2008 to counter this.

6. Monitoring of the prevalence of diclofenac and other NSAIDs in carcasses of domesticated ungulates is an essential component of the vulture programme. It allows the effectiveness of measures to remove diclofenac from the vulture food supply to be measured and revised as necessary. It enables an assessment to be made of the feasibility of re-introduction. At present only a sample of states is covered by the survey work and this should be extended to as many range states as is practical. It is recommended that surveys are repeated at regular intervals. Research is also needed to identify the sources of diclofenac offered for sale for veterinary use.

Breeding Programme

7. Wild vultures are few and diminishing. Therefore, the highest priority should be given to collecting a large number of vultures of all three species in 2009. The new centres are unlikely to be fully operational by then, but if wild vultures are available for collection in a state without a fully operational centre, the numbers needed to stock the state centre, and those in other states, as agreed among the states, should be collected and held at existing centres in other states. The birds required for the state's own centre would be returned to the state when the new centre is ready.

8. The written guidelines for husbandry of captive vultures and technical reports should be completed by December 2008 and made available to all interested parties for implementation. The documents should be reviewed regularly and improved as necessary. Recommendations for the staffing levels and expertise needed to promote best practice should be included in the guidelines.

9. The use of colony aviaries, rather than small breeding aviaries, was approved as the preferred method for housing breeding vultures.

This is based mainly upon experience so far with oriental white-backed vulture and should be reviewed regularly as more information is gathered on long-billed vulture and slender-billed vulture breeding attempts. VCBC staff should test methods for monitoring and manipulating breeding attempts. These might include habituation of vultures to regular checking and cleaning procedures and accessing nests from outside the aviary.

10. Recruiting, training and retraining adequate staff for the new and existing centres will be of increasing importance as the number of centres increases. The number of specialist staff needs to increase immediately and steps should be taken to recruit and train more staff as rapidly as possible, particularly with the needs for the new centres in mind. Every centre should have access to specialist veterinary expertise and staff with skills and experience in vulture management. Capacity for training should be expanded.
    It was concluded that there is currently a shortage of specialist staff to man the VCBCs.

11. The influenza virus H5N1 is a potential threat to the captive population of vultures held in VCBCs. Vaccination of vultures against H5N1 is highly desirable [and has been approved by MOEF]. Regulations affecting the availability of vaccine to the VCBCs should be examined in detail and whatever steps which may be possible to allow vaccination should be pursued.

12. The potential value of using wild ungulates as food for the captive vultures was discussed. (see Appendix I and II for summary review of factors involved, and flowchart of potential protocol that would be needed).
    Following IVRI advice, it was concluded that this should not proceed; primarily because of potential health risks to VCBC staff involved in processing carcasses. Further consideration will be given to whether these risks can be reduced and the options reviewed at a subsequent meeting.

Additional issues

12. Injuries and deaths of vultures are caused each year by collisions with kite strings during the 14 January Ahmedabad kite-flying festival in Gujarat. Although this is best known to occur in Gujarat, it may also

be a problem elsewhere. Although these losses are not the main cause of the large decline in vulture populations, methods should be developed to reduce these unnecessary losses. It is important to ensure that any birds injured by kites are given veterinary treatment and placed in vulture conservation breeding centres. This also provides an opportunity to train veterinarians in the special techniques needed for treating vultures and to find potential veterinary experts for the staff of VCBCs.

Reference

Anon (2004). Report of the international South Asian vulture recovery plan workshop 12-14 February 2004.

Appendix: 1 Broad Considerations Comparing Goat Meat and Wild Meat

Goat Meat	**Wild Meat**
Expensive – all costs apparent	"Free" – but hidden costs
Regular supply (subject to market forces)	Irregular supply
Known disease-status/ provenance/ quality-controlled	Needs strict assessment of quality
Presumed low zoonotic risk	Recognised potential risk of zoonosis
Lower labour input	Labour-intensive – transport, butchering, meat inspection etc
Nutritionally-adequate and natural behaviours seen	Equivalent to wild diet – nutrition and behaviour
Waste – bones (and skins?)	Baseline waste similar but potentially additional waste including gut-fill and rejected carcasses
No religious constraints (though would be for other domestic species)	Potential religious constraints with certain species

***For both systems capacity for freezing meat essential

Appendix-2 **Flow chart for utilisation of wild-meat**