

Namibia: Conservationists Act on Mass Vulture Poisoning

The Namibian

THE poisoning of hundreds of vultures last month in the Zambezi Region has prompted private and government conservationists to push through an urgent protocol in dealing with and avoiding such incidents in future.

Part of this protocol would be calling a convention of conservation authorities from SADC to establish regional coordinated legislation to ban over-the-counter and off-the-shelf poisons and pesticides.

"Deliberate and unintentional use of poisons are the single biggest killer of vultures. To have the legislation will be a big step in attempting to recover the numbers of this important bird, which Africa cannot live without," Holger Kolberg, principal conservation scientist in the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), told *The Namibian* on Wednesday.

The Zambezi Region incident (in the Bwabwata National Park) was more far-reaching than previously reported. While an estimated 500 birds (mostly vultures, but also other carrion species) were discovered in proximity of the carcass of a suspected poached elephant that had been laced with what is believed to be a pesticide, hundreds of other birds are also believed to have died elsewhere, especially since it is the breeding season.

According to Maria Diekmann of the Rare and Endangered Species Trust (REST) attempts to save the chicks from affected mating pairs was futile since the poisoned birds were discovered a few weeks after the incident. The carcasses were also burnt and buried by MET wardens thereby seriously hampering the task of getting samples for toxicology analyses. It is, however, suspected that an organophosphate was used – an active ingredient in many pesticides.

An aerial survey was conducted on the Botswana side near the park where most of the cross-boundary birds nested and according to Diekmann, the entire colony there had been wiped out.

"We may have lost over a 1 000 birds during this last incident," Diekmann said.

The *Namibian* understands that a recent study by the Polytechnic of Namibia showed that about 2 000 vultures are killed every year.

"In 30 years, if things don't change, there won't be any vultures left in our country, if not in the region," said Kolberg. ...

A very serious consequence that will emerge as vulture populations dwindle is the increase in pestilences such as anthrax, rabies and botulinum. A case of note is in India where the vulture population there decreased by 95% over 10 years with a sharp increase in diseases that are fatal to humans.

SOUTH AFRICA

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