



12<sup>th</sup> of August 2013

## **POSITION STATEMENT: THE THREAT POSED BY POISONING AND POACHING TO AFRICA'S VULTURES**

The death of between 400-600 vultures after feeding on a poisoned elephant carcass in the vicinity of the Bwabwata National Park in Namibia's Caprivi-region in July 2013 is cause for concern and again confirms that the indiscriminate use of poison is one of the major causes for the current decline in vulture populations across most of Africa. It has become common practice for poachers killing elephant and other large mammals to lace such carcasses with poison to kill vultures. Vultures congregate at such carcasses in large numbers and are often used as an indication of poaching activity by law enforcement and anti-poaching teams in many parts of Africa to find carcasses from where poachers can be pursued. By poisoning such carcasses, poachers hope to eradicate vultures from an area where they operate and thereby hope to escape detection. The fact that incidents such as these can be linked to the rampant poaching of elephant in Africa is a serious concern and similar incidents have been recorded from Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia in recent years.

Vultures on the African continent are under severe pressure from a range of factors and populations of some species have been in drastic decline over the last 30 years. This is particularly evident in West Africa where an average drop of 42% has been recorded in vulture populations occurring in that region with some species declining by as much as 85%. This trend is similar in East Africa where certain species, such as Lappet-faced Vulture (*Aegypus tracheliotus*), are now largely restricted to large protected areas and others have shown a serious decline in numbers such as the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) and African White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*). In 2011, the Hooded Vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) was upgraded from Least Concern to Endangered due to large-scale declines in populations of this species across its range in East and West Africa. This was followed by the up-listing of Rüppell's Griffon (*Gyps rueppellii*) and African White-backed Vulture to Endangered in 2012.

Africa's vulture populations cannot sustain losses such as this and the current decline may well have serious ecological and human health consequences in the longer term. The precipitous decline in three vulture species on the Indian sub-continent over the last 20 years has resulted in a number of problems emerging due to the vultures no longer being able to fulfil their role of removing the carcasses of dead animals from the environment. A proliferation of feral dogs and a substantial increase in diseases such as rabies have been documented and can be linked directly to this decline. There is little doubt that the continued decline of Africa's vultures will see similar impacts on both the natural processes in ecosystems and human health over time.

The implementation of a legal ban on the use of Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDS) containing *diclofenac sodium* in India in 2006 to prevent the further decline of vulture populations is a good example of how the effective implementation and enforcement of legislation can contribute to addressing challenges of this nature. The indiscriminate use of poisons that result in the loss of large numbers of vultures and other wildlife in Africa will likely also benefit from similar actions, but these need to be implemented across the range where Africa's vultures occur.

The IUCN SSC Vulture Specialist Group would therefore like to recommend that governments and environmental authorities across the continent implement the following:

- Bestow the highest level of legal protection to vultures similar to that of other species of wildlife such as elephant and rhinoceros.
- Appropriate legislation to control the sale and use of chemicals known to be used in the indiscriminate killing of vultures and other wildlife
- Suitable penalties on those found guilty of being responsible for incidents such as these that reflect the serious nature of thereof and that will act as sufficient deterrent to those who may wish to perpetrate such acts in future
- Train and logistically support conservation staff to swiftly act and minimise the damage that can be caused by future incidents of this nature
- To work together through regional structures to ensure that the above is implemented as widely as possible within the range where vultures occur in Africa