

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **AFRICAN VULTURES DECLINING AT A CRITICAL RATE**

#### **Study suggests that African vultures are heading towards extinction**

**Nairobi, Kenya: 18 June 2015**—An international team of researchers, including leading scientists from National Museums of Kenya, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Makerere University and The Peregrine Fund, say African vultures are likely to qualify as ‘Critically Endangered’ under the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s global threat criteria.

In a report published today, in the scientific journal *Conservation Letters*, scientists from across Africa, and Europe and North America have published the first continent-wide estimates of decline rates in African vultures: and find that many national parks and game reserves appear to offer vulture species in Africa little effective protection.

Scavengers such as vultures are essential to a healthy ecosystem; without them carcasses are largely consumed by mammalian scavengers such as dogs and jackals and this can increase levels of disease transmission, with possibly dire consequences for human health.

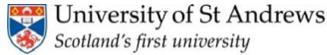
Being long-lived, slow breeders, vultures take several years to reach maturity, and typically fledge only a single offspring every 1-2 years. Yet the study indicates that Africa’s vultures are declining at rates of between 70% and 97% over three generations; a time interval used by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) when assessing a species’ threat status. Since six of the eight species are largely or wholly confined to Africa, and are projected to decline by at least 80% over three generations, the study suggests that they are likely to qualify as ‘Critically Endangered’ under the IUCN’s global threat criteria.

Dr Darcy Ogada of The Peregrine Fund and National Museums of Kenya, and lead author of the study, said:

“Large declines of Africa’s vultures should ring alarm bells due to their immense ecological importance. Vultures are a vital component of a healthy environment, especially in Africa, where ‘free’ ecosystem services such as disposal of carcasses and other waste products remain the norm. If we don’t take urgent steps to save these birds, and in particular to curtail wildlife poisoning, we should expect long-term consequences for the environment, as well as for humans in Africa.



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What makes our results so concerning is that national parks and game reserves appear to offer these birds very little effective protection. Because vultures are so mobile and can easily travel hundreds or thousands of kilometres, decline rates were worryingly high even within protected areas.”

Continent-wide declines in vulture species have already been reported in four Asian vulture species. However the study’s authors highlight two important distinctions between the Asian vulture crisis and that in Africa. First, to date, the rates of decline evident in Africa have been substantially lower than in Asia, affording African governments a window of opportunity in which to head off the environmental consequences of a collapse in this functionally important group.

Second, while Asian vultures have declined largely as a result of a single factor (ingestion of the anti-inflammatory drug Diclofenac), African vultures face multiple threats. They include incidental and deliberate poisoning, the illegal trade in vulture body parts for traditional medicine, killing for bushmeat, mortality caused by power lines and wind turbines, and a reduction in habitat and the availability of food from wild animal populations.

The study suggests that the greatest quantifiable threat to Africa’s vultures is poisoning, which accounted for 61% of all reported deaths. African vultures are often the unintended victims of poisoning incidents, in which carcasses are baited with highly toxic agricultural pesticides to kill livestock predators. However the study also shows that the recent rapid increase in elephant and rhino poaching throughout Africa has led to a surge in the number of vulture deaths recorded, as carcasses have been poisoned specifically to eliminate vultures, whose overhead circling might otherwise reveal the poachers’ illicit activities.

Dr Ogada added:

“The situation requires the resolution of a number of environmental and cultural issues. We propose a range of measures, including more effective regulation of the import and sale of agricultural and other chemicals commonly used as poisons. This would benefit not just vultures, but all species widely targeted by pastoralists and poachers in Africa”.

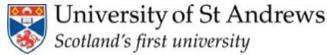
Other authors commented as follows:

Mr Andre Botha of Endangered Wildlife Trust said:

“There has been a substantial increase in the number of reported mortalities of vultures in southern Africa resulting from poisoning and interactions with energy infrastructure since 2011. There are very real concerns that the region’s vulture populations cannot be sustained with these losses and, considering the range of other



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threats that also impact on these birds, it is possible that the region may see other species joining the Egyptian Vulture by being declared extinct. The environment and people of southern Africa simply cannot afford this.”

Dr Ralph Buij of Alterra Wageningen University said:

“The trade in vulture parts for traditional medicine is particularly widespread in West Africa, where vultures are openly traded at large markets, especially in Nigeria and Benin. Because vultures remove large amounts of pathogen-infested meat and other waste products each day, they limit the spread of disease in both rural and urban areas. Ironically, therefore, the trade of vultures for traditional medicine may in fact enhance the spread of disease”.

Dr Munir Virani, the Africa Program Director for The Peregrine Fund said:

“The catastrophic collapse of South Asia’s critically endangered vultures over a decade ago unified South Asian governments to ban the manufacture and use of veterinary diclofenac, the main cause of the population declines. Saving Africa’s vultures from extinction will require unstinting support from African Governments. In addition, outreach programs geared toward pastoral communities in East Africa will be critical in ensuring that they perceive vultures as a vital and integral component of ecosystems and economies”.

Dr. Derek Pomeroy of Makerere University said:

“We lack adequate information on numbers and movements of any vulture species in Uganda, but the data we do have are clearly a cause for concern”.

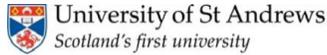
**ENDS**

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

The study estimated rates of decline (over three generations) for the following eight vulture species: Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* (-70%), Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (-92%), White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* (-90%), Rüppell’s Vulture *Gyps rueppellii* (-97%), Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* (-92%), Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus* (-83%), Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* (-80%), White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis* (-96%).



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The full article is free to view at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12182/abstract>

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Images are available here <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/re2g3eue57lsyrg/AAAmIAppf3oKOLuzQLTsc9yDa>