

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



Thirty-first meeting of the Animals Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 13-17 July 2020

Species specific matters

WEST AFRICAN VULTURES (ACCIPITRIDAE SPP.)

1. This document has been prepared by the Secretariat.
2. At its 18th meeting (CoP18, Geneva, 2019), the Conference of the Parties adopted Decisions 18.186 to 18.192 on *West African vultures (Accipitridae spp.)*, as shown in Annex 1 to this document.
3. The Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures ([Vulture MsAP](#)) is a comprehensive, strategic conservation plan, developed under the auspices of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). It covers the geographic ranges (128 range States) of all 15 species of migratory African-Eurasian vultures and promotes concerted, collaborative and coordinated international actions with the aim to rapidly halt current population declines. This includes bringing the conservation status of each species back to a favourable level and providing conservation management guidelines applicable to all range States.

Implementation of Decisions 18.188 and 18.189

4. The Secretariat issued Notification to the Parties No. 2020/034 to request relevant information as per Decision 18.188. At the time of writing, no responses had yet been received by the Secretariat. Any responses received at a later point in time will be made available to the Animals Committee in an information document.
5. The Secretariat learned that the United Nations Environment Programme-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) is collecting detailed information on the six vulture species mentioned in Decision 18.188, with support from the European Commission. The results of this research are expected to be ready in time for the present meeting and will be made available to the Animals Committee as an information document.
6. The Secretariat further learned that the International Union for Conservation of Nature – Species Survival Commission (IUCN-SSC) Vulture Specialist Group is collecting substantial relevant information, including publications in scientific journals. The Secretariat has reached out to the Specialist Group, encouraging it to participate in the working group that the Animals Committee is instructed to establish as per Decision 18.190, and to bring this information to the attention of the group for its consideration.
7. The Secretariat also received from the IUCN-SSC Vulture Specialist Group a call for action to stop mass killing of vultures in Guinea-Bissau. The call addresses the killing of more than 2,000 hooded vultures (*Necrosyrtes monachus*), which appears to have been driven by demand for vulture body parts for traditional medicine. There is a suspected international illegal trade component to this incident as part of the demand for vulture body parts appears to originate from countries neighbouring Guinea-Bissau, and that no export permits were granted. The available information is presented in Annex 2 to the present document.

Implementation of Decisions 18.190 and 18.191

8. With regard to Decision 18.190, directed to the Animals Committee, the Secretariat proposes that the Animals Committee establish an intersessional working group that can be tasked with analysing and addressing gaps in the Vulture Multi-species Action Plan with particular attention to the six vulture species in West Africa. The Secretariat notes that the detailed assessment on the scale and impact of legal and illegal trade in live birds, eggs and vulture body parts across the range of the Vulture MsAP called for in paragraph b) of Decision 18.190 is very broad and covers 128 range States and 15 species and would benefit from inputs and assistance from the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and other relevant stakeholders.
9. Regarding Decision 18.191, directed to the Animals Committee, the Committee may agree to decide on guidance and recommendations for range States and the Standing Committee at its 32nd meeting, after having reviewed the outputs of the working group.

Recommendation

10. In support of the implementation of Decision 18.190, the Animals Committee is invited to establish an intersessional working group on West African vultures (Accipitridae spp.) to address key gaps in knowledge as it relates to the biological and trade issues highlighted in the Vulture Multispecies Action Plan (Vulture MsAP), with particular attention for the six species mentioned in Decision 18.188 and the West African region, and including but not limited to trade in vulture parts of belief-based use (Objective 4), sentinel poisoning by poachers (Objective 5), cross-cutting actions that contribute to addressing knowledge gaps (Objective 11), and contribute to effective implementation of the Vulture MsAP (Objective 12), by:
 - a) reviewing the information on West African vultures (Accipitridae spp.) submitted under Notification No. 2020/034, and any additional relevant information submitted by the United Nations Environment Programme – World Conservation Monitoring Centre and the International Union for Conservation of Nature – Species Survival Commission Vulture Specialist Group;
 - b) conducting a detailed assessment on the scale and impact of legal and illegal trade in live birds, eggs, and vulture body parts across the range of the Vulture MsAP with the assistance of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and other relevant stakeholders; and
 - c) providing findings and recommendations to the Animals Committee for its consideration at its 32nd meeting.

Decisions on West African vultures (Accipitridae spp.)
adopted at the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties

Directed to the Secretariat

- 18.186** The Secretariat shall liaise with the Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) to assist in the implementation of the trade-related aspects of the Vulture Multispecies Action Plan, subject to the availability of resources, including sharing information based on the work of the Animals Committee.
- 18.187** The Secretariat is encouraged to include vultures as a case study for the possible Non-Detriment Findings workshop.
- 18.188** The Secretariat shall issue a Notification to the Parties requesting the following information concerning trade in and conservation of Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), white-headed vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*), hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*), whitebacked vulture (*Gyps africanus*), Rüppell's vulture (*Gyps rueppelli*) and lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*) in West Africa:
- a) biological data on West African vultures, including population size, breeding productivity, distribution, and trends across the range of the species;
 - b) available information about harvest and levels of legal and illegal trade of vultures and their parts;
 - c) information on threats to these species, in particular belief-based use and sentinel poisoning, and other trade-related threats;
 - d) information on enforcement actions taken, including seizures, forensic analysis of seized specimens, arrests, prosecutions and judgments relating to illegal trade in vultures as well as disposal of seized specimens; and
 - e) new developments regarding management, education and awareness-raising measures concerning vultures.
- 18.189** The Secretariat shall compile responses from the Parties and provide these responses to the Animals Committee's working group to inform its work.

Directed to the Animals Committee

- 18.190** The Animals Committee shall establish a working group to address key gaps in knowledge as it relates to the biological and trade issues highlighted in the Vulture Multispecies Action Plan (Vulture MsAP), with particular attention for the six species mentioned in Decision 18.188 and the West African region, and including but not limited to trade in vulture parts of belief-based use (Objective 4), sentinel poisoning by poachers (Objective 5), cross-cutting actions that contribute to addressing knowledge gaps (Objective 11), and contribute to effective implementation of the Vulture MsAP (Objective 12).

The working group shall:

- a) review the information submitted under the Notification;
- b) conduct a detailed assessment on the scale and impact of legal and illegal trade in live birds, eggs, and vulture body parts across the range of the Vulture MsAP; and
- c) provide findings and recommendations to the Animals Committee.

18.191 The Animals Committee shall provide guidance to range States on how to factor in all known threats to the species when making non-detriment findings for these species, and make recommendations, as appropriate, for consideration by the Standing Committee.

18.192 *Directed to the Standing Committee*

The Standing Committee shall:

- a) consider the recommendations from the Animals Committee, as appropriate, and information relating to illegal trade in vulture body parts for traditional/belief-based use, and adopt recommendations as appropriate for consideration by the Parties concerned; and
- b) in consultation with the Secretariat, report on the implementation of Decisions 18.186 to 18.191 to the Conference of the Parties at its 19th meeting.



Partnership for
nature and people



8th April 2020

To,

Mr. Bernardo Cassamá - Diretor-Geral da Pecuária, Guinea-Bissau

Mr. Justino Biai - Director of IBAP, CBD Focal Point, Guinea-Bissau

Mr. Joãozinho Sá - Director do Gabinete de Planificação Costeira, Country Representative of Wetlands International, Guinea-Bissau

Mr. Kaoussou Diombéra – AEWA focal point and CMS National Focal Point, Guinea-Bissau

Mr. Tjark Egenhoff - UNDP Country Representative in Guinea-Bissau

Dr Jean Marie Kipela - WHO Representative in Guinea-Bissau

Dr. Yannick Ariane RASOARIMANANA- Country Representative of FAO in Guinée-Bissau

Mr. Moussa Leko - ECOWAS - Principal Programme Officer responsible for Natural Resources Management

Mr. Abba Sonko - Direction des eaux, forêts, chasses et de la conservation des sols, CITES Focal Point, Senegal

Colonel Layaly Camara- Directeur National des Eaux et Forêts, CITES Focal Point, Republic of Guinea.

Mr. H.E. Josefa Sacko - African Union Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture

Dr Jacques Trouvilliez - Executive Secretary of the UNEP/Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) Secretariat)

Ms. Sofi Hinchliffe – Associate Programme Management Officer at UN Environment Programme

Mr. Tom De Meulenaer- Chief, Scientific Services, CITES Secretariat

Ms. Amy Fraenkel – Executive Secretary of CMS

Mr Tilman Schneider – Associate Programme Officer, Avian Species

Re: Call for Urgent Action to Stop Mass Vulture Killing in Guinea-Bissau

In the last month, we have received extremely concerning news that several hundred vultures have been found dead in Guinea-Bissau. All of these are species on the brink of global extinction, including the Hooded Vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*), for which Guinea-Bissau is one of the most important countries in the world. Vultures are of great socio-economic importance through their unique scavenging ability (free removal of dead meat) and likely role in helping limit disease transmission at carcasses. The impact of this mortality on the survival of such rare and important species, and on the ecosystem in which it lives, is very worrying.

This briefing follows a letter calling for urgent action that was sent to national and international key stakeholders at the end of February by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Vulture Specialist Group, which includes other collaborators such as BirdLife International and the Vulture conservation Foundation. The brief is intended to set out the known facts concerning these events and request support of stakeholder organisations to stop the mortality.

1. **In Guinea-Bissau**, vulture deaths have been concentrated in the Eastern Sectors of the country, namely Bambadinca, Bafatá and Gabú. Lower vulture mortality has also been reported in various other sectors of the country, including the Bijagós archipelago.
2. **Recent information** received from initial urgent in-country response efforts indicates that similar events (as many as five) began in Guinea-Bissau towards the end of 2019 and are continuing, with a report of 120 casualties in Gabú during the second week of March 2020.
3. **Confirmed** number of vulture deaths from events in February and March is approximately 1,603. However, it will never be possible to determine exact numbers, as only a very limited area has been covered during searches, and many carcasses have probably been missed or rapidly disposed of (incinerated or buried) by the local population once discovered. Therefore, we fear that there could be many hundreds more deaths from ongoing events as well as from earlier unaccounted incidents.
4. **The cause:** of this mass mortality is as yet unconfirmed, but poisoning (probably deliberately targeted at vultures) is the most likely, given the pattern and nature of deaths, and drawing from the initial information that has been gathered in-country. Evidence suggests that the vultures have been killed deliberately using poisoned baits, for belief-based use (ritual use) with demand related to the country's political instability. Belief-based use, in particular possession of vulture heads (or other body parts) is thought to bring good fortune or even special powers: almost 200 have been found without their heads. Additionally, there have been reports that high demand for vulture body parts from neighbouring countries (and potentially other countries further afield) may be driving cross-border trade.
5. **Poisoning is the main cause of steep declines in African vultures:** which led IUCN to increase the global conservation threat status of six species in 2015, with four up listed to Critically Endangered (the highest category of threat) and two to Endangered.

6. **All vulture species that occur in Guinea-Bissau are globally threatened:** The country has one of the largest populations of Critically Endangered Hooded Vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*), locally known as jugudé, which has been the most affected species in the current mass mortality event and occurs only in Africa. Although this species may appear abundant in Guinea-Bissau and other parts of West Africa, the severity of their decline across the continent shows it to be a highly vulnerable species. This level of mortality has even greater significance because it is occurring during the vulture breeding season in this region, meaning that mortality of adult birds could also result in mortality of chicks. An incident such as this could have a catastrophic impact on the conservation status of this vulture species at national and global levels. Similar incidents outside of urban areas will likely also impact other species that are not commensal with human populations.

7. **The Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures:** adopted in 2017 by the Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), of which Guinea-Bissau is a signatory since 1995, recognises the critical status of African vulture populations, the importance of these birds and the threats that they face. It sets out the necessary actions for their conservation, which include many that are pertinent to this event, such as the recommendation that all appropriate policy instruments and legal measures are established and/or aligned to reduce belief-based use of vulture body parts. Furthermore, all vultures are on **CITES Appendix II**: any international trade must be authorized by an export permit, which should only be granted if, inter alia, trade will not be detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild. Concern over illegal, international trade affecting vultures in West Africa was reflected in CITES decisions 18.186 - 18.192 at the most recent Conference of Parties.

8. **Urgent measures in-country:** are being supported by BirdLife International, the IUCN SSC Vulture Specialist Group and the Vulture Conservation Foundation to gain a clear understanding of the current situation in Guinea-Bissau and offer international support to bring the mortality to a swift end. We are supporting a national emergency response action plan in close collaboration with in-situ field teams established for this purpose (including government departments, institutions, NGOs and local experts) with the following objectives in mind:
 - **To collect and document information** on the events that led to the mass mortality of vultures in the main affected regions: Gabú, Bafatá and Bambadinca.
 - **Collect further vulture carcasses** from future incidences, establish a pre-arranged and agreed system for post-mortem examination and sample analyses at a suitable facility to facilitate a more rapid response. Should suitable facilities and capacity not be available to do this in-country, permits to move carcasses/samples to such facilities outside of the country be expedited.
 - Aggregate, confirm and complete all **accounting of vulture mortalities** in all possible detail, including dates, locations and other affected species.
 - **Map the areas where vultures were found dead** in order to produce a map of the location and number of deaths on each date.

9. **We acknowledge and applaud the actions already taken at national level** namely the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Ministry of Territorial Administration, the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Governor of the region of Bafatá and Gabú, the NGO ODZH, the national institutes IBAP and GPC, and the support of FAO Guinea-Bissau office and the FAO-ECTAD in Accra-Ghana to swiftly address this incident.
10. **We call for additional and decisive further action**, given the continuing severity of this incident, as follows:
- Relevant ministries and regional governments to move with haste to stop the systematic extermination of vultures and where needed use **litigation and the court process**.
 - Put in place a **national alert network** to quickly detect future vulture deaths and improve reaction speed; **set up a response protocol** and create a chain of actions, with clear actors and responsibilities, to respond more effectively to future poisoning events.
 - Initiate a **wide-scale awareness campaign** at regional and national level on the importance of vultures and other biodiversity and the inherent dangers of using poisons to kill them and other wildlife.
 - Ramp up efforts to **collaborate with neighbouring countries** to confirm and document any **international trade** in vulture carcasses or body parts, and **similar persecution**, to understand the extent of the problem and determine appropriate responses
 - Set up a national plan for the conservation of vulture population in Guinea-Bissau, based on the [Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures](#), and identify national and international partners for its implementation.
 - Keep the **Secretariats of various conventions** (CMS, CITES, CBD), the African Union and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) informed on efforts and progress made in addressing the current mass vulture killings in Guinea-Bissau.

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