

Egyptian Vultures under siege: threat of illegal trade In India

The Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, a scavenger listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List due to its rapidly dwindling global population, faces a new threat: illegal wildlife trafficking. This practice poses a significant risk to numerous threatened species worldwide, including Egyptian Vultures.

Vultures are experiencing a global decline, with populations plummeting over the past three decades. Egyptian Vultures face significant threats in both central Asia and southern Asia (Goranova 2014). In central Asia, habitat loss, pesticide poisoning, and human-wildlife negative interactions pose major challenges. The decline of wild ungulates, which provide a crucial food source for vultures, further exacerbates their vulnerability. In southern Asia, the widespread use of diclofenac, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, has been

linked to the catastrophic decline of vulture populations.

This drug is toxic to vultures when ingested through the carcasses of treated animals. Additionally, habitat loss, human-wildlife negative interactions, and illegal trade in vulture body parts continue to threaten Egyptian Vultures in south Asia (Rastriya Samachar Samiti, 2016). This decline is primarily attributed to poisoning and electrocution incidents in Asia, where vultures have largely vanished. In Africa, illegal trade in vulture body parts has significantly impacted populations. In 2014, individuals were smuggled through Bulgaria and Greece to western Europe, targeting both adults and their young and eggs (Oppel et al, 2019).

In 2016, a disturbing incident of vulture smuggling occurred in Palpa District, Nepal. The



Smuggled Egyptian Vultures recovered from train in Khandva, Madhya Pradesh. © P. Naveen

District Forest Office discovered the carcasses of four endangered Red-headed Vulture and Egyptian Vulture hanging from a tree in Batasedanda, Tansen-13. The DFO suspected that these vultures were killed for their body parts, which are highly valued in traditional medicine and other practices. According to reports, vulture bones could fetch prices as high as Rs 5,000 in the local market (The Himalayan Times 2016).

Case study

This illegal trade poses a serious threat to the survival of Egyptian Vultures. India witnessed its first recorded vulture trade case in 2022 when railway police and forest department officials intercepted seven smuggled Egyptian Vultures on a train in Khandva (latitude 21.8235° N and longitude 76.3528° E), Madhya Pradesh (Naveen 2022). The forest department successfully apprehended a man from Uttar Pradesh who was engaged in the illegal smuggling of rare white vultures. Acting on information from passengers, railway police and forest department officials intercepted seven vultures on the 12144 Sultanpur Lokmanya Tilak Express at Khandwa station. The culprit, identified as Farid Ahmed from Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, was found carrying the vultures in a bag.

During questioning, Farid admitted to transporting the vultures from Kanpur to Malegaon for a fee of Rs 10,000. These vultures were being transported from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, to Malegaon, Maharashtra, with the intent of smuggling them internationally to Arabic and African countries. The Wildlife

(Protection) Act, 1972, and international conventions like CITES provide legal protection for vultures. Consequently, the Khandwa Forest Department registered a case under sections 9, 39, 44, 48A, 49, and 51 of the WPA, 1972, against those involved in the illegal trade.

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