

Vultures and traditional medicine



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Background

Use of vultures is an important component of traditional medicine, particularly in southern Africa and there is evidence to suggest that traditional use is at least partly responsible for the rapid decline of vulture populations in the sub-continent.

There is a widely held belief in many African cultures that health, disease, success or misfortune are not chance events but the result of the active influence of individuals or ancestral spirits. For this reason, traditional medicine is held in high esteem in such cultures and is regularly used by a large proportion of the population. Traditional medicines represent herbal, animal and mineral material used for physiological as well as symbolic/psychological purposes. Approximately 80% of the population in South Africa uses traditional medicine in one form or another because pharmaceutical drugs are too expensive or traditional methods are considered more appropriate.

Stimulated by rapid urbanization and high levels of unemployment, the demand for traditional medicines is probably higher than at any time in the past. Population increases, declining economy, rising unemployment and increasing uncertainty about the future are all indicators that demand for traditional medicines will continue to increase in the future. These factors have also given rise to a rapidly expanding commercial trade in plants and animal parts for traditional medicine.

Despite the persistence of customary controls on use of many species, the commercial trade and consequent economic benefits has eroded many of these controls to the detriment of the species involved and the systems in which they occur.

Until very recently, little information on the extent of the trade in animal parts, particularly vultures, for traditional medicine was available. The trade in animal parts is secretive and mostly illegal in South Africa. This makes it extremely difficult to obtain reliable information on amounts and turnovers of species traded, which is essential to assess potential impact on species populations.

The vulture trade

Recent research (Mander *et al.* 2007) confirms that vultures are used in the traditional medicine industry for a range of purposes, but are believed to be most effective for providing clairvoyant powers, foresight and increased intelligence. The main drivers of demand for these uses are betting and gambling, for improved business success, and intelligence in school children. Vulture is also prescribed by traditional healers for various ailments, including headaches.

An estimated 160 vultures are sold per annum in eastern South Africa, and there are some 59,000 consumption events of vulture pieces annually in this region. The total annual value of sales of vultures to end consumers in eastern South Africa (excluding the costs of vultures as input costs) is estimated at R1,185,600.

Various species of vultures are used for traditional medicine, and there is no distinct species preference. Vultures traded in the eastern South African markets are harvested by vulture hunters from a range of formally protected and unprotected natural areas in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Lesotho and southern Mozambique. They are killed using shotguns, poisons or traps. Poisoning is the most destructive method of harvesting, as large numbers of vultures are usually killed in one poisoning event.

An estimated 130 000 traders, hunters and traditional healers are operating in South Africa, of which 1251 benefit financially from vulture trade. These individuals could earn between R950 and R2500 per annum from this vulture trade. Vultures thus constitute an important trade item for these people, and for the average traditional healer this could constitute between 5 and 10% of their income.

Is traditional use of vultures sustainable?

Trade in vultures is not sustainable at the present harvest levels in the context of poor vulture population replacement and recruitment, unless there is a substantial change in the management of these

populations and current pressures on them. The implication is that for people involved in the trade, the benefits currently enjoyed will no longer be available in the next 15 to 30 years. The White-backed Vulture population in Zululand could become exhausted by 2033, and should research (Mander *et al.* 2007) have underestimated the intensity of use, then these birds could be extinct by 2017. This population cannot withstand the current environment and harvesting pressures being placed on it.



The White-headed and Lappet-faced Vultures have very small populations in Zululand that are likely to disappear from this region by 2020 unless there is a dramatic change in management effort. The Cape Griffon populations in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho could become locally extinct within 44 to 53 years. Should the numbers of White-backed Vultures decline, a larger proportion of the current harvesting pressure (the whole 160 vultures traded per annum) could fall on the Cape Griffon vulture population. In this instance, the Cape Griffon vulture populations in Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape could also be exhausted by 2020.

What can be done?

To protect the important cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, genetic resources, ecosystem functioning and economic benefits associated with vultures and their traditional use, the current levels of harvesting must be reduced and other negative environmental pressures that affect vulture populations and their reproduction rates need to be managed. An intervention strategy should be developed and implemented that addresses the following primary areas of action:

- Reducing consumption and demand for vultures through an awareness-building campaign targeting public consumers and current role-players in the trade.
- Changing and/or creating policy to improve regulation of the vulture trade.
- Improving policing and enforcement for better regulation of the vulture trade.
- Improving understanding of the vulture trade to allow more focused interventions, including research and monitoring of the use and trade of vultures.

If effective measures are not taken, southern Africa will lose its vultures. Vultures are under threat, not only from traditional use but from other serious threats such as habitat destruction, food shortages, powerline electrocutions and incidental deaths caused by use of harmful veterinary drugs.

Reference

Mander, M., Diedericks, N., Ntuli, L., Mavundla, K., Williams, V. and McKean, S. 2007. Survey of the trade in vultures for the traditional health industry in South Africa. FutureWorks Report for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. March 2007. 54pp.

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