

# Study blames painkiller for decline of Asian vultures

NEW DELHI, Sept 30: A new study into the catastrophic decline of vultures in India and Pakistan blames the drug diclofenac, a painkiller treatment for livestock which is widely sold across the counter on the Sub-continent.

Conservationists have warned that if the drug is not banned immediately, vultures in South Asia could be extinct in three to five years.

Populations of three species of vulture have plummeted by more than 95 percent in the past decade, placing the big birds on the critically endangered list and causing much hand-wringing among environmentalists.

The link to diclofenac was first exposed in January by researchers led by Lindsay Oaks, a veterinary microbiologist at Washington State University.

In the latest research, British zoologists drew up a complex computer model that factored in vulture demography, eating habits, percentage of dead livestock likely to be available for these scavengers and the amount of residual diclofenac likely to be found in the carcasses of buffaloes and goats.

The findings exactly mirrored the proportions of dead and dying vultures that have been found in the field which bear the symptoms of diclofenac poisoning: a kidney disease called visceral gout.

Contamination of less than one percent of livestock carcasses would have been enough to have caused the observed population crash, the research says.

The study appears in the *Journal of*

*Applied Ecology*, published by the British ecological society.

It says that even if India and Pakistan work fast to ban diclofenac, the controversial drug is likely to remain on shop shelves and in stores for a long time to come.

In that case, the vultures will be doomed to extinction unless some are caught and held in a captive breeding programme to keep the species alive until the threat is removed, it warns.

"These declines are among the most rapid recorded for wild birds," said Rhys Green, lead author of the new research and a Cambridge University zoologist, who is also principal research biologist for Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSIB).

"The situation is dire and captive

breeding programmes are essential to buy the time necessary to remove diclofenac from the environment."

According to a survey conducted in 2003 by the Bombay Natural History Society — India's nodal ecological conservation body — the number of vultures has fallen nearly 99 percent in India where the "oriental white-backed" species has been the most affected.

"We have made several representations to the government to phase out the drug but we have only got assurances which is not enough. Time is running out," institute director Asad Rahmani told AFP.

Rahmani said if diclofenac was not banned, the birds, and especially the Gyps species, would become extinct within three to five years.

"They have already declined by 97-99 percent," he said, adding that only a small population survived in the western desert state of Rajasthan, coastal Gujarat and central Madhya Pradesh.

Rahmani also lamented government apathy.

"In the beginning the officials were sceptical when told that veterinary use of diclofenac was the main reason," he said.

But India's environment ministry did organise a meeting of conservationists and drug companies in April this year.

"Unfortunately, till now minutes of the meeting have not been circulated," he said.

Senior officials of the two ministries in New Delhi could not be contacted despite repeated attempts.

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Until the Oaks study was published in January, scientists had been baffled by the population loss. The chief suspects were a virus or a bacteria.

Vultures pay a key part in the food chain, but their loss is cultural as well as ecological.

In most parts of India where people do not eat cattle, vultures play a crucial role by feeding on the flesh of dead livestock.

And the Parsi community depends on the birds for disposal of their corpses, considering the burial or burning of human remains to defile the elements.

In Mumbai — the hub of India's miniscule Parsi population — vultures are now being bred artificially to ensure enough are left to eat the dead. —AFP