

DRAFT (5th September 2013)

Protocol

Vultures & poisoning

PREAMBLE

- Vultures are amongst the most threatened species worldwide. Their populations have declined alarmingly over the past decades.
- Vultures in Namibia have experienced similar declines and crashes in their populations. As a result, all vulture species in Namibia are listed in Namibia's Red Data Book on birds as "Extinct" (Egyptian Vulture), "Critically Endangered" (Cape Vulture), "Endangered" (Hooded Vulture and White-backed Vulture) or "Vulnerable" (Lappet-faced Vulture and White-headed Vulture).
- The most significant cause of mortality in vultures is poisoning. This is the main reason for them being endangered and of high conservation concern in Namibia, across the SADC region and globally.
- Other scavenging bird species, such as the Bateleur and Tawny Eagle, are exposed to the same threats as vultures, have shown similar population crashes and are thus also listed in Namibia's Red Data Book as "Endangered".
- In the past the main source of poisoning was farmers putting out poison baits or poisoning domestic stock carcasses to kill livestock predators such as leopard, hyaena, jackal and caracal. The vultures and other scavenging species were non-target victims, with up to 100 non-target animals being killed for every target animal, because scavenging birds such as vultures, eagles and kites are so much more effective at finding carion than mammals.
- In the past year or so a new situation has arisen, in which commercial poachers of mainly elephants have started poisoning the elephant carcasses specifically to kill vultures to reduce the likelihood of spiraling vultures being seen and thereby drawing wildlife authorities to the poaching site.
- Such poisoning events are particularly devastating because of (a) the large amount of food that an elephant carcass provides over many days and even weeks, thereby attracting huge numbers of vultures - many hundreds of birds, (b) the foraging behaviour of vultures, which form a huge "foraging net" of birds in the sky searching not only the ground but also watching one another and thus all being drawn into a food source, and (c) the huge distances that vultures cover, with birds traveling many hundreds of km to a food source.
- A poisoning incident in north-east Namibia, for example, will kill birds breeding in Botswana, Zambia, Angola and Zimbabwe, and may also have young birds from as far away as South Africa. Such events thus have devastating regional impacts and regional implications.

It is therefore important for Namibia to have clear and effective protocols to:

- 1) respond quickly, decisively and efficiently in the event of a poisoning incident, and
- 2) have general preventative measures and actions in place to reduce the likelihood of such incidents occurring in the first place.

<p>This Protocol has been developed and adopted by the Ministry of Environment & Tourism, Namibia Bird Club, Vultures Namibia, NARREC, REST and the Namibia Nature Foundation.</p>
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1) IMMEDIATE RESPONSE PROTOCOL IN THE EVENT OF A POISONING INCIDENT

1.1 For the person first on the scene of a poisoning incident:

Record the scene

- ✓ Photograph the scene, both at a wide angle to capture landscape view and close up, ideally a photographic close up of each dead animal found and photographs of any marked animals.
- ✓ Fill in the “Poisoning Incident Report Form” (see Annex 1 and downloadable from one of the following web sites: www.vultures-namibia.com, www.namibiabirdclub.org or www.the-eis.com) to the best of your ability, recording location, date, your contact details, numbers of each species found dead and sick, and any marked animals (e.g. ringed, tagged, collared).

Personal safety

- ✓ **Important** - if you need to touch any of the dead animals, e.g. move birds to see if they are marked, make sure that you put on plastic gloves or put plastic bags over your hands so that you do not directly touch the dead animals, and then safely dispose of the gloves or plastic bags (e.g. by placing them into another plastic bag and burning them).
- ✓ Be cautious when approaching sick animals, especially mammalian carnivores, as they may be dangerous

This could be a crime scene

- ✓ Be careful not to damage or destroy any potential evidence, e.g. walk on tracks, touch any equipment left behind by perpetrators, etc. Carefully moving birds to check for rings etc after you have photographed the scene, then putting the birds back into their original position will not damage evidence.

Urgently report the incident

- ✓ **If you are a member of the general public**, inform the nearest Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET) Regional Office, or the MET’s toll-free emergency number at 55555, and the MET Ornithologist at 081 129 5163 as soon as possible. Send through a copy of the completed “Poison Incident Report Form” by fax or e-mail as soon as possible to:
Fax: 061 259101, e-mail: holgerk@mweb.com.na and keep a copy on your file.
- ✓ **If you are a member of the MET**, inform your supervisor and the Regional Head immediately. Then notify the MET Ornithologist (081 129 5163), your local MET Scientist and your local MET or state Veterinarian. Send through a copy of the completed “Poison Incident Report Form” by fax or e-mail as soon as possible to:
Fax: 061 259101, e-mail: holgerk@mweb.com.na and keep a copy on your file.

Collect samples for poison analysis

- ✓ Either the first person on the scene or someone following up immediately must collect samples from dead animals for analysis. Details on how to collect and preserve samples are explained in Annex 2.
- ✓ Samples must be clearly and individually labeled, fixing the label firmly to the outside of the container or plastic bag holding the sample. The label should have:
 - Collector’s name:
 - Collector’s contact information (telephone, e-mail):
 - Location where the incident happened (GPS coordinates if possible plus description):

- Date samples were collected:
 - Species from which samples were collected:
 - Your assessment of the date when the incident happened:
 - Any notes you wish to add.
- ✓ Samples must be sent to a MET Vet, local state Vet, local private Vet or the MET Ornithologist, who will send the samples on to the toxicology laboratory at the Central Veterinary Laboratory in Windhoek for analysis.
 - ✓ Send a copy of the “Poisoning Incident Report Form” with the samples as this information might be useful in helping to identify the type of poison used.

If there are sick birds

- ✓ The following procedures should be followed in the event that you find sick birds in the vicinity:
 - Immediately move sick birds out of the sun into a shaded area
 - Place birds in a cardboard box or hessian sack (one bird per container) and transport them as soon as possible to the nearest Vet (state or private)
 - Keep noise and movement around the sick birds to a minimum
 - One of the following rehabilitation centres should be contacted for further information:
 - NARREC at tel: 061 264409 or cell: 081 129 0565
 - REST at cell: 081 367 9425

Criminal investigation

- ✓ It is a crime to deliberately poison protected species and to use poisons in irresponsible ways and for purposes other than those for which they are registered. Many poisoning incidents will therefore also be crime scenes. Law enforcement officers of the MET (possibly in conjunction with the Protected Resources Unit of the Namibian Police) may initiate an investigation. This investigation should include the illegal poisoning of protected species and the illegal use of substances. It should also address outlets selling poisons and pesticides to ensure that they are complying with their responsibilities under the law. All possible support should be provided to the investigating officers, who may require a copy of the completed “Poison Incident Report Form”, the photographs and details of the samples collected and to whom you sent them.

Prevention of further poisoning

- ✓ It may be necessary for people to remain at the site of the incident full-time to keep other animals away while the investigation is ongoing to prevent further poisoning – both from the original source and from secondary poisoning (i.e. animals that were killed by the original source and are themselves now toxic to other animals).
- ✓ There may be further investigations necessary (see section 1.2 below). Once all work has been completed, the MET Ornithologist has given the all-clear and law enforcement has completed their work, then the site must be properly cleaned up to ensure no other animals will be put at risk. Carcasses should be thoroughly burned or deeply buried and covered by lime or wood ash.

1.2 Follow-up actions by the MET Ornithologist:

- ✓ At this stage in the process, based on the information obtained from the “Poison Incident Report Form”, from direct contact with the first person on the scene and with people who might have done follow-up visits, e.g. local MET staff or others, the MET Ornithologist will assess what further action is required. This may range from (a) no further action required (in the case of a small local incident which is clearly understood), (b) informing neighbouring farmers and/or communities

about the incident and asking them to (i) report sick or dead birds and (ii) report any suspicions they may have concerning the culprit(s), (c) requesting local MET staff, local farmers, etc to follow up and provide more details, to (d) in the case of a large, complex incident organizing that “specialists” visit the area to do more detailed investigations.

- ✓ Follow up work at site visit would typically involve:
 - Checking the “Poison Incident Report Form” and verifying all aspects, particularly species identification, location and marked animals;
 - Extending the geographic area of investigation around the incident site to ensure that there are no other sick or dead animals nearby, at local water points, etc.;
 - Aging dead birds and checking adult birds for brood patches;
 - Taking additional photographs (if necessary) to ensure good coverage of the incident.
- ✓ If a poisoning incident occurs in the bird’s breeding season, the MET Ornithologist, with input from relevant partner organisations, should assess the feasibility of rescuing chicks on the nest. Such assessment would include consideration of:
 - The conservation status of the affected species,
 - Date of the event vis-à-vis the stage in the breeding season,
 - The time elapsed between the event taking place and it being discovered,
 - Feasibility of such a rescue being successful and cost-effective,
 - Availability of rehabilitation facilities being able to take on the raising and release of young birds, and
 - Public interest and conservation awareness value to be gained.
- ✓ A concise, timely report should be prepared on the incident, shared with all pertinent sectors of the MET, with key national stakeholders, the general public (via the media) and regional and international partners. This report should acknowledge all people and organisations that have provided assistance.

11.3 Action by MET head office

- ✓ MET head office must ensure that the above-described procedures run smoothly, that there is good cooperation, collaboration and information sharing across all sector within MET, and between the field and head office, and that everyone knows the role that they need to play in the Protocol.
- ✓ MET head office needs to fine-tune this Protocol based on practical experiences to ensure that it is as effective and efficient as possible.
- ✓ MET head office must put out early information on significant poisoning events via the media to the general public. This information should:
 - Explain what has occurred,
 - Describe what actions have been taken to date,
 - Explain what further actions have been initiated and are planned, and
 - Remind the public about the reward scheme for any information leading to the apprehension of the perpetrators.
- ✓ As new information becomes available so should stakeholders and the public be updated, both directly and via the media.

----- end of immediate response protocol -----

2) PREVENTATIVE PROTOCOL TO REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF POISONING INCIDENTS

- ✓ Develop a network of relevant organisations and “contact point” individuals on wildlife and poisoning, including the bird and mammal specialists, relevant NGOs, toxicology lab, veterinarians (MET, state and private), MAWF officials responsible for poisons and pesticides, MHSS, outlets such as AGRA, etc.
- ✓ Ensure that all in the network are familiar with the issues and problem, are familiar with and supportive of the Protocol, and are supported by the hierarchies in their respective agencies.
- ✓ Ensure that MET field staff is familiar with the issues and problems around poisoning, are provided with copies of the Protocol and know their role in its implementation.
- ✓ Ensure that the Parks & Wildlife Bill specifically legislates against the use of all poisons, pesticides and toxins for the killing of predators and all protected wildlife in Namibia, and that penalties are sufficiently severe to be effective.
- ✓ Establish a reward system of sufficient value for information leading to the prosecution of perpetrators of poisoning events that people will be disinclined to risk such actions.
- ✓ Prepare and widely distribute up-to-date information on vultures, other scavenging species, poisons, farming and related information, including this Protocol, targeted at different audiences, in different languages and in accessible formats.
- ✓ Provide information and training to relevant law enforcement and investigative agencies and individuals on the protected status of vultures and other scavengers, the fact that poison use for killing protected wildlife is illegal, obligations of suppliers under the law and “scene of crime” training at poisoning events.
- ✓ Focus on poison and pesticide outlets and tighten up on their accountability, their record keeping and their controls. Together with the responsible authorities (MAWF, MHSS, Registrar of Poisons and Pesticides, etc) review all authorized outlets, carry out inspections, monitor their records and ensure that the sector knows it is under close scrutiny.
- ✓ Promote, support and implement public information, education and mobilization campaigns and activities to raise and maintain awareness, volunteerism and action for the conservation of scavenging species and against poisoning.
- ✓ Improve the level of knowledge on key indicator scavenger species in Namibia (and ultimately across the region), with emphasis on status and distribution of populations, population dynamics and movement patterns.
- ✓ Foster regional cooperation and collaboration with agencies (both state and non-governmental) on all aspects of vulture and other scavenging species monitoring , research and conservation, on information sharing, on prevention on poisoning and on harmonizing protocols and action plans in pursuit thereof.
- ✓ Update and fine-tune this protocol as might be necessary in the light of new information and practical experience.

----- end of preventative response protocol -----

Poisoning Incident Report Form

Annex 2

Collecting & preserving samples

Always use gloves or put plastic bags over your hands when handling suspected poisoned animals, and wash your hands very thoroughly afterwards.

Samples from live vultures at the poison site (in order of usefulness):

- Any food that has been regurgitated (vomited)
- The actual contaminated bait or samples from the bait (in the case of a large carcasses being poisoned)
- Any dead insects lying around the carcass

Samples from dead vultures or other animals at the poison site (in order of usefulness):

- Any food that has been regurgitated (vomited)
- The whole crop of a vulture
- The actual contaminated bait or samples from the bait (in the case of large carcasses being poisoned)
- The whole digestive tract consisting of the crop, oesophagus, stomach and intestines
- The liver, kidneys, heart
- The whole animal/bird can also be collected
- Any dead insects lying around the carcass

Storing and Transporting samples:

- Take samples from as many animals as possible, including from the source of the poison
- Place each sample in two or three plastic bags (to prevent leakage)
- Samples from different animals should be kept separate
- Fix a label securely to the outside of each sample
- Freeze the samples as soon as possible
- If no freezer, refrigerate the samples as soon as possible
- If no cooling facilities keep samples out of sunlight and in the coolest place possible
- If samples cannot be kept frozen or cool, and you cannot get them to the nearest Vet or cooling facility quickly, then place them in a saline solution in a clean glass jars.
- To make a saline solution, mix 1 cup tap water with ½ teaspoon non-iodized salt. Make enough of this mixture to cover the sample. But please note – this will give you only a few days extra time to get the samples to your nearest Vet.
- Get the samples to the nearest Vet or research facility with freezing facilities as soon as possible

How to collect samples from fresh or moist vultures:

- Lay the bird on its back and cut from the sternum down so that you can open the entire stomach cavity
- Stomach contents & secondly crop contents are the most important samples for toxicology & should be preserved separately for each animal.
- All organ sample parts of each individual bird can go into the same jar. Each bird a separate jar.

Taking samples on very old dried remains:

- Collect dried samples from the stomach or crop and put in glass jars or test tubes until they can be frozen.
- Bones can be collected and put in sealed ziplock bags and may determine toxins such as lead accumulation, but not recent single event effects.

This is not part of the protocol – it is our tracking tool to get the job done

Follow-up next steps on the development and implementation of this Protocol		
Action	Who	Progress
1. Write up Protocol and circulate to core group	Chris	Done - 24 Aug
2. Core group to give feedback on Protocol	All	Done - 31 Aug
3. Revise & circulate 2 nd draft to core group.	Chris	Done - 2 Sep
4. Core group to give feedback on 2 nd draft	All	Done – 5 Sep
5. Revise and forward to Holger	Chris	Done – 5 Sep
3. Present Protocol to MET for review	Holger	
4. Revise Protocol based on MET feedback	Chris/Holger	
5. Prepare press release on Protocol, to be released ideally by MET	Holger	
6. Once approved put Protocol on websites (MET, Vultures Namibia, Bird Club, NARREC, REST, NNF & EIS, publish in Lanioturdus, etc.)	All	
7. Distribute Protocol to key stakeholders & affected parties, i.e. MET staff, NAU, NNFU, state & private vets, MAWF regional offices, AGRA, NEWS, NACSO & Conservancies, lodges, tour guides, etc.	All	
8. Package Protocol in ways that make it as accessible and user-friendly as possible to different users, e.g. MET field staff, general public	NGOs & MET	
8. Share Protocol with regional stakeholders, e.g. BirdLife SA, BL Botswana, BL Zambia & BL Zimbabwe, regional & provincial conservation agencies, other relevant organisations (e.g. EWT)	Holger	
9. Explore with regional partners the idea of developing a harmonized regional Protocol and web-based information sharing procedures	Holger& NGOs	