

## Open letter re. Juvenile Egyptian Vulture disappeared, probably shot, in Malta

Prime Minister Dr Robert Abela  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Castille Palace, Valletta MALTA

cc  
EU Head Life Unit Mr Angelo Salsi  
European Commission  
Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME)  
Unit B.3. – LIFE and CIP Eco-Innovation  
B-1049 Brussels  
Belgium

EU Head of Nature Unit Mr Nicola Notaro  
Avenue de Beaulieu 5  
1160 • Bruxelles  
Belgium

Dear Sir,

The Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF) is the leading organisation working towards the conservation of European vultures – we have been working tirelessly to stop the decline and restore vulture populations in Europe and elsewhere. We are involved with and support many conservation projects in various countries, mitigating the threats affecting vultures. Vultures are nature's clean-up crew, and they play an important role in our ecosystems.

It is therefore with sadness and revolt that we are writing to you about the case of a juvenile Egyptian Vulture – an Endangered species globally, threatened with extinction and very rare in Europe, that disappeared two days ago (14<sup>th</sup> September) above Malta, almost certainly killed by Maltese poachers.

The bird in question – named Isabel, originated from a captive breeding programme at CERM Endangered Raptors Centre (Italy), had been released on the 20<sup>th</sup> August in southern Italy, as part of a EU-funded LIFE project to save the very threatened Italian Egyptian Vulture population (<https://www.lifegyptianvulture.it/en/>), with a GPS tag provided by the VCF to monitor its movements. The project is supported by many Italian partners, including ISPRA, a public research institute, and Association CERM.

Four of the five birds released this year started their migration to reach their African wintering areas. Two reached western Sicily, crossed the Sicily Channel and are now in Tunisia. The other two followed an eastern route and reached Malta. One arrived in Malta on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September, and we have credible information that this bird was

shot at on September 7th, but luckily it was not killed, flew away immediately and reached Libya some hours later.

The second was not so lucky - it was probably shot down and killed two days ago in Malta. It had been photographed by some people during the day, and at 19:44 emitted its last signal over the Dingli cliffs. It then vanished from the radar. Searches of the area yesterday did not find it. Data from the tag suggests that it was shot and killed, and most probably the body taken away, and the tag destroyed.

The shooting of these Egyptian vultures is a major blow to the conservation of the species in Italy and elsewhere. There are only about 1600 pairs of Egyptian Vultures in Europe, and maximum of 10 pairs in Italy. Of all the European vultures, the Egyptian Vulture is the only species that is not increasing. To try to improve its conservation status, the EU and many national governments have invested significant financial resources for the conservation of this species. Since 1995 alone, there has been at least 25 EU funded LIFE projects related with this species, with a total investment of around € 70 million. Two recent projects in southern Italy have been trying to save the highly endangered Italian population (*Measures for the conservation of the Egyptian vulture in Italy and the Canary Islands, LIFE16 NAT/IT/000659* & *Measures for the conservation of Bonelli's eagle, Egyptian vulture and Lanner falcon in Sicily, LIFE14 NAT/IT/001017*).

The first project includes captive-breeding and release of young Egyptian Vultures – just like Isabel. The estimated cost to “produce” an Egyptian vulture for reintroduction has been put at 50,000€. Considering that in the last few years between 4 and 7 birds have been released per year in southern Italy, the yearly costs of Egyptian vulture restocking there (not even considering the monitoring) is between 200,000 and 350,000 €. Unfortunately, our joint efforts to protect the last Egyptian Vultures are jeopardised by the reckless attitude of Maltese shooters, which also compromise Malta’s legal obligations under the EU Birds Directive.

The killing of protected species is a serious environmental crime, we are therefore asking you to take all possible action to investigate and punish this crime. We suggest that an expert forensic wildlife investigation is started so that a suspect is eventually identified, and criminal proceedings are started. We work alongside many enforcement agencies from EU countries that can offer you help and support.

It is unconceivable that in the year 2021 rogue people are allowed to shoot such birds illegally with impunity. We demand swift action to prevent further such incidents to occur.

Yours sincerely,



José Tavares, Director, VCF



Guido Ceccolini, Director, CERM