

VULNERABLE SPECIES - *Cape Vulture at the Waterberg Plateau Park and Motivation to set up a Vulture feeding site.*

The only species in the Waterberg Plateau Park considered vulnerable is the Cape Vulture Gyps coprotheres. The Karakuwisa cliffs on the northern side of the park accommodate the only remaining breeding colony of this vulture species in South West Africa. Table 2 documents the catastrophic decline in the Cape Vulture population over the past 50 years.

TABLE 2

The Cape Vulture population at Waterberg from 1939 to 1983.

DATE	NUMBERS	RECORDER
1939	500 +	Diekmann
1969	300	Ludwig D.
1975	50	Ludwig D.
1981	40 (22 nests)	Riekert B.
1983 Feb	28 ( 7 nests)	Komen J.
1983 May - Aug	22 ( 7 nests)	Brown C.J.

The Cape Vulture is endemic to southern Africa. It is a bird adapted to open grassveld and tends to avoid continuous tracts of woodland or forest. It is listed as an endangered species in the S.A. Red Data Book - Aves and recent research has shown that the accelerating decline, started over a 100 years ago will lead to the extinction of this species within 60 years if the current mortality rate is not curbed. Various reasons for this decline have been postulated. These include: (a) The decline in game herds and recent advances in stock-farming practices which result in reduced food availability; (b) poisoning at carcasses aimed at "problem animals"; (c) electrocution on power lines;

(d) disturbance at breeding colonies; (e) osteodistrophy resulting from calcium deficiency; (f) drowning in circular farm reservoirs, and (g) direct persecution.

None of the above factors apply to the Waterberg colony. Large-stock farming predominates in the area, characterised by the infrequent use of poisons; as a result of the rabies epidemic large numbers of carcasses were evident; no disturbance took place at the colony, and no indications of osteodistrophy were present.

On the farmlands surrounding Waterberg, severe bush encroachment has taken place, reducing ground visibility from about 85% to less than 5% in many places. This, in my opinion, has been the main reason for the decline documented in Table 2. Even in bush adapted species such as the White-backed and Lappet-faced Vultures, the severity of the bush encroachment has resulted in breeding failure at all known nesting sites. This is because birds are (a) no longer able to find food due to the ground cover and (b) if food is observed, birds may be unable to land and take off. The Cape Vulture is particularly effected because it forages from a greater height than the bush-adapted species, and being a cliff nester, has evolved a greater wing-loading. This means that it needs more space to take off and is thus more seriously restricted by the bush encroachment.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

If we are to save the Cape Vulture in S.W.A., the only solution, until such time as the bush has been sufficiently thinned and cleared, is to provide food at a set feeding site.

- 1) Location of feeding site: There is a large pan almost directly beneath the vulture colony on the farm Warlencourt, belonging to Mr. Diekmann. This is an ideal site as it is (a) open, so birds will easily find food and be able to take off, and (b) close to the colony, so they will be the first birds to arrive and thus get most of the food.

It is suggested that this section of land be either purchased, or an agreement be entered into with Mr. Diekmann such that this area be made available to the Department of Nature Conservation for providing carcasses.

- 2) Frequency and amount of food: Regular provision of one carcass of over 80 kg per week would ensure that all Cape Vultures in the colony obtained at least one full meal each week. The carcass should be slit open along the belly, but the viscera left in place within the animal. By opening the carcass, the Cape Vultures can begin feeding as soon as they arrive, and do not have to wait for the larger Lappet-faced Vultures to open the carcass.

- 3) Competition with other species: Other bird species are unlikely to out-compete the Cape Vultures for the provided food. This is because (a) the Cape Vultures are so close to the food source that they will arrive first; (b) seldom more than three or four Lappet-faced Vultures feed at the same

carcass and (c) the White-backed Vulture is smaller than the Cape vulture and is thus out-competed.

However, as pointed out above, the Lappet-faced and White-backed vultures are also suffering breeding failures as a result of the severe encroachment, so any food obtained by them from the feeding site would be extremely beneficial.

Mammal carrion feeders such as hyena, jackal and possibly cheetah may seriously compete with the Cape Vultures and other birds. If this occurs, it is suggested that a fence be erected about the feeding site. It has been found that a fence enclosing an area of approximately 300 m X 300 m is large enough not to frighten the birds, and to allow them enough space to take off with full crops.

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Key words: Cape Vulture, Waterberg, Bush encroachment, population decline, feeding site, vulture restaurant.