**The Formation and Progress of POWAG – (Poisoning Of Wildlife Action Group)**

**Compiled by Mark Paxton (Coordinator) 30 June 2014.**

During August 2013, a poisoning incident was reported in the Algemeine Zeitung on an Elephant, shot by ivory poachers in the Caprivi (Zambezi) Region, who laced the carcass with poison in order to kill vultures which would indicate the carcass to the authorities, thereby evading repercussions. In this incident which was found by the MET veterinarian co-incidentally and weeks after the event, an estimated 500-700 vultures were killed. This incident sparked a nationwide heated debate on the accuracy of elephant poaching cases reported by MET (Ministry of Environment and Tourism) in this region. More importantly, it also drew attention to the apparently cheap and uncontrolled availability of poisons and use/misuse thereof by poachers.

Subsequently several similar cases were openly reported from neighbouring Botswana where vultures were also killed in vast numbers. Given the fact that Vultures travel incredible distances on a daily basis foraging for food and the vast numbers killed in single poisoning incidents, the possible extinction of the entire vulture population in this region and in the neighbouring countries became a reality and a matter of urgency. The frantic debate amongst birding circles and NGO’s in Namibia began reaching fever-pitch, but unfortunately without any discernible cohesive and constructive direction towards a solution.

I live with my wife Charlie, at Shamvura Camp which is situated in the adjoining Kavango Region close to this unfolding situation and it became frustrating to the point where Charlie and I decided to do something about it.

In early July I had also uncovered a poisoning incident on the Okavango River where water-birds (Geese and Ducks) had been poisoned. A follow up which I handed over to Lizzie Komen resulted in an investigation which revealed the irresponsible use of poisons/pesticide by the Divundu Agricultural Project being the source. This was when I first decided the misuse of poisons may well be a critical issue than we all imagine and definitely worth pursuing.

I began contacting people and NGO’s in Botswana about the poisonings, which snow-balled into an email debate throughout Africa and beyond, and I was very hard pressed to keep up.

At the time of year when most people and organizations were either on holiday or closed for the Festive Season, I approached SAREP and with **Steve Johnsons** help sourced a small amount of funding to hold a modest workshop. I approached whom I thought to be the appropriate local people and NGO’s and finally had a small group together at Shamvura Camp on 12th December 2013. At this stage we regarded ourselves merely as a group of concerned conservationists who wanted to put pressure on the various people and authorities to stop and control the misuse of poisons particularly when used against wildlife. We had no intention of becoming a formal organization with any long term life, and once we had set the wheels in motion with some direction towards a solution, we would simply fade away.

The group which I coordinated was made up of the following:

**Lise Hanssen (Kwando Carnivores Project)**

**Beaven Mungali (Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation)**

**Maria Diekmann (REST)**

**Lizzie Komen (NARREC)**

Although not at the meeting we included input from the following:

**Kenneth Uiseb (Ministry of Environment and Tourism)**

**Paul Funsten (PANTHERA)**

We conducted a sometimes heated and stressful day-long workshop, where we finally came up with an ambitious budgeted proposal to conduct a larger workshop in order to implement short term immediate control measures, as well as put pressure on the various Government and Private institutions to implement long term changes to inadequate legislation and the control of poison availability, now easily and cheaply available through locally based Chinese dealers. We were therefore targeting a difficult to convince group of civil servants and businessmen.

The next hurdle was to source substantial funding for an 80 delegate 3-day workshop and a suitably qualified facilitator. Again with the long suffering Steve Johnsons help, I formulated a letter of request which included a hastily designed logo to portrait credibility to the funders. Now well into the New Year period most potential funders were simply just not available. With the urgency of the situation uppermost in my mind I was not deterred from sourcing private telephone numbers and emailing them repeatedly.

The list of potential funders among others included WWF, AWF, WCS, The Paul Allen Foundation, IUCN, IFAW, KAZA TFCA and Columbus Zoo. Most of them simply ignored my request, while others had the good grace to answer sympathetically and with good wishes, but without funding.

**Tim Snow** from **Wildlife Poisoning Prevention & Conflict Resolutions** however, offered to facilitate the workshop and became a helpful ally.

With no more potential funders available to approach, now all that remained to be done was to wait and see. I also had very little to report to what now was a lengthy email list of interested people in Namibia and throughout the world all eager to hear of our progress, and had to break off the communications until I had something to share. It was a frustrating period.

Steve Johnson then alerted me to possible funding through the US Embassy, which may cover our entire costs for the workshop, and I embarked on a renewed drive with re-written letters, references and additional supportive material. Steve enlisted the assistance of **Dovas Saulys** also with the US Embassy to speed up the process and we had some renewed hope. With this process finally completed and in the correct channels it was again back to waiting.

The Birds Of Prey Program (BOPP) AGM invitation during the middle of May added some additional distraction to what was now a boring and frustrating waiting process. Interestingly the invitation included a program which indicated a 1-day “Poisons Workshop” prior to the AGM. On being lead to believe this may be duplicating our intended workshop, I enquired about this and got a frosty and defensively aggressive response. This led to some stupidly petty mud-slinging between myself and Holger Kohlberg from MET, who until now although fully included in the email debates, had refused to become involved. I eventually ironed out the uncertainties more reasonably with Andre Botha from EWT who was organizing the event. We decided this small workshop was targeting a different group of those already converted, and it would be beneficial to use this as a forum to add more substance to our workshop which would be targeting an entirely different and more difficult group of delegates. Three of the members of POWAG attended this well facilitated workshop, being Lizzie Komen, Maria Diekmann and myself. It transpired that we were in fact headed in exactly the right direction and that our Action Group would be duplicated in at least two neighbouring countries namely Botswana and Zimbabwe. It was suggested by **Jose Tavarez**, the facilitator that we refine our strategy by enlarging POWAG slightly to include a few more representatives from different Institutions, but that our approach towards a final workshop was still entirely correct. Again, all that remained was the frustrating wait for funding to materialize.

Then on 27th May I heard from the US Embassy that roughly half our funding had been approved. Grateful and elated emails followed with congratulations all round. This was then followed by a meeting with the Vice Consul Joel Hanssen in Windhoek, where I explained our slightly changed but more strategic approach towards achieving our goal acting on suggestions from the BoPP meeting. Just when I thought we were finally on track, another meeting here at Shamvura Camp with Heather Smith the Grants Coordinator was thought necessary. After clearing up some misunderstandings, I again thought we were set to go. Then on 23 June I received a call from Marlies from the US Embassy who actually controls the funds and it now transpires this still has to come from Washington DC and will only be available in 4-6 weeks. We again are waiting, and fully expecting a long tedious administrative process before the funds are finally available to use for what they were intended. In the meantime carcasses continue to be poisoned and Vultures are dying.