

## Poisons and birds in Namibia

C.J. Brown<sup>1</sup> & Liz Komen<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Namibia Nature Foundation, PO Box 245, Windhoek, Namibia, [www.nnf.org.na](http://www.nnf.org.na);

<sup>2</sup>Namibia Animal Rehabilitation, Research and Education Centre (NARREC),  
PO Box 11232, Windhoek, Namibia

The farmlands surrounding the Waterberg Plateau Park, where the last remaining colony of the Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* in Namibia survived, is heavily bush-encroached, and birds are forced to forage far from their cliff-site in cattle, goat and wildlife farming areas. In the 1980s, the colony's population was just large enough to support breeding attempts; the principles of vulture conservation, such as vulture restaurants and farmer awareness campaigns, were therefore implemented. But in spite of the conservation actions, the population declined and the last known breeding attempt in Namibia was in 1994.

Other large scavenging avian species that have been monitored in Namibia, such as the Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* and the Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*, have also shown declines in population numbers and range sizes. The irresponsible and indiscriminate use of poison for predators, as a livestock-farming management tool, has been implicated in these losses. In order to assist in preventing further losses to Namibia's biodiversity, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism has proposed, in their Wildlife and Parks Management Bill, to ban the use of poison for killing predators on Namibian farmlands. Only in exceptional cases, where the need for a given method, including the use of poison for the killing of predators, is specifically authorized, will the user be within the law.

In support of the proposed Wildlife and Parks Management Bill, CJB puts forward the following arguments.

Poisons should be banned for purposes of predator control. The logic is simple. Poisons

kill indiscriminately. For every target species (e.g. a jackal) that is killed, they kill many non-target species, mainly useful scavengers, both mammals and birds. Work done to date in the Kruger Park, in parts of Namibia, and elsewhere in southern Africa, shows that the ratio of non-target to target species is often way in excess of 100:1. When it comes to the problem individual, the ratio of non-target to target is vastly larger.

The result is that the scavenging cohort of birds and mammals has been effectively wiped out in many parts of southern Africa, including Namibia. The fact that these scavenging animals are a useful and important part of the ecosystem has been clearly demonstrated. They are also powerful symbols of healthy ecosystems, and have been an inspiration to humans since the cradle of humanity.

The link between poison use and scavenger numbers – especially using birds of prey such as eagles and vultures as indicators – has been clearly demonstrated in Namibia, as well as elsewhere in southern Africa. This issue is not in dispute. The fact that a small part of Namibian society is responsible for this poison use, possibly no more than 2000 people out of a population of 1.8 million, is also clear. This small subset of Namibian society (0.1%) is responsible for the decline – in many areas to extinction – of some of our most magnificent and useful species, all as an indirect consequence of poison use for predator control.

Some farmers are locked into the paradigm of killing predators as their first line of defence to prevent stock losses. There are

Poisons kill indiscriminately

other paradigms that work better. One is protecting stock to prevent stock losses. Some farmers say that poison use is essential in preventing or reducing stock losses. And yet, many other farmers (indeed, the majority) say that they run their farms without ever using poison.

While the use of poisons for predator control remains legal, it will always be a major cause of mortality for scavengers. Birds will continue to die, and local populations will continue to go extinct, just as has happened with the Bateleur Eagle, the Whiteheaded Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis* and the Cape Vulture in many parts of Namibia. Public education, asking for voluntary cooperation and other similar approaches will not work – not now, not ever. The reason is simple. Birds have large home ranges and search for food over huge areas. For Tawny Eagles in the central parts of Namibia, ranges exceed 150 000 hectares. Those of Cape Vultures exceed 3 million hectares. Individual birds thus fly over the land of more than 500 different farmers and landowners. If only a few of them use poisons, at some time in the year birds will be vulnerable, eat poisoned meat and die.

It is important to draw on the experiences of other countries. In France, Spain and in a number of other areas, intensive education, awareness and other programmes were undertaken to try and convince farmers not to use poisons. They failed, despite the vastly greater state-funded resources and infrastructures that these countries had to apply to the problem than we in Namibia have. Vulture populations in these countries continued to decline. Then the governments of those countries decided that the use of poisons for predator control was simply not in the national long-term interest, and that their rare and endangered scavenging species could no longer be a side-line casualty to predator control. As a result, poisons were banned, and the ban was firmly enforced.

Shortly thereafter, vulture numbers started

to recover. Some colonies showed a remarkable recovery close to 20% per year. Sure, there were violations; some farmers persisted with poison use. They were caught and punished. From time to time there will be others who continue to violate the law, just as there are people in society who steal, who drink-and-drive and who do other anti-social things. But the important thing is that the problem has been brought under control. Scavenging populations of many species have recovered (or are recovering), enriching the ecosystems and bringing back important ecological services, as well as economic opportunities, including tourism. And farmers continue to farm. There is no evidence that they are any less successful that they were before. In fact, on a number of farms the shift to protecting stock as the first line of defence, and living with predators, has resulted in improved animal husbandry and better results overall.

*the use of poisons for killing predators is not acceptable*

The really significant point of banning poisons for predator control is that society is setting a standard. Society is saying that the use of poisons for killing predators is not acceptable, and not in the national long-term interest. People who persist in using poisons are thus going outside the behaviour and norms of what society expect, and are behaving unprofessionally. If the use of poisons for killing predators is *not* banned (and no matter how much we tell people that poison use is not good practice), society will essentially be condoning the use of poisons, and it becomes a matter of opinion.

The evidence shows that the only long-term solution to this very significant environmental issue is to ban the use of poisons for predator control. The time is now right to strongly move this approach forward, as the range of alternatives are all 'feel-good' activities that will not solve the problem. In saying this, the important work carried out by many people to raise awareness around the problem, and to try and do something to ease the situation, is in no way undermined. Given the fact that the use of poisons is currently

legal, people are doing their best within the existing system to reduce the problem. However, we need to put all our efforts into getting out of the current system into one where poison use is no longer legal tenure for predator control in rangeland farming.

Until this new stage is reached, one 'feel-good' activity that might be a bit more effective than others is to invite farmers and land-

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owners to become members of a 'POISON-FREE' coalition. Each farmer and landowner who joins gets a certificate. A map of all farmers who are members, as well as of those who are not, is then updated and made public. Our friends in the media – both press and TV – could help publicize the initiative, and give updates of farmers joining, and print maps as they fill with new members.

**The Vulture**

The Vulture lacks culture I've heard it said – he has no table manners and feeds on the dead; that scrawny neck and eyes so beady, in fact we find him offally greedy!

Taken from B. O'Keefe. 1983. *Game without Reserve*. Illustrated by K. Aldred, Paula Major Publications, Durban.

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