on a plate

Can fine dining offer hope to Africa's vultures?

KERRI WOLTER/VULPRO

It is assumed that vulture restaurants are beneficial to vultures, but is this so? A new study aims to find out.

We are currently experiencing what some have described as an African Vulture crisis. The rapid decrease in vulture numbers across Africa was recently highlighted when parties to the Convention of Migratory Species unanimously adopted the Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African–Eurasian Vultures (Vulture MsAP). The parties also listed six species of African vultures on Appendix I of the Convention.

African vultures face a variety of threats: electrocution and collision with energy infrastructure, habitat degradation, decline of food availability, harvest for belief-based use and human disturbance. However, in all regions, poisoning towers above all other threats. Poisoning can be intentional, when poachers poison carcasses (and thus vultures) to avoid detection – so-called 'sentinel poisoning' – but unintentional poisoning is equally important and occurs when farmers make use of poison to target predators that may threaten their livestock.

Urgent conservation effort is needed to save vultures in Africa and the Fitz-Patrick Institute is currently engaging with a range of partners, including VulPro, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, BirdLife South Africa, Vultures Namibia, Raptors Botswana, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and CSVet, on research projects that will inform vulture conservation across southern Africa. Our newest project focuses on vulture restaurants and is being undertaken by PhD student Christiaan W. Brink. Vulture restaurants are locations where safe and reliable food is provided for vultures in the hope that this will reduce the risk of poisoning and bolster vulture numbers. The first restaurant in South Africa was established as far back as 1966.

Vultures provide an important ecosystem function in the form of a cleaning service. They are extremely efficient scavengers, greatly increasing the decomposition rate of carcasses and limiting the risk of disease. For example, following the collapse of Asian vulture populations, numbers of feral dogs have surged, posing a substantial risk of increased human rabies infections. Vultures present a cost-effective waste-management solution for livestock farmers who are responsible for the hygienic disposal of unusable meat and offal. The restaurants provide a potential win-win solution for farmers to dispose of their waste and for vultures to be supplied with safe food.

However, we need to understand whether restaurants carry any risks to vultures. The supplementary feeding of wild species is a contentious subject as it may alter natural behaviour and survival rates. To date, most research on the benefits of vulture restaurants has been conducted in Europe, and with mixed results. Our research project aims to assess some of the key assumptions regarding vulture restaurants so that we can be sure that they do indeed benefit both farmers and vultures.

We are especially interested in whether a diet of intensively farmed livestock affects vulture health and we will determine this by comparing the health of vultures exposed to varying levels of livestock in their diet. We also need to assess whether vulture restaurants reduce the risk of poisoning. To do this we need a good understanding of the use of poisons across South Africa. Finally, should we find any impacts on vulture health, we need to weigh up this cost against the possible benefits of a reduced risk of poisoning.

South Africa has a long history of vulture restaurants, but we need an up-to-date database of past and present restaurant sites and their frequency of use. We ask that readers contact Christiaan (*christiaanwillembrink@gmail.com*) with information regarding any vulture restaurants, active or inactive. The project ultimately will assist conservation managers and policy-makers to come to informed decisions, enabling the most effective conservation of these magnificent and useful species.

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