

First Progress Report – Rufford Small Grant- 43413-1

Project Title: [Saving vultures in Benin: Reducing habitat loss and the illegal slaughter of vultures with the involvement of the local community in north-east Benin].

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of our project is to protect four bird species considered highly endangered in Benin: *Gyps africanus* (white-backed vulture), *Necrosyrtes monachus* (hooded vulture), *Gyps rueppelli* (Rüppell's vulture) and *Trigonoceps occipitalis* (white-headed vulture). These birds are at risk of disappearing from the region due to a number of factors, including habitat loss, illegal hunting, agricultural expansion and poisoning. This work is part of the urgent need to understand the nesting requirements of these vultures in order to develop effective conservation strategies.

This first report presents the progress of our activities, focusing on 3 major activities: the conduct of survey sessions on the perceptions and uses of vulture species among the local population and the celebration of International Vulture Awareness Day combined with the implementation of awareness-raising and environmental education actions for the public and students on the value and importance of vultures in villages and schools.

METHODOLOGY & RESULTS

During August and September, we carried out the following activities:

1- Survey of local populations perception and use of vultures

The surveys went well during August, and a few sessions were carried out in September. We developed a questionnaire that was shared and amended with collaborators via the Kobotoolbox and kobo Collect platforms to collect

quantitative and qualitative data on local communities socio-economic profile, knowledge, attitude and practice towards vultures. The team then administered closed and open-ended questions to village residents (farmers, herders, traders, local authorities, eco-guards...) around the three project sites. Twenty-six (26) villages in six (06) different municipalities (Kandi, Segbana, N'dali, Kalale, Gogounou and Sinende) were considered. Using semi-structured interviews, 200 individual interviews were carried out for this study.

According to the results of our surveys, the majority of respondents (70%) have a positive perception of vultures, as they allow dead animals to be eaten and therefore play a role in nature. Unfortunately, however, a minority (30%) perceive vultures as bad birds. This perception is due to the fact that some people believe that vultures have evil powers and that their presence portends evil. The drastic decline in the population of vulture species was confirmed by the survey, with over 90% of subjects confirming that they were seeing fewer and fewer vultures and their nests. Intentional poisoning was the main cause (90%), followed by low availability of wildlife for feeding (75%) and deforestation (60%) leading to habitat loss. It has been revealed that tobacco leaves are crushed and mixed into the meat of animal carcasses, and once this meat has been consumed by the vultures, they can no longer flap their wings, rendering them immobile and easily captured. This form of poisoning is practiced in order to capture vultures alive; it is a requirement of some traditional practitioners and traders. Moreover, live vultures cost twice as much as a dead one. A live vultures cost twice as much as a dead one. A live vulture can cost up to 150,000 FCFA (£190), while a dead vulture costs up to 60,000 FCFA (£76). These are the prices at which traders buy vultures from hunters.

According to vulture's bodies traders, demand is growing by the day, and with good reason: all parts of the vulture, including the whole bird, are used to treat illness (94%), for prosperity (61%), protection against evil spells (65%), and good luck (50%). We can see from our surveys that the people who capture these birds find it more profitable to sell the animal than to leave it in the wild. There is therefore a lack of awareness of all the ecological and financial benefits that

vultures provide for our ecosystems and for us humans. Having understood this, our awareness-raising sessions have focused much more on the importance of vulture conservation, showing local people the role vultures play in nature and what we could suffer in terms of financial loss if vultures were to disappear. One of the positive results of this work is that over 95% of the people surveyed were in favor of setting up small local cells of people to monitor vultures and report incidents to the relevant forestry and local authorities. We held awareness-raising sessions with all the people we interviewed in the various localities we visited, just after the question sessions were over.



Photo 1: Image illustrating an interview session with hunters in the commune of Kalalé. A member of our team showing an image of the vulture species seen in north-east Benin. © HOUNNOUVI Fidele Ezechiel K. 2024



Photo 2: Raising hunters' awareness of the need to conserve vultures, reduce the threat to these species and the consequences of their disappearance. © DJOSSOU Dossa Elisée, 2024

2- Implementation of conservation, awareness-raising and environmental education actions for the public and students on the value and importance of vultures in villages and schools.

During the last week of July, just after the funding had been received, we completed the preparation of a range of communication and awareness-raising materials to be used during awareness-raising sessions on the importance of vultures and their conservation in localities bordering the targeted protected areas. These include posters, several vulture colorings sheets, a banner, t-shirts, polo shirts and other visual aids showing the four targeted vulture species. Project team members and local partners were trained in the use of this awareness-raising kit and the material distributed to local stakeholders (schoolchildren, adults...) during several awareness-raising activities in the intervention areas.

The theme of the International Vulture Awareness Day was: *Let's protect vultures, let's preserve biodiversity - All for vulture conservation*. Awareness-raising activities were organized for students, adults, school teachers, farmers,

leaders of local associations and NGOs and All those involved in the threats to vultures, on the importance of vulture conservation. A town crier helped to mobilize the local population. We organized 3 different awareness-raising sessions for 300 schoolchildren, plus other audiences that were added.

During these sessions, which were held in primary and secondary schools located in villages bordering the three targeted protected areas, educational activities on biodiversity conservation, vulture conservation and vulture leaf coloring were organized for the students. The best students who answered the questions correctly and drew the best pictures were rewarded with school supplies. These sessions aimed to teach students and the general public about the importance of biodiversity conservation, the ecological roles of vultures, reducing habitat loss and illegal slaughter of vultures. These events were held over several days starting on September 7, 2024, to mark International Vulture Awareness Day.

At the end of these sessions, we are reassured that these results have been achieved:

- 300 students have been sensitized
- More than 50 individuals (farmers, stockbreeders, teachers, association leaders) have been sensitized.

We're convinced that local people have a better understanding of the importance of vultures, the causes and consequences of their disappearance, and the solutions needed to put an end to this crisis. This has reinforced their involvement, capacity, responsibility and motivation to protect these birds and their habitat.



Photo 3: Awareness-raising materials: Lacostes, shirts; brochures and banners. © HOUNNOUVI Fidele Ezechiel K.,



Photo 4: Awareness-raising session for students in a school located in a village near the Sota classified forest. © JORDAN, 2024.

Difficulties:

As we look back on the project's progress, we were fortunate not to face any major challenges during the initial phase. We have encountered a few minor difficulties, but thanks to the experience of our team, we have resolved them without a hitch. Every challenge has been a learning opportunity, and we've moved forward with confidence.

Conclusion

We would like to thank the Rufford Foundation for having fully funded the activities of this project. We would also like to thank the forest managers and agents of the various protected areas targeted by the project, the forest guides, the local authorities and populations, and the NGOs Naben and SOS Savane for their assistance and contribution to the success of this project.

Next steps

- Survey for identification of vultures nesting sites on the three sites.
- Organization of workshops with project stakeholders to define and implement strategic action plans for vulture conservation for the three target protected areas.
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