

Vulpro Protocol - Vulture Restaurant



This document is designed to guide the development of artificial vulture feeding sites. Please note that this is a living document that can be reviewed and updated as necessary.

Artificial vulture feeding sites (informal and formal)

An artificial vulture feeding site is a site whereby safe food i.e carcasses are placed out for vultures, at a particular designated spot on a regular or ad hoc basis for the purpose of supplying safe food for vulture consumption.

Vulture feeding sites, also known as "vulture restaurants," are a vital conservation tool that provides a safe, reliable, accessible and uncontaminated supplementary food source for endangered vulture populations, while also offering essential ecosystem and human health benefits.

In the last thirty years, African vulture populations have declined by over 80%. This decline is owed to numerous ongoing and rising threats such as direct and indirect poisoning, lack of safe, accessible food, collisions with energy infrastructure, electrocution on power lines, anthropogenic activity affecting nesting sites and poaching for the illegal wildlife trade due to belief-based practices.

As keystone species, vultures are vital for the ecosystems in which they reside. Vultures' diet of carrion is an indispensable niche because they neutralise pathogens and aid in the prevention of the spread of diseases by removing carcasses from the environment before they can fester.

While being exposed to a wide array of external threats, vultures' slow reproductive rates and late maturity further heighten their vulnerability and these species now face a real extinction risk.

Feeding sites are a core component of "Vulture Safe Zones", which are areas where landowners commit to managing their properties in ways that provide safe havens for vultures, free from contaminants like lead ammunition or certain veterinary drugs as well as providing safe, accessible food to reduce food scarcity where possible.

Before one establishes such a site, the following needs to be taken into consideration:

- terrain
- prevailing winds
- accessibility
- location of power line structures
- surrounding physical environment
- other factors

Terrain

A suitable location for an artificial feeding site will be an open area with very few trees to allow the birds the opportunity to locate the food from a distance.

Remember they have very good eye sight however, if the carcasses are 'hidden', they will not be able to locate them. The bottom of a valley is also not suitable for this reason.

Prevailing winds

It should preferably be on an elevated area or slightly sloping hill with access to prevailing winds to allow the vultures the opportunity to be able to take off. Vultures are actually poor flyers and need thermals to enable them to rise up into the sky.

Location of power line structures

Power lines have been one of the major mortality factors with vultures. A suitable site should not be established at least within 2 kms away of any power line structure or proposed one. Structures within the area should also be mitigated if possible.

Surrounding geophysical environment

There should be some 'koppies' or an odd tree for the birds to be able to roost on after feeding. This is where the unsafe power line structures are often used to the detriment of the birds.

If one does not have such physical features close by, you could erect a basic roosting structure with a couple of old poles a little distance from the restaurant.

Accessibility

Two factors play a role here. You need to be able to access the area with relative ease to place carcasses out as well as the management thereof. Secondly it must not be too accessible for the general public as vultures are very sensitive to disturbance and prefer a quieter environment when feeding.

Other factors

No artificial vulture feeding site must be placed where there is an active airstrip. This will endanger both bird and man and could have serious consequences.

Fences pose a problem for vultures and can cause damage to the vultures taking off after feeding. A fence line should not be within at least 100m from the restaurant site.

Fencing off the restaurant is not recommended as this limits the opportunities for the vultures to feed, however should one need to do so, a wide area needs to be created to allow the birds the opportunity to land and take off after feeding. One must remember they need a longer 'runway' for takeoff after feeding as they are heavier.

Once a suitable area, taking all the above into consideration has been chosen, management of the feeding site becomes vitally important.

How to manage the site?

Take the following into consideration whilst managing the site;

- food supply
- cleanliness
- maintenance

Food supply

One would normally supply this site with livestock and or wild game that have died on the farm, however if one works together with your neighbours, feedlots and abattoirs, more food can be made available for the vultures. There are a couple of important things to remember.

DO NOT place animals that have been put down using drugs such as barbiturates, or that have been treated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID) drugs such as sodium diclofenac. (*see list below). This will lead to their death.

If you are not sure of the origin of the carcass as well as whether it is potentially safe, avoid putting this carcass out for vulture consumption.

If the animal has been shot with a lead bullet, do not put the carcass out as vultures are extremely susceptible to lead poisoning. Choose your Ammunition well. Do not use lead Bullets, especially hollow point bullets as they fragment whilst entering an animal. Each one of these fragments are dangerous to wildlife. Choosing a lead free round for both hunting and euthanasia eliminates the risk of poisoning birds.

Most vulture species are unable to or will struggle to open a carcass on their own. Open the carcass for the vultures by slitting the skin along the belly and chest so they can access the 'inside' of the carcass (this is due to the absence of predators that would have naturally done this). One can also slit open the skin on the legs too.

Cleanliness

Keep your restaurant site clean of all litter like plastic, cattle/sheep/goat ear-tags, bullets, pieces of glass, china, porcelain, pottery, plastic, bailing twine, string and any other foreign objects. The vultures can either consume some of these objects or get injured or entwined by them.

Remove all ear tags before placing out the carcass. Just as we would like to eat off a clean table, let them eat from a clean environment!

Maintenance

The grass should be kept relatively short around the restaurant to assist with the cleanliness and maintenance of the site. Remove all bones and skins or uneaten carcasses from the site at least once every two months.

Approximately every 4 months (if it is an active restaurant), bones can be splintered/broken in a bone crusher to provide small pieces to supply the necessary calcium supplements the vultures need.

In the past the scavengers like hyenas would have left splinters of bone which the vultures would have consumed.

Remove all alien vegetation around the site as well as any possible bush encroachment that could be taking place.

Collaborate and succeed

By setting up a restaurant you have gone into partnership with these magnificent birds. You do not have to do this alone but can work together with your neighbours to ensure a constant food supply. Should you be able to 'stockpile' your food supply, use a walk in the freezer or cold room!

Should food supply be limited, consider putting out food when vultures are reported in the area. Remember these birds soar at high altitudes, with Cape Vultures being reported flying as high as 8000 meters above sea level, just cause you can't see them doesn't mean they can't see you or your restaurant.

* Carcasses containing any of the following products should **NEVER** be left where they are available to vultures:

- **Barbiturates** (used for euthanasing animals e.g. **Phenobarbitone, Pentobarbital** etc.).
- **Sodium Monofluoroacetate** – a natural toxin contained in some plants, e.g. **Gifblaar Dichapetalum cymosum** that may be ingested by livestock or game causing death.
- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs]** (used to treat a variety of ailments but lethal to vultures; **Sodium Diclofenac (active ingredient of Voltaren®)**; there is only one registered NSAID in South Africa that is safe for vultures - Meloxicam and also known as Metacam which is available.
- **Antibiotics** (especially **Tetracycline or Penicillin**).
- **Lead** (the main source of lead is from animals shot with lead-containing bullets which fragment on impact into many small (often microscopic) pieces; vulture mortality has been linked to lead ingestion).
- **Dips** (any animal recently dipped in an **organophosphate dip** should not be accessible to vultures; **the skin should be removed from livestock recently dipped against ticks using externally applied sprays or pour-on treatments**).
- Other agricultural products that are deadly to vultures and should not be used in vulture areas include **Strychnine, Aldicarb, Monocrotophos, Methamidophos, Diazinon and Ethylfenthion**.

Recommended dips that are environmentally friendly can be provided upon request.

For any further information or additional explanations, please contact:

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