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SOUTH AFRICAN CAPE VULTURE RELEASED IN NAMIBIA IN 2005 IS BACK IN SOUTH AFRICA

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On 19 October 2005, 15 Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres* were released in Namibia as part of a population supplementation programme initiated by Dr Gerhard Verdoorn and Maria Diekmann in 2002. The focus of this supplementation programme was to bolster the remaining population of Cape Vultures on the Waterberg Plateau before these few birds left the site causing the second species extinction in Namibia (the White Rhino has since been successfully reintroduced). As Cape Vultures are communal breeders, they will usually leave a breeding site altogether should the numbers of breeding birds drop below the acceptable minimum number, thereby making the breeding pair numbers insufficient for the colony to remain active. This minimum number of breeding pairs is unknown but is believed to be a flexible number dependent on the availability of breeding ledges and historical breeding numbers at different breeding sites.

The vultures sourced for this particular project were rehabilitated vultures of different ages from South Africa, fit and able for release and believed suitable candidates for Namibia. Eighty percent of the vultures were initially from the Magaliesberg Cape Vulture breeding colony with a handful from the Limpopo and Free State provinces. The vultures were kept in a purpose built enclosure for 2 ½ - 3 years, adjacent to the vulture feeding site where 400 wild (mainly African White-backed) vultures would visit weekly, allowing the captive vultures the opportunity to observe wild vulture behaviour as well as the opportunity to interact with these birds and potentially form some degree of bond with them in preparation for their release. It was believed that if the captive birds be kept for an extended period of time, up to a few years, that it would instill site fidelity to the release candidates and thus they would be more inclined to remain in the area and hopefully initiate breeding attempts on the Waterberg Plateau, which was in direct sight and only a few kilometres away from the release and captive site. Reintroductions around the world have successfully followed similar procedures, but “best age” release is being researched with Cape Vultures.

Before the release, all the releasable vultures were fitted with colour coded and specifically selected leg band combinations together with SAFRING metal rings. Only three were fitted with satellite PTTs in addition to their leg bands, due to the expense involved. For the first year after the release of the vultures, the satellite transmitters relayed data and the public reported many sightings of these colour coded bands, proving that the released vultures had in fact remained in Namibia for some time. However, the number of sightings decreased over time and after 3 years the trackers were no longer transmitting for various reasons and only 2 of the released birds were frequently reported. In addition, as of 2012 there was no recorded breeding activity of Cape Vultures at the Waterberg Plateau (Holger Kolberg, pers. comms.) and the species has since been classified as critically endangered in Namibia with only a few remaining individual Cape

August 2014 at VulPro (photo: Walter Neser)

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Vultures left and no breeding recorded. It is also believed that due to low population numbers, hybridization was observed and documented between a Cape and African White-backed Vulture. (Maria Diekmann) Additionally, the entire southern African region has experienced massive vulture declines in the past 3 years due to poisoning. Poachers are now often spreading poison over the entire carcass of an elephant and other species once the ivory/horn is removed. This kills all landing vultures (and other scavengers) so that the birds do not fly up in large numbers after eating and "give away" the site to authorities monitoring illegal activities. These declines could also have affected the Namibian population.

It was not until August 2013 that South Africa had any recorded re-sightings of any of the South African vultures released in Namibia. Vulpro was the first to report re-sightings and it took them some time to find the original data for the colour banded birds. A year after the initial sighting, VulPro managed to photograph and read the number of the metal ring of one of the vultures which with the help of SAFRING, led us to check the Namibian records. G25058, a female Cape Vulture released in Namibia on the 19 October 2005 has now been re-sighted 3 times at the VulPro vulture restaurant which is located on the southern slopes of the Magaliesberg Mountains and approximately 20 kms from the Scheerpoort breeding colony of Cape Vultures.

The vulture feeding site is frequently visited by approximately 150 vultures, mostly from the Magalieberg range but not limited to other sites such as visitors from Limpopo and KZN provinces as well as African White-backed and Lappet-faced vultures on an ad hoc basis. VulPro has also noted, firstly from the observations of the captive birds and confirming these observations with the wild birds that breeding Cape Vultures may show their breeding status by blushing spots on either side of their faces, at the corner of both cheeks between the bill and eyes (Kerri Wolter). In all cases observed, birds with blushing spots were involved in breeding activity. The re-sighting of G25058 showing these blushing spots, indicating that this bird is probably breeding and the most likely location would be the Magaliesberg mountains. As in most cases, breeding vultures will remain in fairly close proximity to their breeding site throughout the breeding season. As VulPro's vulture feeding site feeds the birds on a daily basis, we have no doubt that the Magaliesberg Cape Vultures have become accustomed to the regular supply of food and are thus regularly visiting the site to feed their chicks and themselves during this time where plentiful food is a huge requirement for the success of the breeding season.

These resightings and observations are giving researchers from around the region the ability to gain a better understanding of this species. More research is required to try to determine why some of the released birds seem to have remained in Namibia, while others like this female, returned to South Africa. There is much to learn, but the team work between various historical and current researchers in this case, has provided helpful data for future conservation efforts.

Governor release vulture in Namibia – 23 Oct 2005