

Final

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Vulpro education initiative achieves breakthrough success at Blouberg vulture colony, reducing muthi-related killings through community engagement

[Vulpro](#), one of South Africa's leading vulture-only conservation organisations has noted a rise in tip-offs about suspected vulture poaching in the Blouberg Nature Reserve in Limpopo – home to the country's largest breeding colony of endangered Cape Vultures. The team believes this increase is the result of a comprehensive community outreach programme that engages directly with local communities, schools and traditional healers. VulCha (Vulture Champions) was first initiated by Vulpro in 2023 targeting schools in the region and is run in conjunction with the Pan African Conservation Education (PACE) initiative, supported by Tusk Trust. The initiative extends from Limpopo into Nigeria and Botswana and includes programmes for local guides and conservationists.

A total of 160 vultures are sold per annum in South Africa with some 59,000 consumption events of vulture pieces each year. According to Alistair Sinclair, General Manager at Vulpro, consuming vultures or their body parts (such as claws, bones, skulls, kidneys and skin) are done for a range of purposes, with the most popular being their perceived clairvoyant powers, foresight and increased intelligence. The main driver for this is betting and gambling, improved business success, and intelligence in school children. It's also believed to help with mental health and physical health ailments like headaches. Various species are targeted with no distinct species preferred and are killed using shotguns, poisons or traps.

Poisoning is the most destructive and widely used method of harvesting as large numbers of vultures are usually killed in one poisoning event as was seen in the latest spate of killings in the Kruger National Park and Marloth Park. It's estimated that there are 1251 vulture traders, hunters and traditional healers in eastern South Africa who are involved in the vulture trade. The need for education is therefore critical as many people are unaware of the conservation crisis facing vultures.

“Doing something one way your entire life just because your parents and grandparents did it, doesn't mean it's the only way, or the right way. To illustrate what we mean by this, we ask community members if they'd be willing to give up their mobile phones and revert back to letter writing to communicate with their friends because that is what their parents and grandparents used to do. Their answer is always no. This then gives us the opportunity to discuss whether killing vultures is still a good idea, especially since there are medicines now that one can buy at the pharmacy and that winning a bet is not worth the lives that are lost in the process by discussing their role in the ecosystem. It's an analogy that appears to be working and with the increase in tip-offs we are beginning to see the fruits of our labour.” Says Sinclair.

Our children are the future which is why education must also focus on them. In 2023, Vulpro took VulCha (Vulture Champions) to schools near the Blouberg Nature Reserve starting with Marumafase Secondary School and Biokotso Primary School. Since then more schools have joined the programme including Maphuta High School, Kgobokang Primary School, Boikhutso Primary School, Ntsose Secondary School and Maromofase High School.

Heading up Vulpro's school education programmes is Phillipine Makhubela, a nature conservation graduate from Tshwane University of Technology. Growing up she lived close to mountains, rivers and wildlife and felt deeply connected to nature. Pursuing a career as a conservationist meant she would be able to make a difference. Between March and May of this year, Phillipine has interacted with over 900 students setting up student committees to act as ambassadors for vulture conservation in their communities. Makhubela says: *“My mission is to raise awareness, educate the public and actively contribute to the safeguarding of our natural world for future generations.”*

“Our education initiative represents a paradigm shift in vulture conservation,” says Kerri Wolter, CEO of Vulpro. *“Further to implementing protective measures, we've chosen to work hand-in-hand with local communities to address the root causes of vulture persecution and are building genuine partnerships with community leaders.”*

Miss Sekele, a teacher at Marumofase High School says that since their school introduced the vulture programme they've noticed a significant positive shift in their learners. *"We are fortunate to have Phillipine as our Vulpro coordinator. She has played a key role in changing how learners perceive vultures. Through her guidance, students have come to understand the important they play in maintaining environmental health, preventing the spread of diseases. Inspired by her, some learners are now even considering careers in environmental conservation. Learners are even coming forward to report vulture sightings and agreed to stop hunting them, recognising the importance of protecting them from extinction."*

Vulpro is also working hard at establishing collaborative relationships with sangomas and traditional healers, providing education about sustainable alternatives to vulture-based remedies while respecting cultural practices and beliefs. But the work doesn't stop here, farmers and recreational hunters are also responsible for the senseless killing of vultures. Education around lead bullets, chemical dips, traps and reservoirs is ongoing and even though alternatives do exist it's a matter of informing people about them.

The Blouberg colony's significance cannot be overstated. As cliff nesters, Cape Vultures utilise the area's rocky cliff faces and ledges for breeding during the April to October season. The colony's protection directly impacts the species' recovery prospects across southern Africa. The success at Blouberg is already being replicated at other vulture sites across South Africa. Vulpro plans to expand the education initiative to additional communities, with the goal of safeguarding critical areas where vultures can live and breed without threat.

"This is just the beginning," emphasised Wolter. "Every community we reach, every mind we change, represents hope for the future of Cape Vultures. The Blouberg success proves that when we approach conservation with respect, understanding, and genuine partnership, we can achieve remarkable results."

Vulpro is dedicated to safeguarding Africa's vulture populations through rescue, rehabilitation, breeding, research, and education. Learn more and help us rewrite the story at www.vulpro.com

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Vultures play a major role in the ecosystem and a world without them would have significant ecological and health implications. Disposing of carcasses quickly they're able to prevent the spread of diseases like anthrax, botulism, and rabies among wildlife and humans. Their absence would also lead to an increase in other scavengers, such as feral dogs and rats, which are less efficient at disposing of carcasses and can carry diseases harmful to humans and livestock.

Since 2007, Vulpro has been at the forefront of Cape Vulture conservation through multifaceted approaches including a captive breeding programme for population supplementation, monitoring of 10+ breeding colonies across southern Africa, research on movement patterns and threat mitigation, educational outreach to over 15,000 community members annually, power line surveys and advocacy for bird-friendly infrastructure and rehabilitation of injured and poisoned vultures.

The organisation maintains Africa's largest vulture rehabilitation and breeding facility, which has become increasingly vital as wild populations continue to face mounting threats.