

## Nepal builds 'restaurants' for vultures

Developed countries have 'hotels' and haute couture for pampered pets. In Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world, bird lovers have begun a unique initiative to save the endangered vulture by building 'restaurants', Nepal's official media reported.

Once a common enough sight at garbage sites, the vulture began disappearing from South Asia due to the rising use of a veterinary drug administered to sick cattle.

The drug Diclofenac, used to treat diseases in cattle and cows, remains in the carcass. When vultures eat the meat, the drug causes kidney failure.

The killer drug is said to be responsible for 90 percent of the extermination of three vulture species in Nepal, India and Pakistan.

Though several governments, including Nepal, banned the drug after lobbying by wildlife activists, Diclofenac is still widely used in the Himalayan kingdom as it is cheaper than the new option available.

Concerned at the near-extermination of the once common bird, Nepal's oldest civil organisation fighting for the rights of birds, Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN), has started a unique initiative to build chemical-free feeding centres for the vulture, the Rising Nepal daily said.

The first vulture 'restaurant' runs at Kawasoti village in Nawalparasi district in western Nepal. BCN bought a plot of land to build a farm for old cattle nearing death.

The farm buys old and ill cattle from farmers, treats them with the new alternative to Diclofenac, a drug called Meloxicam, and when the animals meet their end, leave the carcasses in the open for vultures to feed on.

After establishing the Kawasoti feeding centre, BCN conducted a massive awareness campaign in the district. As farmers started sending old cows to the farm, it focused on building a new feeding centre.

The new 'restaurant' came up at Panchanagar village. With awareness about the harmful effects of Diclofenac spreading, the locals have come forward to run the new project.

Though BCN provided the seed money of Nepali Rs.50,000 to start the new farm, it is now being run by the villagers themselves.

BCN is eyeing three more districts that have large nesting colonies of vultures: Kanchanpur, Kapilavastu and Bardiya.

BCN is also lobbying the government to effectively implement the ban on Diclofenac.

After the drug was banned last June, it raised Rs.200,000 to buy the new drug, Meloxicam, and gave the new stock to drug stores in place of the killer drug.

BCN is also concerned that Nepal is being used as a dumping ground for Diclofenac manufactured in India.

After the Indian government banned the use of the drug in the subcontinent, unscrupulous dealers instead of destroying the stock have been smuggling it across the open border to Nepal.

BCN has more ambitious plans for the vulture.

The Terai plains lying along the Indo-Nepal border have pockets where large vulture colonies nestle. As the feeding farms spread, the NGO plans to build watchtowers near the centres, from where both bird lovers and tourists can watch the birds feed.

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