

The clean-up crew we need

Vultures not only keep our environment free of carcasses but also help control disease outbreak

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The valour of Jatayu (a demi-god in the form of a vulture) in confronting Ravana is well-described in the Ramayana. The epic also mentions Sampati, Jatayu's brother, who played an instrumental role in guiding Lord Rama towards Lanka. While we read and marvel at these helpful creatures in our epics, we haven't granted them the same importance in reality, however. **Vultures are very important scavengers in our ecosystem, yet India lost more than 95% of its vulture population through the 1990s and by the mid-2000s. Today, the country requires urgent conservation efforts to save vultures from becoming extinct.**

Myths and facts

Vultures are often misunderstood as a source of diseases. Although they feast on carrion almost exclusively, they are sometimes capable of preying on extremely sick, wounded, or infirm creatures if there is no food around. As a result, they are demonised. Some consider vultures ugly, unlovable and even a bad omen. Given the lack of understanding and knowledge about them, let's first understand what vultures do and why they are important.

Vultures belong to the Accipitridae family whose members include eagles, hawks and kites. They are relatively social birds with an average lifespan of 10-30 years in the wild. Being bulky, they nest on tall trees or rocky cliffs. Vultures are slow breeders and so the survival of every individual is very crucial. With their excellent eyesight and strong sense of smell, vultures can detect the presence of dead animals from great distances. Vultures don't have a voice box and so they cannot sing. They communicate via grunts and hisses. Generally, vultures rely on other carnivores to open carcasses. Their powerful bills and long slender necks are designed to help them tear off the meat chunks from inside the carcass. Unlike other raptors, vultures have weak legs and claws (talons). They do not carry food; instead, they regurgitate food and feed their young ones. Vultures have a highly acidic stomach that helps them digest rotting carcass

and kill disease-causing bacteria.

India has nine species of vultures. Many are critically endangered. The main reason for the decline in the vulture population is the use of the drug, diclofenac. Diclofenac, which relieves cattle of pain, is toxic to vultures even in small doses and causes kidney failure and death. Myths about the medicinal healing powers of vultures' body parts has led to the hunting of vultures. Quarrying and blasting of stones where vultures nest have also caused their decline. Interestingly, studies show that while the vulture population has declined, the feral dog population has increased. The health hazards associated with feral dogs are well known.

Removing vultures from the ecosystem leads to inefficient clearing of carcasses and contaminates water systems. If dead animals are left to rot for long durations, it may give rise to disease-causing pathogens. The animals that consume such flesh become further carriers of disease. Very few animals/birds can ingest rotting carcasses. Thanks to their acidic stomach, vultures can. Thus, they play a crucial role in maintaining the health of the ecosystem.

Steps to increase numbers

To tackle this problem, **India banned diclofenac for veterinary use in 2006. Five States are to get vulture breeding centres under the Action Plan for Vulture Conservation for 2020-2025, approved in October 2020.** There are no rescue centres for treating vultures as of now, so this too has been mooted under the Plan. Vulture 'restaurants', which exist in some countries, are also a way of preserving the population. In these 'restaurants', diclofenac-free carcasses of cattle are dumped in designated areas where vultures gather to feed. These measures have slowly started making a positive impact, but there is still a long way to go. Awareness and action must go hand in hand. With International Vulture Awareness Day coming up on September 4, it is important for us to spread awareness about the importance of vultures in our ecosystem.

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