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New study explores establishing a new Bearded Vulture population in South Africa

The Bearded Vulture is one of the most threatened vultures in southern Africa with only around 100 breeding pairs left in the wild. While the species could once be found in both the Eastern Cape and Western Cape, its range is now restricted to the Maluti-Drakensberg mountains of Lesotho and South Africa.

Conservationists are proposing that a new population be established elsewhere in South Africa to help safeguard the species' future as scientists predict that without intervention the population could completely disappear within the next 50 years.

The species is threatened by poisoning (for example the use of poison to control predator numbers and avoid livestock losses), electrocutions and collisions with powerlines and more recently, threats from wind energy developments.

A new study led by scientists at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and published in the journal *Ostrich* explores where best to establish this new population. It identifies five potential locations within the species historic South African range, in both the Eastern Cape and Western Cape, and explores the potential benefits and threats present at each site. The study also found that any reintroduction would be far more likely to succeed if a captive breeding population is established first.

Based on these findings and motivated by successful reintroductions of the species in Europe, the Bearded Vulture Recovery Programme has now initiated a captive breeding programme, 'Bred 4 The Wild', under the management of Shannon Hoffman. This breeding programme aims to supply young captive bred vultures for the proposed reintroduction.

"We have already successfully reared seven chicks from eggs that were taken from wild nests," says Dr Sonja Krüger, author of the study and ecologist with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife who coordinates the Bearded Vulture Recovery Programme. She explains that these egg removals will have no effect on the wild population because bearded vultures lay two eggs, only one of which ever survives to fledge.

However, before any reintroduction programme can begin more research is still required. “Our study helps give a general idea of potential areas to consider for the reintroduction,” says lead author Christiaan W. Brink, a PhD candidate at UCT. “However, it is now vitally important to ground truth their suitability and engage with stakeholders to ensure it is safe for the species to return.”

Krüger explains that “poisoning is the single most important cause of bearded vulture declines in southern Africa. Landowner cooperation within a release area will therefore be vital to the success of any reintroduction project”.

Associate Professor Arjun Amar of UCT, who supervised the research, says: “Our study suggests that establishing a new population away from the species’ current range can act as an insurance policy against the extinction of this population.”

“Successful reintroductions in Europe have shown that such a strategy can work for this species – and is therefore something that we need to start exploring here in Southern Africa; our study is the first attempt to explore its feasibility.”

Note to editors:

The study is published as:

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Requests for copies of the paper and interviews can be sent to:

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Interviews can also be arranged with Shannon Hoffman who managers the captive breeding population (please contact Sonja.Krueger@kznwildlife.com)

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‘BV nest in wild’: An adult Bearded Vulture on its nest on the Drakensberg escarpment

Photo: Sonja Krüger

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