

1. India's First Vulture Conservation Portal – Environment

India's first vulture conservation portal launched in Assam. An Assam-based foundation dedicated to vulture conservation has launched a pioneering digital portal, marking a significant step in monitoring and protecting India's critically endangered vulture populations. This initiative is reported to be the first of its kind in the country, aiming to centralize data and streamline conservation efforts.

Objectives and Purpose of the Portal

The primary goal of the portal is to create a robust, technology-driven framework for the comprehensive monitoring and conservation of vultures across India.

Population Monitoring – The portal serves as a centralized database to track the status, population trends, and geographical distribution of the nine vulture species found in India. This allows conservationists to identify critical habitats and monitor population changes over time.

Centralized Data Collection – It facilitates the systematic collection of crucial field data, including –

1. Sightings and flock sizes.
2. Breeding data, such as locations of nesting sites and nesting success rates.
3. Mortality causes, helping to identify hotspots for poisoning or other threats.
4. Habitat information, including the availability of food and roosting trees.

Supporting Research and Conservation – By providing accessible and organized data, the portal acts as a vital resource for scientific research on vulture ecology and behavior. This evidence-based information is crucial for formulating effective policy-making and on-ground conservation planning.

Enhancing Community Awareness – A key function is to educate the public about the ecological importance of vultures and the threats they face. The portal aims to reduce threats like diclofenac poisoning and habitat destruction by engaging local communities, veterinarians, and farmers.

Vultures in India – An Ecological Overview

Vultures are birds of prey that play an indispensable role in maintaining ecological balance.

Ecological Significance – As natural scavengers, vultures are nature's most efficient cleaning crew. They consume carcasses of dead animals, which prevents the spread of zoonotic diseases (like rabies and anthrax) to wildlife, livestock, and humans. Their rapid consumption of carrion helps keep the environment clean.



Species in India – India is home to nine species of vultures –

1. Oriental White-backed Vulture
2. Long-billed Vulture
3. Slender-billed Vulture
4. Himalayan Vulture
5. Red-headed Vulture
6. Egyptian Vulture
7. Bearded Vulture
8. Cinereous Vulture
9. Eurasian Griffon Vulture

Conservation Status and Legal

Protection – The majority of these species are threatened with extinction. Under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Bearded, Long-billed, Slender-billed, and Oriental White-backed vultures are listed under Schedule I, granting them the highest level of legal protection. The remaining species are protected under

Schedule IV.

Causes for the Decline of Vulture Populations

The catastrophic decline of vultures in India since the 1990s has been attributed to several interconnected factors.

Diclofenac Poisoning - The primary cause was the veterinary use of Diclofenac, a Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drug (NSAID), to treat livestock. Vultures feeding on the carcasses of animals treated with this drug suffer from acute kidney failure and visceral gout, leading to death within days.

Secondary Poisoning - Vultures are often victims of consuming carcasses laced with pesticides or other toxic chemicals. This can occur when farmers poison carcasses to kill predators like feral dogs or leopards, and vultures inadvertently become the secondary victims.

Habitat Loss and Degradation - Increasing urbanization, deforestation, and the expansion of agriculture have led to the destruction of vultures' natural habitats. This results in the loss of large, mature trees required for nesting and roosting.

Collisions with Man-made Infrastructure - Due to their large wingspans and soaring flight patterns, vultures are highly susceptible to fatal collisions with power lines, wind turbines, and other tall structures.

Poaching and Hunting - In some areas, vultures are hunted for their body parts for use in traditional medicine or due to superstitious beliefs, contributing to their decline.

Lead Poisoning - Vultures can suffer from lead poisoning after feeding on the carcasses of animals that have been shot with lead ammunition. The ingested lead fragments are highly toxic and can be fatal.

Disease Outbreaks - Natural disease outbreaks, such as avian pox and avian flu, have also been responsible for vulture mortality in certain regions, further stressing the already diminished populations.

Vulture Species in India and their IUCN Status

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List provides the global conservation status of different species. The status of India's nine vulture species is as follows -

IUCN Category	Vulture Species	Scientific Name
Critically Endangered	Oriental White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>
	Long-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>
	Slender-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps tenuirostris</i>
	Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>
Endangered	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Near Threatened	Himalayan Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>
	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
Least Concern	Eurasian Griffon	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>

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