

Saving the White-rumped Vultures at Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary



Prashant Shinde (SCEE)

Oriental Bird Club - Conservation Grant
Project: Saving the White-rumped Vultures at Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary
Project Report
Project Duration: December 2011 to May 2012
Implementing Organization: Srushtidnyan

Acknowledgement-

We are very grateful to Oriental Bird Club for considering the Project “Saving the White-rumped Vultures at Phansad wildlife Sanctuary” with the support of grant of **£1,375.00**. We express our special gratitude to Ms. Margaret Sykes, OBC Admin; Dr. Francis Buner, Senior Conservation Scientist, OBC Conservation Manager for Pakistan, India and Bangladesh; Mr. Dave Buckingham, OBC Conservation Committee for their timely advice and support during the project period. We are also thankful to RSBP and Mr. Ian Barber and Mr. Chris Bowden for donating the binoculars being used during this project. We express special thanks to Dr. Raju Kasambe, the Project Manager of Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme & Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) for the support in organizing Vulture festival at Phansad wildlife sanctuary. We are also thankful to Mr. A. K. Nigam, the Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests; Mr. Arvind Kamble, the Conservator of Forest for Phansad wildlife Sanctuary for granting the formal permission required to work in Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. Last but not least, we appreciate the involvement of local villagers, women, children, youth, local forest department staff, veterinary medical practitioners, journalists, school administration heads & teachers from Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary and region around for their active participation in various activities and programmes organized during the project period.

Introduction-

The project “Saving the White-rumped Vultures at Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary” was intended to focus on saving the scarce population of vultures found in the forest of Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. The Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary covering 53 square kilometers area of forests is located at Raigarh District of Maharashtra state in India. The forest is situated on the lower hills of the Malabar Coast, west of the Sahyadri hill ranges. The Western area of the forest is sloped down and reached to the Arabian Sea near the villages named Borli and Mandla. Dominant forest subtypes are, moist teak forest, Southern moist mixed deciduous forests, west coast semi-evergreen forests comprising 179 species of trees, 66 shrubs, 141 herbs, 78 climbers, 2 bamboos, 13 grasses, 9 ferns and 2 Orchids. The fauna includes 16 species of mammals, 62 birds, 17 reptiles, 8 amphibians, 47 insects and 27 marine invertebrates. It is one of the few low land forests remaining in the country with a home for Indian Giant Squirrel.

The White-rumped Vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) is stated as ‘**Critically Endangered**’ species (IUCN 2010. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2010.4. www.iucnredlist.org > Downloaded on 25 February 2011. The status remained unchanged till the date. The bird is native breeding resident in India. Year before last, a scarce population (reportedly around 30-40) of White-rumped Vultures was found in and around Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. The Thane Wildlife Division of the State Forest Department of Maharashtra initiated the work for saving them. Srushtidnyan expressed its’ intention to join in this

work. The formal correspondence was done from both the organizations to work in collaboration. There were three important tasks considered to be accomplished simultaneously-

1. To start the Vulture Restaurant in Phansad wildlife Sanctuary.
2. To survey the use of Diclofenac drug for veterinary purposes.
3. To raise awareness among the people from all walks of life about saving the vultures.

The Thane Wildlife Division of the State Forest Department began with the Vulture Restaurant last year at the point named Chikhalgan in Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. Regular carcasses were kept at this point for the vultures to land and feed on them. But the later two tasks were pending. Thus Srushtidnyan entered in the work this year with the assistance from OBC.

Intervention-

A team of nature lover and professional individuals comprising of following-

1. Mr. Prashant Shinde
2. Mr. Madhav Athavale
3. Mr. Sudeep Athavale
4. Ms. Sangeeta Kharat
5. Ms. Jyoti Khopkar
6. Mr. Umakant Jagdale

These individuals contributed their time, energy and mind to build this project up to the mark. Their skills of making rapport with the stakeholders, communication, fact finding and documenting, organizing meetings were proved complementary to carry on the project work towards success.

Documentation of Vulture Population at Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary: The team has kept regular records by observing the vultures in the forests of Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. We have done the observation of nesting, incubating and fledgling/ hatchling of White-rumped Vultures in the densely forested valley of the Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. We have also tried and done the video recording of the vultures at the Vulture Restaurant area. It was extremely hard days of walking in the forests during hot sun to wait for the vultures to come for soaring and landing at the carcasses offered at the Vulture restaurant. The updated number of 17 White-rumped Vultures are resident to this forest is recorded by us. One egg was destroyed by the crows from the nest. One fledgling is clearly identified in the nest visible to the project team. Few other nests were highly impossible to observe due to physically in-accessible. But the juveniles may later be observed as they join the adults.

Interaction with local villagers: The team covered Western part of the Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary in the first half of the project. The villagers from the villages namely Mandla, Borli, Kashid, Surve, Barshiv, Danda, Usroli, Mazgaon and Nandgaon, were interacted. They were randomly interviewed about what kind of treatment is being done to their cattle. At the same time they were provided with the information about ill-effects of Diclofenac in the nature's food-chain and endangering the White-rumped Vultures in the region. A twofold printed brochure was distributed to the villagers. This pamphlet contained information in the local language i.e. Marathi about how Diclofenac has put the vultures on the verge of extinction and the role of the villagers to bring this species back in nature.

In the second half, the team repeated similar line of interaction with the villagers from the villages located at the Eastern part of the sanctuary namely, Supegaon, Talekhar, Chordhe, Tadgaon, Satirde, Valke.

Children's Camp at Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary: A group of 40 students from local school named J. H. Ambani High School participated in Children's Camp. They were taken in to the forests for Vulture

Watch. They were also exposed to various problems related to forest conservation; the students decided to keep watch on veterinary treatments in their villages and ensuring that the Diclofenac is not used in the treatment.

Youth Camp at Phansad Wildlife sanctuary: A group of 15 youth from Harishchandragarh Wildlife Sanctuary located on the Northern most regions of the Western Ghats visited the Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. They wanted to understand the work being done for saving the White-rumped Vultures by us. They were introduced to the concept of Vulture Restaurant and a dialogue initiated in the villages to spread awareness about Not to Diclofenac in Veterinary Treatment. Some of them now want to explore the similar work at their own forests in association with us. We have asked them to identify the vulture population in their Sanctuary.

25th Maharashtra State Level Birders Conference: This was the Silver Jubilee year of the Annual Maharashtra State Level Birders Conference 2012. The issues of protection of endangered species like vultures, Saras Crane, Hornbill, and Forest Owlet were discussed with great amount of seriousness in this conference. There were around 1000 individuals participated throughout the conference. We did a presentation of the work being done on species conservation and education. It was well appreciated by all the organizations working for the protection of birds throughout Maharashtra State. We expressed a need of State level census of the vulture population at some point or the other in future.

Appointment on Critical Wildlife Habitat Committee: The Wildlife Wing of the State Forest Department has appointed Mr. Prashant Shinde (the project leader) as one of the members of the Critical Wildlife Habitat Committee for Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary; Sanjay Gandhi National Park; Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary and Karnala wildlife Sanctuary. This committee has a task of identifying the critical wildlife habitats in the sanctuaries and national parks for further protection of wildlife from the encroachments and other threats.

Meeting with the villagers: As a part of our interaction with the local villagers, we invited them to the Phansad Wildlife sanctuary for a joint meeting with the staff of the forest department. There were around 80 individuals present in this meeting from various villages. We spent half a day with the villagers from adjoining villages of the sanctuary to explain their role in saving the White-rumped Vultures by ensuring that they will never use Diclofenac in the veterinary treatment. At the same time they can also spread the words to the other villagers they interact at various occasions. The villagers were also briefed about organizing VULTURE FESTIVAL on April 12, 2012 with their support and participation.

Interaction with Veterinary Medical Practitioners: They were the crucial stakeholders of this project. We interacted with the following veterinary medical practitioners during the project period for ensuring no prescription of Diclofenac being issued in the medical treatment of the cattle in the villages around Phansad Wildlife sanctuary-

1. The Livestock Development Officer; Location: Murud Regional Headquarter.
2. The Livestock Development Officer; Location: Valke village.
3. The Assistant Livestock Development Officer; Location: Mandla village.
4. The Assistant Livestock Development Officer: Location: Aagardanda village.
5. The Livestock Development Supervisor; Location: Nandgaon village.

These medical practitioners are now using Meloxicam as a safe alternate drug in the veterinary treatment. They are prescribing Paracetamol and Ibuprofen for other veterinary treatments. The interaction with these veterinary medical practitioners will be continued till the whole Murud Block (Taluka) becomes Diclofenac Free Zone or Vulture Safe Zone.

Vulture Festival (April 12, 2012): This was the first of its own programme taken place in Maharashtra State. This was a concluding programme of the project where all the stakeholders came together. There

were villagers, forest department officers, representatives from IBCN-BNHS and other nature conservation groups, women, children from local schools, nature lover citizens from Mumbai city, newspaper journalists and electronic media personnel. Around 500 individuals were the part of this daylong event. The Vulture festival was organized to declare the results and success of the consolidated efforts taken by Srushtidnyan and Thane Wildlife Division of the State Forest Department towards vulture protection. It was declared that the vulture population has increased due to the execution of village level campaign against Diclofenac drug used in veterinary treatment and running Vulture Restaurant successfully. The media has given a great coverage of this event which would spread the message of Vulture Conservation to the larger population in the State. The Chief Secretary of the State Forest Department has also taken a note of this event and the work done under this project.

Conclusion-

It has been a great experience and a feeling of satisfaction hold by the team while working on the project “Saving the White-rumped Vultures at Phansad wildlife Sanctuary.” We received optimum response from the people towards spreading the message that the vultures are important and need to be brought back in nature. We have experienced that everyone is concerned about the vultures. The villagers showed the readiness to keep the Diclofenac off from the veterinary treatment. The veterinary medical practitioners have decided to prescribe Meloxicam as an alternative drug to Diclofenac. The Forest Department has introduced the concept of Vulture Restaurant and trying to run at its maximum capacity though it has limitations of required funds. We found the villagers, women, children, local forest department staff, journalists and the citizens of Mumbai city have taken special interests in all the programmes we organized and showed full participation. In fact, there would be a day to come when all of these stakeholders would be in a position to declare the region around Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary is “Diclofenac Free Zone or Vulture Safe Zone.” And this would be first of its’ own example in Maharashtra State. We would follow it up to this direction.

There is a good amount of literature and documentation generated during this project, especially, when it is created in the local languages like Marathi. This can be a permanent asset in replicating the same work in other region. The brochure, poster exhibition, video recordings have a great amount educational value. We are very happy with the response from Newspaper media. They really took this work on priority and given a good coverage through publishing news and feature articles. We were very happy to see that the Parsi Times (Newspaper run by the Parsi community who believes the Vultures as sacred bird in their religion) also covered the event of Vulture Festival very well.

Issues ahead-

We began to work for the protection of vulture population in Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. But the sanctuary area that we covered is 53 sq.kms. and the radius used by the vultures for soaring is around 100 kilometers. We had also found another flock of vultures probably resident in other blocks namely Tala and Mhasla in Raigarh District. These blocks are sharing the boundaries with Murud. That means we need to expand our geographical reach out up to the same radius used by the vultures and create more and more awareness and education through campaign theme like “Save Vulture – save Nature.” There are many such villages that need to be ensured of not using Diclofenac for veterinary medical treatment. The final aim would be to make the whole Murud Block (Taluka) free from Diclofenac or to declare it as **Vulture Safe Zone**. Srushtidnyan is intended to take this up for further intervention in the next year.

There is also an idea of developing “**Vulture Conservation Manual**” in the local language i.e. Marathi. This would aim to help the other organizations to initiate the work in any region of Maharashtra State. The manual would contain information in the form of text for printing brochure, poster exhibition and pictorial guide about species of vultures found in Maharashtra State. It would give the checklist of methods and activities to be introduced towards making the area as Vulture Safe Zone. The user would directly pick up the interactive methods from this manual like quiz, jigsaw puzzle, crosswords, mask stencil, vulture trail, etc. to make the group aware about vulture conservation. The manual would also contain the list of all the stakeholders to be contacted and involved in the work.

There is an urgent need of conducting the census of entire vulture population in the state of Maharashtra. Probably we could begin with the district level census, first to be conducted in Raigarh District of Maharashtra State. This would help in measuring the success of all the efforts being taken in the state to protect vultures. This work can be done through establishing **Vulture Protection Network** in the state.

To consolidate, we would like to take up the major issues to work further as follow-

1. Declaring the Murud Block as Diclofenac Free Zone or Vulture Safe Zone.
2. To develop Vulture Conservation Manual in local language i.e. Marathi.
3. To conduct the census of vulture population (district and/ or state level).
4. To establish the Vulture protection Network.
5. To continue education and awareness programmes on the theme “Save Vulture – Save Nature.”

Final statement-

We are very happy to see that the vultures are surviving in Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary. There is a success in nesting and hatchling too. The population slowly but surely will be increased. We feel proud that we are a part of the efforts taken to protect them. We are there to bring them back all over the sky forever.

**The Vulture! The king of the sky!
Sure to say that it will fly high!**