

Vultures and Public Health: How Conservation Prevents Future Pandemics

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Vulture Conservation Latest News

- Vultures, often overlooked in discussions on pandemic preparedness, play a vital role in South Asia's public health by acting as nature's most efficient waste managers, preventing disease spread.

Vultures and Their Role in Pandemic Prevention

- As India's National Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (2016–25) ends, the next phase highlights vultures as vital for pandemic preparedness.
- By swiftly consuming carcasses, they reduce risks of zoonotic spillover and act as the first line of defence in disease surveillance and carcass management.
- However, their role in public health has rarely been formalised.
- Communities living alongside vultures remain underutilised partners.

- Conservation financing has not yet recognised vultures as cost-effective pandemic prevention tools, despite the relatively low investments required compared to the enormous costs of outbreak responses.

India's Vanishing Vultures and Public Health Risks

- For centuries, vultures acted as nature's cleanup crew, preventing the spread of deadly pathogens such as anthrax, botulinum, and rabies.
- In the 1980s, carcass dumps swarmed with hundreds of vultures.
- India once had over 40 million vultures, but since the 1990s, numbers have plummeted by more than 95%, mainly due to the **veterinary drug diclofenac**.
- This decline is not just ecological — it poses a growing public health challenge by tying biodiversity loss to future pandemic risks.

Central Asian Flyway and Regional Linkages

- India's vultures are part of the **Central Asian Flyway (CAF)**, a vast migratory corridor connecting breeding grounds in Central Asia with wintering areas across South Asia.
- Spanning more than 30 countries, the CAF is used by millions of migratory birds, including raptors like vultures.
- As these birds move, they link ecosystems and disease risks across borders.
- Poorly managed landfills, carcass dumps, or stopover sites can quickly become hotspots for pathogen spillover.
- Thus, the CAF represents not just a biodiversity corridor but also a **public health corridor**, making regional cooperation crucial.

Conservation Challenges

- Despite this importance, conservation efforts remain fragmented and underfunded.
- Vulture protection is rarely integrated into **One Health strategies**, which link human, animal, and environmental health.
- Infrastructure threats like electrocution from power lines and continued poisoning from toxic veterinary drugs remain largely unaddressed.
- Without stronger investment and policy alignment, regional ambitions to safeguard vultures — and in turn, human health — face major roadblocks.

Protecting India's Vultures Through a Post-2025 Strategy

- India's post-2025 vulture strategy could focus on **five key pillars**:
 - nationwide satellite telemetry to track habitats and hotspots;
 - a Decision Support System integrating wildlife, livestock, and health data;
 - stronger cross-sector coordination under the One Health framework;
 - transboundary collaboration through the Central Asian Flyway with global health commitments; and

- community stewardship that empowers women, youth, and local groups in surveillance and awareness.
- Together, these measures would conserve vultures as keystone species, strengthen public health systems, reduce pandemic risks, and align with WHO's regional roadmap for health security.
- This approach shifts conservation from recovery to resilience, making India a leader in biodiversity-linked health security.

India's Opportunities in Linking Vulture Conservation with Health Security

- India has a unique chance to show **how biodiversity conservation can also serve as pandemic prevention**.
- By integrating surveillance across human, animal, and environmental health, and cutting detection-to-response time, systemic resilience can be built at modest cost compared to outbreak losses.
- With its significant share of Central Asian Flyway vulture species like **Himalayan griffon, cinereous, and Eurasian griffon**, India can scale telemetry, use Decision Support Systems, and embed vulture protection in One Health strategies.
- This model could inspire regional and global adoption, reminding us that safeguarding vultures not only protects ecosystems but also strengthens public health security.

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