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South African vultures have their fill at ‘restaurants’ – new study

There’s no menu and the food is sometimes rotten. Yet South Africa’s vulture restaurants are dishing up valuable information for researchers working to conserve Africa’s scavenger species, according to a new scientific study published in the *International journal Animal Conservation*.

Researchers at the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town (UCT) collected information from 143 vulture feeding sites across South Africa, and found that these ‘restaurants’ currently provide around 3301 tons of meat each year – enough to feed almost the entire regional vulture population. The study is the largest ever review of vulture restaurants in Africa, a popular conservation tool first started in the 1970s to help protect vultures in Europe, Africa and Asia.

By providing free vulture meals conservationists hope that these feeding sites may limit the birds’ exposure to poison-laced carcasses which have decimated vulture populations across Southern Africa.

These poisoned carcasses which are put out by farmers or poachers have caused vulture populations to plummet to an all-time low.

Despite the restaurants’ popularity, up until now there has been little research into how they function and their impact on vulture populations. Consequently the UCT team set out to provide a baseline for further research by collecting data from hundreds of sites, of these 143 were found to be currently ‘active’.

These restaurants were located across much of the South Africa (mostly KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape) where they were most often stocked with dead cows, pigs or game. “A lack of knowledge on the number, distribution and management of SFS (supplementary feeding sites) is a key factor hindering such research,” the UCT study authors noted in their paper.

Lead author Christiaan Brink, a PhD student at UCT, hopes the new study will help inform future vulture conservation decisions. “Currently the beneficial effects of supplementary feeding sites for vultures are still debated and there may be trade-offs which should be considered,” Brink said. “Most research to date has been conducted in Europe where feeding sites are more formally documented. Our aim was to determine the extent and contribution

of South African supplementary feeding sites so that future research can establish if they have a positive effect. Such research will be essential to ensure that limited conservation resources are not wasted on ineffective or even counter-productive efforts”.

Results suggest the number of feeding sites has stabilised over the past decade, with each site providing an average of around 65kg of meat per day. Sites attract a broad range of vultures but species with large home ranges (e.g. African white-backed and Cape vultures) have the greatest access to these sites.

However, the authors acknowledge that the impacts from these sites might not be all positive. The study notes that a significant number of site managers were unaware of the dangers of inadvertently poisoning vultures via contaminated meat. Conservationists are currently very concerned about vultures ingesting toxic lead fragments from spent ammunition in hunted carcasses and about consuming some veterinary drugs.

However, Brink said: “We found that 68% of managers were unaware of the dangers of lead and 28% were unaware about the dangers of veterinary drugs, suggesting that many feeding sites may be providing carcasses containing these substances.”

“This could undermine the potential positive effects of supplementary feeding sites for vultures,” he said.

Overall the study findings emphasise the importance of feeding sites and the need to conduct ongoing research. “With this study we demonstrate the potential importance, but also some potential risks associated with supplementary feeding sites for vultures in South Africa, and provide the information-base to assess the impacts of this popular but as yet largely un-assessed conservation tool,” the authors said.

Almost 70% of old-world vulture species are threatened with extinction (IUCN, 2019), the most rapid population declines occurring in the vulture-rich regions of Asia and Africa.

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[Read the full study.](#)

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