

The story of Sa'a and other examples of the implementation of complementary conservation actions to fight against the illegal killing of vultures in Niger.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/vulnew.v82i1.5>

Introduction

In Niger and throughout Africa, vulture populations have declined drastically over recent decades (Ogada *et al.* 2017). Among the six vulture species breeding in Niger, four are critically endangered (Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli*, White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis*, Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus*, White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*) and two are classified as endangered (Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*). All vulture species are still at risk from chronic and widespread persecution in Niger, mainly for belief-based uses. Despite being protected by law, direct and indirect evidence of illegal killing of vultures were collected from different sources in the region (Dila 2019). Few monitoring and targeted conservation activities have been carried out in Niger and the current lack of knowledge related to these avian scavengers in the country is hindering the implementation of effective conservation actions (Botha *et al.* 2017).

The organisation SaharaConservation started working on vultures in Niger in 2008 and it was selected in 2018 to participate in the EU-funded Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project (<https://www.lifeneophron.eu/>) as the local partner for Niger. In the scope of this project, SaharaConservation intensified its work on Egyptian Vultures and focused on assessing and

addressing the main threats to vultures in the region. Illegal killing and trafficking of vultures for belief-based use was identified as the main threat, and education and awareness-raising work was initiated and is being pursued among key stakeholders.

The story of Sa'a

In September 2021, SaharaConservation recovered an Egyptian Vulture seized from poachers in the Koutous massif, in the region of Zinder, southern Niger. Named *Sa'a*, which means luck in Hausa, the vulture had been kept for six months at the Departmental Direction of the Environment of Gouré before being transferred to SaharaConservation's facilities in Kellé. Weighing less than 1.5 kg and with many damaged feathers, the vulture was in poor condition when transferred and needed several months of treatment and rehabilitation in Kellé to recover.

With technical guidance from the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) and Green Balkan's Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Center, SaharaConservation built an aviary and good care has been provided to the vulture (Figure 1-3).

Given the large number of damaged feathers on the wings and tail, the process of manually removing these feathers was relatively long. It was done in stages, with only a few feathers being

removed at a time, with resting periods between each phase. Finally, after two months of care, the last damaged feathers were removed in late December 2021, and in March 2022, Sa'a was deemed ready to be released, as its feathers had grown back well, based on photographs and according to experts.

Unfortunately, as soon as it left the aviary, the team realized that the vulture was not able to fly. Indeed, Sa'a did not manage to stay more than a few seconds in the air, always landing on the ground after only a few meters of flight. One of the most likely causes is that its right wing had been seriously damaged during its initial capture. In this condition, the vulture cannot return to the wild and will have to stay in captivity. As part of the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project and partnership, a DNA analysis performed on feathers is underway to determine if Sa'a originates from a migratory population or a local resident population. If it is from a migratory population, it could then

eventually be admitted into a captive breeding program in Europe. If not, the vulture could be kept in Kellé's facilities to help with the environmental education activities.

Sa'a's story illustrates the consequences of poaching, even for rescued individuals, and the importance to fight these threats to conserve this species as well as other vultures. Despite this disappointing outcome, having Sa'a at SaharaConservation's facility has been helping to raise awareness as its presence draws attention and the background story makes a strong impression with visitors. For example, several environment officers have had the opportunity to observe an adult Egyptian Vulture for the first time and members of the local community have been trained in caring for injured vultures. To our knowledge, such a rescue has never happened in the region before, and SaharaConservation thanks the BSPB, Green Balkans and the Saint Louis Zoo for their support.



Figure 1: Photograph of the Egyptian Vulture (named “Sa’a”) in its newly built aviary in Kellé, Niger.
Photograph: Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou/SaharaConservation.



Figure 2: SaharaConservation team members checking Egyptian Vulture Sa'a's feathers.
Photograph: Abba Mamane / Sahara Conservation.



Figure 3: One of SaharaConservation's team in Kellé cleaning, feeding and watering Egyptian Vulture, Sa'a.
Photograph: Sahara Conservation.

Ongoing initiatives

Concurrently with the rescue of Sa'a, SaharaConservation have pursued our work in the framework of the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project to raise awareness on the importance of vultures, their conservation status, their threats and the need to protect them. In 2022, over 1,600 local community members attended awareness raising and education events (Figure 4), most of them living close to Egyptian Vulture and Rüppell's Vulture populations in the Koutous massif.

Because of the complexity of the threats to be addressed and their connection to local cultural beliefs, the success of this project relies on the implementation of complementary activities involving a range of actors. To break the supply chain and reduce the demand for vulture body parts, meetings with stakeholders such as hunters, traditional healers and local leaders involved in such practices were organized (Figure 5). In 2022, over 600 people were involved in these activities,

in both the regions of Maradi and Zinder.

In addition, capacity-building missions for relevant authorities regarding the trafficking and illegal use of vultures in Niger initiated at the end of 2021 took place in the region of Zinder led by partners from the Regional Direction of the Environment (Figure 6). Key checkpoints along the road axes linking vulture distribution areas to the border with Nigeria were targeted. Small group sessions were held with officers at these checkpoints, with the aim that they can directly act and to reduce the illegal trafficking. In total, 56 officers were trained during these missions.

Concurrently, environmental officers posted close to vulture breeding populations were also trained in vulture identification and on the threats that they are facing, to improve their capacity in fighting illegal hunting. Similarly, the management unit of the Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve, where Rüppell's and White-headed Vultures are nesting, are supported during monthly monitoring surveys of the nests within the reserve (Figure 7).



Figure 4: Awareness raising among local communities, in the Koutous Massif in May 2022.

Photograph: Abba Mamane / SaharaConservation.



Figure 5: Sensitization of hunters and traditional practitioners in the region of Zinder, November 2021.
Photograph: Abba Mamane /SaharaConservation.



Figure 6: Capacity building of environmental officers in the region of Zinder in November 2021.
Photograph: Nouhou Moutari.



Figure 7: Staff at the Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve studying the vulture guide at their base camp in February 2021.
Photograph: Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou /SaharaConservation.



Figure 8: Distribution of educational material in a primary school in Koutous massif (Ganatcha) in May 2022.
Photograph: Abba Mamane /SaharaConservation.

Finally, since 2019, as part of the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project, SaharaConservation has been involved with schools in the commune of Kellé. These schools, located in a rural area, face a significant lack of resources. By improving the conditions at schools, SaharaConservation aims to provide sustainable support while developing environmental awareness and an interest in wildlife and its preservation among the young people, as an effective vehicle to disseminate the conservation message among their communities. In 2022, SaharaConservation supported six additional primary schools and provided 175 school

textbooks, and over a thousand notebooks and other school material, benefiting hundreds of children (Figure 8).

Thus, in collaboration with local and international partners, SaharaConservation continues its work to combat the main threats to vultures in Niger. The implementation of complementary and effective conservation actions on the ground are expected to have an impact both in the short and long term, making us believe that vultures and other threatened species can be saved from extinction in this part of the world.

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