

## Engagement with Communities and Communication Campaigns

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### A comprehensive environmental education programme to save an endangered vulture in Greece

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During the period 2018-2022, the Hellenic Ornithological Society of Greece/BirdLife Greece (HOS) along WWF Greece designed and implemented an environmental education programme focusing on the conservation of the Egyptian Vulture (EV). Although usually NGOs' Environmental Education (EE) activities occur in a non-formal education framework, this EE programme was based on a combination of both non-formal and formal education in order to achieve the objectives of an organized, systematic and purposeful EE action also within the framework of the school curriculum. Through direct and ongoing communication with schoolchildren as well as outdoor EE experiences and awareness events, the next generation citizens develop the skills and attitude to actively participate and engage in activities aiming to benefit the vultures that are immediately linked to their own communities. More precisely, the aim of the EE Programme was students to become "caretakers" of the EV through their engagement in experiential school projects on the EV that would be broadly promoted acting as catalysts for the sensitization of their communities, mainly of project target stakeholder groups that affect EV's survival. Through the project EE actions, students choose and develop the most suitable tools to communicate their demand from their senior generations to modify their behaviour in favour of the vultures. Thus, the Programme included work with children in schools, outdoor education and communication with the general public, including decision-makers and stakeholders. All actions took place at the project sites of Trikala, Ioannina and Evros Prefectures in the framework of the project LIFE16 NAT/BG/000874 Egyptian Vulture New LIFE. The EE programme was based on an ongoing two-way interaction between the project EE team and the educational community. In the beginning of each school year, along the support of the local Directorates of Education, schools willing to participate in the EE programme were gathered and joined the "School Network for the protection of the Egyptian Vulture". Multiple visits to each school unit were implemented by the project team. The number of school visits varied depending on each school group availability and dynamic synthesis. In-class sessions were designed as to enable interaction between the students and the project EE team. Moreover, students and teachers were encouraged to design and implement their own research projects adopting a bottom-up approach to enable stronger commitment. All schools participating in the Network received the project environmental education and awareness material as to provide them the tools needed to actively get involved in the protection of the EV (EE material "Mission to save the Egyptian Vulture: together in the past, present and future". EE special edition "Mission Impossible Booklet", pins and t-shirts featuring the EV). The community-based EE material included proactive activities addressing the main threat of illegal use of poison baits thus aiming to turn students into important allies in the fight against this illegal practice. Furthermore, a number of workshops targeting the educational community was

organized as to promote the EE Programme. Finally, in the end of each school year, a number of structured field trips to the EV habitats was organized as to add value to students' classroom experiences, to have positive impact on students' long-term memory and to improve attitudes towards the EV. The majority of schools approached were very willing to participate in the Network, to learn about the EV and its current status and to contribute to our efforts to protect the species. In total, 4.201 students from 176 school groups and 59 school units participated in the EV school Network, 15 EE events were organized with the participation of 1.358 children while 4 field trips were implemented with the participation of 253 schoolchildren of the EV Network. School teams designed a variety of awareness actions: posters, banners, artworks, theatre performances and events, the symbolic adoption of EV nests by schools, awareness actions by pupils at local markets, gymkhanas, poems and lyrics, children's book publication and an award-winning puppet show. It should be noted that the participation of the educational community in the EV Network would be even larger if it wasn't for the COVID-19 pandemic. As to keep active the EE Programme, mainly during the first year of the pandemic, part of the EE material was adjusted to a distance-based education framework. During the EE Programme lifetime, all EE sub-actions were published in the local media as to maximize the promotion of schoolchildren projects on the protection of the EV revealing them as representatives of a generation that wishes and demands to have present the EV in their areas. Additionally, the ultimate aim is that the message is transferred to the parents and grandparents, as they may have a direct impact on the conservation status of the species. In that direction, a further step would be to bring those different generations into a direct creative dialogue on a future that mainly belongs to the proactive youth.



Photo: HOS/D. Vavylis

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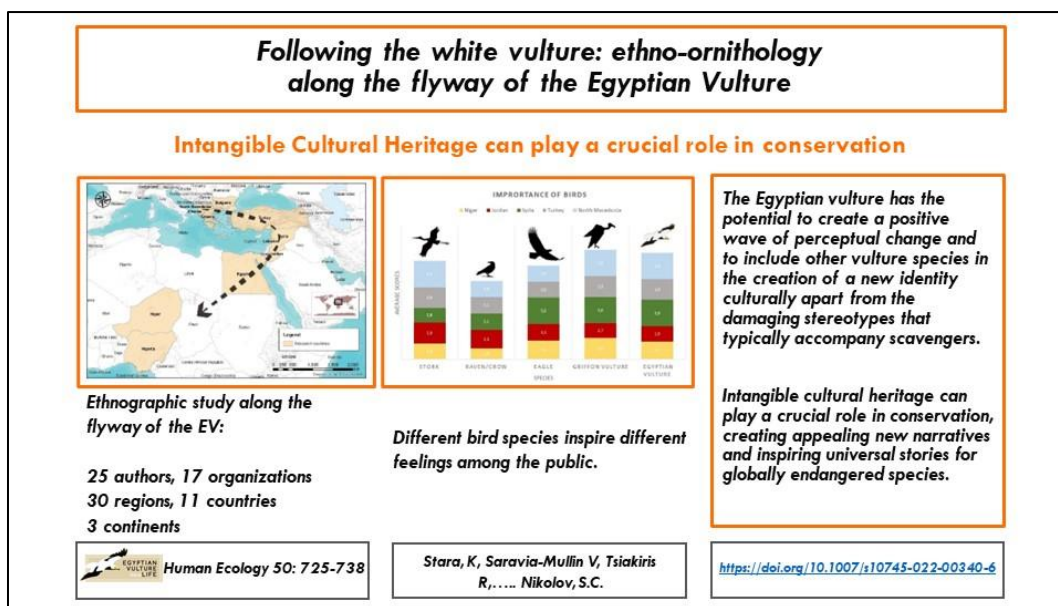
## Following the white vulture: ethno-ornithology along the flyway of the Egyptian Vulture

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Human attitudes, perceptions and degree of species awareness are often directly or indirectly linked to the conservation and threatened status of wildlife. Globally, vultures now constitute the most rapidly declining group of birds. Across their wide distribution range they share common ecological functions and unfavourable conservation status, while being associated with varying habitats, lifestyles, cultural standing and threats. In a paper published in 2022 in *Human Ecology* journal, we reveal conceptualizations about the emblematic critically endangered Egyptian Vulture (EV) along its migratory flyway from the Balkans through the Middle East to Africa. Information was gathered through interviews, focus group discussions and market surveys, with 420 people in 11 participating countries contributing overall. Our results showed that all vultures are recognized primarily for the environmental cleaning services they provide, but level of awareness differs between countries. EVs have some perceptual advantages based on their white colour, migratory nature and endangered conservation status. This underlines the suitability of the species as a charismatic flagship species that can potentially benefit other vulture species and thus enforce wider vulture conservation initiatives.



Peer-reviewed research derived from the abstract:

Stara, K., Saravia-Mullin, V., Tsiakiris, R., Adefolu S, Akyol A, Akyol RI, Asswad NG, Çetin T, Dayyoub M, Dushi G, Ivande ST, Kordopatis P, Kret E, Özuslu, S, Petroopivski N, Simeonova I, Spassova Y, Qaneer TE, Pourchier C, Saad LJ, ElSafoury H, Topi M, Trajçe A, Ziu D, Nikolov, SC. 2022. Following the White Vulture: Ethno-ornithology along the Flyway of the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). *Human Ecology* 50: 725–738.

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## Raising awareness of future generations through SNOW

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In Lebanon, environmental education has been marginalized in the national school curriculum. This has contributed to generations of children and youth lacking knowledge and values, necessary for pro-environmental behaviour. Unfortunately, rigidity and slow reform characterize the Lebanese academic system. As such, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL) through School with No Walls (SNOW), are setting out ground for environmental education in Lebanon by providing extra-curricular programmes. SNOW is an environmental education programme providing tailor-made packages for schools and local community interested groups; targeting children aged between 8 and 12 years old. Through interactive learning sessions and real-world applications, the programme builds the capacities of children to develop pro-environmental attitude and behaviour, forming ultimately an environmentally responsible community in Lebanon. This programme is driven by SPNL belief that environmental education shall be accessible to every child for the positive impact it has on their wellbeing and sense of belonging to nature and thus their surrounding environment and local communities. In a nutshell, SNOW symbolizes a holistic programme encompassing a blend of knowledge, skills and values necessary for children to develop pro-environment behaviour while enhancing their own physical and mental wellbeing. Under the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project, within year 2022, black spot areas where in order to raise awareness about bird migration and the added-value birds have in nature. As such, over 600 children were reached.



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## Best practices of community engagement and raising public awareness to protect the Egyptian Vulture in Albania

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The Egyptian Vulture (EV) is the only breeding vulture in Albania. In 2022, its population is represented by six breeding pairs and a solitary individual, all concentrated in the southern part of the country. Based on the critically low population size, the actions undertaken to reduce the risk of extinction have been multi-directional. One of the main pillars of conservation activities in the country was the involvement of the local community and awareness-raising among the general public for the protection of this species. In this regard, a number of innovative methods have been implemented for informing and raising public awareness, including meetings, the involvement of prominent public figures in events, the installation of information boards, the use of LED screens in the capital and the establishment of WiFi hotspots with information in key points of the cities near EV territories. In total, information about the EV has been distributed to an estimated 750,000 individuals/citizens. While in the direction of community involvement, two Conservation Youth Clubs (CYC) were established, with around 75 active members, in Gjirokastrë and Tepelena. A group of Local Caretakers of the EV, with around 20 members that live near the EV occupied territories was also established and used to survey and provide updates on the EV local population. This group consists of directors of local institutions, shepherds and local residents. The results obtained from the approach used so far have been quite satisfactory, making the cause for the protection of the EV very efficient and popular in Albania.



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## **An interconnected approach to fight illegal killing of vultures in Niger**

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As in most of Africa, vultures used to be widely present in Niger, but their populations have declined significantly. Among the six vulture species breeding in Niger, four are Critically Endangered and two are classified as Endangered, including the Egyptian Vulture, whom resident population share their habitat with Palearctic migrants.

A study conducted in the framework of the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project evidenced that the illegal killing for to belief-based use should be considered as the main threat for the vultures in Niger and beyond. Despite being protected by law, direct and indirect evidence of illegal killing of vultures were collected. Vulture carcasses and body parts were found on sale at traditional healer stands in markets which indicates the vultures were killed for belief-based uses.

Because of the complexity of the threat to be addressed and its cultural anchoring, the success of these conservation measures relied on the implementation of complementary activities involving a various range of actors, expected to have an impact both on the short and long term.

The lack of information at all levels was one of the main issues impeding relevant conservation actions to be implemented. Information being a requirement for action, one of the main objectives was to provide the required keys to the main stakeholders to be able to protect vultures in Niger. As the gaps were identified, a wide range of methods were designed and implemented, targeting very diverse stakeholders and beneficiaries in the region of Maradi and Zinder in southern Niger.

Firstly, we intended to act on the vulture supply chain by reducing the illegal killing of vulture populations. One of the main focus was to strengthen the relevant authorities' capacities in fighting against the illegal killing and trafficking of vulture as they lack capacities and resources to fulfil their mission. Capacity building on the traffic of endangered species and its consequences as well as training on vulture identification was displayed among wildlife and environment officers. A focus was put on legal aspects and on the two main laws regulating the use of fauna in Niger.

Conjointly, a focus on local communities living close to vulture breeding grounds was set and awareness was raised among hundreds of people from local communities, to help them understand the role and value of vultures, the threats they are facing but also the importance of these areas for their reproduction. By engaging with members of the local communities, we believed that they can disseminate the message successfully and be encouraged to participate in the preservation of the vultures.

Additionally, most stakeholders involved in vulture trafficking and belief-based use have proven to be unaware of the vulture conservation status and their level of protection at national and international levels. Despite witnessing the decline of vulture populations, they were unaware of the role played by those practices in the reduction of their numbers. Several approaches were used to engage them and encourage them to take actions to protect this bird, such as visiting markets in the designated areas to meet the targeted people, organising focus groups with key stakeholders and hold in-depth discussions.

Various communication materials were produced to accompany these activities and to reinforce the message communicated.

Finally, it has been proven that young generations are an effective vehicle to approach and disseminate a message. Lots of members of the young generations interviewed in project areas did not know the local vulture species or had never seen one. Therefore, an environmental program aiming at raising awareness while supporting schools was implemented.

By targeting hunters and relevant authorities, we aimed at breaking the supply chain, while working with local communities and traditional healers to reduce the demand for such products and promote plant-based alternatives.

After almost two years of sensitization work, thousands of different stakeholders were involved. A market survey was conducted in the same area and results compared with the initial baseline survey. Only one vulture part was identified, against about 30 in 2019, attesting of a decisive impact of this interconnected approach to address vulture trafficking in the targeted regions. Given the encouraging results, it seems crucial to pursue the work to ensure positive results on the long term and extend it to other regions.

**ILLEGAL KILLING FOR TO BELIEF-BASED USE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS THE MAIN THREAT FOR THE VULTURES IN NIGER**



**How to break the chain ?**

Because of the complexity of the threat and its cultural anchoring, the success of these conservation measures relied on the implementation of complementary activities involving a various range of actors, expected to have an impact both on the short and long term

**REDUCE THE ILLEGAL KILLING**

- Strengthen the relevant authorities' capacities
- Target the hunters
- Engage local communities living close to vulture populations

**REDUCE THE DEMAND**

- Empower the tradipracticioners & promote plant-based alternatives
- Raise awareness among local communities on the importance of vultures

**INVOLVE YOUNGER GENERATION**

- Implement an environmental program : raise awareness & provide support to schools in rural areas
- Organize sensitization activities

**TWO YEARS OF SENSITIZATION WORK, THOUSANDS OF STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED**

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**Raising awareness of the plight facing the endangered Egyptian vulture (Be Our Guest campaign) in Jordan**

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Raising awareness of the plight facing the endangered Egyptian Vulture (EV), The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) / Birdlife Jordan has organized a national awareness campaign that targeted the EV under the slogan “Be Our Guest”. This conservation message was displayed at Queen Alia International Airport on a big screen at the Arrival Hall, which shows to the Airport users a glimpse of the magnificent migratory bird through a busy platform. The ‘Be Our Guest’ digital board was displayed in early December 2019 for two weeks as part of the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project, which is one of the most ambitious ever vulture conservation initiatives, and it reached about 382,000 people. This campaign was followed as a good example in other countries along the EV flyway.



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## BSPB Nature Conservation Centres

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The Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) owns and operates one of the few nature conservation and information centres in Bulgaria - Poda, near the city of Burgas on the Black Sea Coast; and the other in Madzharovo – in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains close to the southern border with Greece. Both centres were created and have been operating since the 1990's, with the purpose of raising awareness for nature conservation in line with the sustainable development of the local communities. Both Centres are operated by the wholly owned commercial company of BSPB – BSPB Ltd for the specific purpose of closely managing the protected areas within which they are placed. Nature Conservation and Information Centre “Eastern Rhodopes” is also well known as the ‘Vulture Centre’, being located in the core areas for breeding of the Egyptian and Griffon vultures in Bulgaria.



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## A Mile for the Egyptian Vulture

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To get our chances to survive, the primary and most important thing is to keep moving. We do not know precisely what thought is holding our minds when facing difficulties. However, one thing is sure: moving forward is pulling us out. The action!

The instinct ultimately drives us to continue, regardless of the obstacles. If we put the movement metaphor aside and think about something else – What does it mean for a migratory bird not to give up? It does not matter how many kilometres it might fly, what difficulties it may pass along its way, tired or not - the most important thing is to arrive at its destination.

Following the example of one of nature's finest athletes - the Egyptian Vulture (EV), all partners and citizens supporting the Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project have decided to run as many miles as possible for the cause: keep the species safe under the campaign "A Mile for the Egyptian vulture". The marathon campaign under this slogan was launched in the project's second year (2018). We have been targeting various marathons along the flyway linking the communication messages with the main threats that the EVs face in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Starting from marathons in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, Jordan, and Nigeria, we became a message sponsor of the Great Ethiopian Run – the most emblematic running event in the world. Unfortunately, the pandemic between 2019-2020 made it impossible for the campaign's implemented, so we decided to organise an online version of a running event under the campaign.

Thus, everyone can participate no matter where they are – in their apartment, park, yard, etc., or if they are runners because there is only one condition – to cover a minimum of 1 mile (1.6 km) walking or running. To motivate more people from various groups to join, we decided to compete with real-time migrating EVs tagged with satellite transmitters. Every participant shares a photo with their covered distance using the hashtag #amileforEV, and at the end of the day, we calculate and share the results. Under the campaign, we managed to involve more than 53 762 runners and to communicate our messages, reaching more than 4.5 million people along the flyway.

United around the "A Mile for the Egyptian Vulture" campaign, the participants aimed to raise awareness, most notably of obstacles during the migration path of the EV. From mouth to mouth, from meter to meter, people spread the cause: safe flyway for this majestic bird!



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