

## **Eskom, the South African electricity supply company, receives award for raptor conservation**

### **Northern Cape Raptor Conservation Forum**

Eskom Distribution North Western Region recently received the prestigious Gariiep Raptor Conservation Award for its contribution to conserve vultures in the Northern Cape, South Africa. During the past two years Eskom undertook a massive environmental project; the modification of 4095 electricity poles (approximately 450 km of powerlines) in the Douglas, Postmasburg and Witsand areas in order to protect vultures. The project was completed during the first quarter of 2005 at a cost of approximately R7.5 million.

The electrocution of vultures on the 22 kV vertical structure (a design considered to be safe for vultures) was first brought to the attention of the Eskom/Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) Strategic Partnership during February 1999. This initiated an investigation on the farm Van Tonderskrans near Douglas by Chris van Rooyen (Project Manager: Eskom / EWT Strategic Partnership) and Rudi Kruger (Chief Environmental Advisor: Eskom Distribution North Western Region). No conclusive evidence at the time could be found of large-scale mortalities of vultures caused by this particular design, but a decision was made to monitor the situation closely.

Further electrocutions on the vertical structure were then reported in the

Postmasburg area by Abrie Maritz (co-ordinator of the Kalahari Raptor project, a project of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group). Eskom experimented with various products to insulate the conductors at the pole-top to eliminate the vulture electrocutions. Vulture mortalities subsequently decreased but did not cease despite the insulation of the conductors.

Eskom and the EWT then initiated a research project on Abrie Maritz's farm to establish the root-causes of the incidents. Powerlines were insulated and sheep carcasses were placed in close proximity to determine the perching and roosting behaviour of vultures. The experiment revealed that the vultures not only perch on the poles, but also perch on the energized conductors. This provided conclusive evidence that the vultures were electrocuted while perching on the conductors and in the process, touching another conductor. According to Rudi Kruger, it is the first time this behaviour of vultures perching on conductors has been observed and documented. It was previously believed that vultures would not perch on conductors due to the small diameter of these cables and the structure of the vulture's feet.

A risk assessment was performed

and recommendations forwarded to Eskom region management to modify the existing vertical design by fitting a cross-arm to the pole and insulating one conductor on single and three phase lines. "Management supported the project not only for the significant biological effect on the African White-backed Vulture and Lappet-faced Vulture but also because bird electrocutions often lead to power supply interruptions, causing our customers to be dissatisfied," said Rudi Kruger.

This Gariiep Raptor Conservationist Award is presented annually to a person or organization who has contributed significantly to the conservation of raptors in the Northern Cape. The presentation is made by the Northern Cape Raptor Conservation Forum, a group which meets twice a year to discuss raptor conservation in the Northern

Cape. The trophy was sponsored by the Wildlife & Environment Society (Northern Cape Region). It is awarded together with a book prize, sponsored by the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group. This year the book prize, Sasol bird field guides, were presented to the two Eskom Technical Service Centres (in Prieska and Postmasburg) who were involved with the modification of the electricity pylons.

According to Andrew Stainthorpe, Chairperson of the Northern Cape Raptor Conservation Forum, Eskom continues to make an extremely valuable contribution towards raptor conservation in the Northern Cape. These efforts will ensure that the Northern Cape's vultures continue to fill the Province's sky, thus being there for future generations to enjoy.

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