



Brussels, 04<sup>th</sup> April 2013

**Ref. no: 13/036**

**Subject: Dramatic blow to endangered Egyptian Vulture population**

To:

Mr Evangelos Livieratos, Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Change  
Mr Athanasios Tsaftaris, Minister of Rural Development and Food  
Mr Evripidis Stylianidis, Minister of Interior  
Mr Stefan Leiner, Head of Unit B3 'Natura 2000' in DG Environment  
Mr Angelo Salsi, Head of Unit E3 'LIFE-Nature' in DG Environment

Dear Sirs,

BirdLife International is the largest bird conservation network worldwide, while the Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF) is the leading non-governmental entity working with the European vulture species. Among us, we have led, contributed to, influenced, invested and implemented countless projects and activities on Europe's vultures and their habitats.

Yesterday we received the rather alarming news that two Egyptian vultures were found poisoned, together with a red fox, near the town of Asprovalta, in northern Greece. The birds were detected because one of them was fitted with a satellite tag, which had been put months before by our Greek colleagues (from the Hellenic Ornithological Society/BirdLife in Greece and WWF Greece).

Lazaros, as it had been baptized, had already suffered from poisoning in April 2012 in Antichasia Mountains, but luckily could recover that time, went into rehabilitation, and was then fitted with a tag before being released. It spent the winter in Chad, only to come and die in northern Greece on the way back to its breeding grounds in Meteora.

Currently, there are less than 20 breeding pairs of Egyptian vulture in Greece, as this species suffered a dramatic decline in the country. This means that almost 10% of the total Greek population died in this poisoning event – a devastating blow to an extremely small population. Globally, the Egyptian vulture is declining everywhere, and the species has been classified by IUCN in 2007 as Endangered at global level (that means that it is considered to be facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild).



Less than two years ago, the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), to which the Greek State is a signatory, adopted resolution 10.26, precisely to minimize the risk of poisoning to migratory species, like the Egyptian vulture (COP 10, Bergen, 20-25 November 2011).

There is also an ongoing EU-funded LIFE+ project (LIFE NAT/BG/152, The return of the Neophron) to try to save the last few pairs of this species breeding in Bulgaria and Greece - the EU has recognized that the species, and its habitat, are priority targets for conservation, and has therefore invested a considerable amount of EU money to help this species in these two countries. It is therefore disheartening, and extremely worrying, to see all these efforts going down the drain due to the persistence of illegal poisoning across Greece.

Poisoning is the main cause of mortality in vultures, also in Greece. People do not usually poison vultures directly, but they put poisoned baits against foxes, wolves and other predators, that then kill vultures. Poisoning is illegal across Europe, as it is extremely impacting, killing animals, wild and domestic, in a non-selective way. Poisoning has brought several other raptors species such as the Griffon vulture, the Black vulture and the Imperial Eagle to the very brink of extinction in mainland Greece. This situation is especially frustrating when compared with the remarkable increase and recovery of those species in some other European countries.

Poison lying in the countryside also poses a real risk to Public Health, as it is rather easy for the illegal substances to enter the human food chain, through the consumption of slightly poisoned game species, contamination of crops, etc.

Fighting against poisoning is difficult, but crucial to safeguard public health, clean our fields, and promote our wildlife to thrive. Experience from other regions of Europe proves that with some investment, know-how and expertise, the issue can be tackled successfully. In Spain for example, the Junta de Andalucia has managed to reduce by more than half the mortality of most large birds of prey due to poisoning, by carrying

out a multidisciplinary approach involving more preventive and reactive enforcement, adequate diagnostic and research, legal persecution and custodial sentencing.

BirdLife International and the VCF urge you and your departments to do the utmost, in this case and in the future, to fight against Poison. In this particular case, the poisoning agent should be identified, and a judicial investigation started, to bring, if at all possible, the culprits to justice. We welcome the prompt response of the forestry and the veterinary services in this case.

In the medium-term future, the Greek authorities should establish a small but dedicated task force to fight this illegality, able to control the whole process, from enforcement to environmental education, from adequate investigations to prosecution.

A national reference laboratory needs to be identified to carry out the diagnostic analysis, the judiciary and veterinary services need to be trained, and protocols and guidelines need to be developed, while an information campaign targeting the relevant populations should be carried out. At the same time, it is urgent to fund preventative measures and compensation of the farmers and livestock breeders affected by predation so as to minimize motives to poison. The above are all measures that have been proposed to your agencies in written by a set of specialists from environmental NGOs in December 2012, and also via the Greek Ombudsmen's. Unfortunately, we have seen no positive development, but a worsening situation.

BirdLife International and the VCF also urge the European Union to consider this as a high priority item for funding within their current programmes. We cannot allow for the current adverse economic climate in Greece (and elsewhere) to be used as an excuse to inaction on this priority topic.

From our part, we are ready to share the existing best-practice, and know-how, with Greek colleagues, so that we, collectively, make a big push to clean the Greek countryside of this unacceptable practice, and safeguard the few Egyptian vultures – but also other vultures, bears, and eagles, from a certain death.

Yours sincerely,



Angelo Caserta  
Director, Birdlife International Europe



José Tavares  
Director, Vulture Conservation Foundation

CC:

Ministry of Environment, Energy & Climate Change: Special Secretariat for Forests; General Directorate of Environment, Directorate of Environmental Planning, Department of Natural Environment Management; General Directorate of Environment, Directorate of Environmental Planning, Department of Solid Waste Management; General Directorate for the Protection of Forests and Natural Resources, Directorate of Forests and Hunting

Ministry of Rural Development and Food: General Directorate of Crop Production, Directorate for the Protection of Crop Production; General Directorate of Veterinary

Greek Agricultural Compensation Agency, Directorate of Insurance and Aid

Centre of Athens Veterinary Institutions