

Vanishing Vultures

Circling high overhead, the vulture spies its tasty prey. When it thinks the time is right, the **ravenous**¹ bird swoops down on the decaying **carcass**², picking the smelly, rotting flesh off the dead animal.

Another vulture follows, then another. It doesn't take long until there's nothing left except a pile of bones. Two vultures can pluck the flesh off a dead cow in minutes.



National Park Service

The vultures, nature's cleanup crew, are slowly dying out.

Vultures once clouded the skies over India, Pakistan, and Nepal. In recent years, though, the birds have been dying out at an alarming rate. India's vulture population has declined by more than 95 percent during the past decade.

At first glance, getting rid of these nasty looking birds might seem to be a good thing. But not really. Scientists say the extinction of the vultures would pose a serious problem for humans.

Why? Simply put, there are not enough vultures to eat all the dead animals that litter the streets and hillsides.

Without vultures flying around, animal carcasses rot for days, creating serious health problems. Rotting flesh not only raises quite a stink but also increases the risk of disease spreading to humans. **Feral**, or wild, dogs will eat **carriion** (the fleshy remains of animals) if vultures don't. And those dogs could spread rabies.

¹ **ravenous**: very eager for food; extremely hungry

² **carcass**: dead body

Reading Passage

Corpse Removal

The lack of vultures also means that members of India's small Parsi community cannot dispose of their dead in the traditional way. The Parsis, members of a religious group, rely on vultures to eat the bodies of their dead.

According to tradition, Parsis cannot **cremate**³, bury, or submerge their dead in water because they believe a corpse is dirty and impure, so the corpse would taint the fire, earth, or water, which they regard as pure.

"We don't bury our dead because we respect the Earth," Khojeste P.

Mistree told the Environmental News Service. "We don't consign [the dead] to the flames because we respect fire, and we don't drown the dead for we respect water."

Religion dictates that the Parsis leave their dead on hilltops known as "towers of silence" for vultures to eat.

"For us, conservation of vultures is closely linked to religion," Mistree said. "We leave our dead bodies exposed to the sun so as to be devoured by the birds, and the vulture is the most important of these birds of prey."

With fewer vultures consuming the dead, the Parsis' age-old tradition is dying, he added.

What's the Buzz?

What's happening to all the vultures?



³ **cremate:** to burn to ashes

Reading Passage

At first, **ornithologists**, or scientists who study bird species, could not explain the increased death rate of the birds. Experts thought an unknown infectious disease or perhaps a buildup of pesticides, used to kill insects, was causing the vultures to die.

A new study proves otherwise. Scientists now believe that a medicinal drug called diclofenac is killing the vultures.

Scientists say the vultures die when they eat the carcasses of livestock that were treated with diclofenac.

Farmers in Pakistan and India started using diclofenac during the past ten years to treat ailing livestock. Small traces of the drug cause kidney failure in the birds, which can lead to an early death.

Last Meal?

Now that scientists have determined what is killing the vultures, efforts are underway in India to ban the use of diclofenac.

"We know for a fact that diclofenac is really bad," one scientist said. "So, the first priority is to get that controlled."

Otherwise, experts say, vultures in Nepal, India, and Pakistan might as well prepare for their last meal.

Critical Thinking

Discuss as a class what animals might be beneficial to our environment and what their extinction might mean to our culture.

Question Sheet

Name: _____

Date: _____

“Vanishing Vultures” Questions

- ___ 1. Apparently, the author would like the reader to be convinced that
- feral dogs are generally dangerous.
 - “towers of silence” are off-limits to vultures.
 - the extinction of vultures not be a good thing.
 - vultures eat too fast for their own good.
- ___ 2. We can assume that farmers who use diclofenac
- need to use up their supply of the drug.
 - are unaware of the problems it causes.
 - don't know that diclofenac hurts air quality.
 - are trying to get away with breaking the law.
- ___ 3. The author includes a quote from a scientist at the end of the article to
- convince the reader that the author is educated.
 - show that diclofenac is a harmful substance.
 - impress the reader with the scientist's knowledge.
 - explain that vultures can make good pets.
- ___ 4. Of the four statements below, the only fact is that
- the vulture's prey is tasty.
 - dead bodies should be devoured by birds.
 - diclofenac is really bad.
 - India's vulture population has decreased.
- ___ 5. Why do you think the author wrote this passage?
