

Nature Tanzania tackles belief-based killing of vultures in Tanzania

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Belief-based killings is the second largest cause of vulture deaths, accounting for approximately 29% of vulture mortalities on the continent.

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By Alpha Mfilinge

Header photo: Traditional healers and Nature Tanzania officials after a meeting © Nature Tanzania

Seated in the sunny morning Zemu Ngwesele chats animatedly with a colleague. Ngwesele is part of a group of 20 traditional healers who ply their trade in Meatu District, part of the Makao Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Northern Tanzania. Today, Ngwesele and his colleagues are waiting to get into the local town hall, where Nature Tanzania (BirdLife Partner) will be making a presentation on vultures. Once inside the hall, and after a round of introduction, Ngwesele and his colleagues listen intently as Emmanuel Mгимwa, Nature Tanzania's Executive Director highlights vulture declines in the country.

In the last fifty years, Africa has witnessed a drastic decline of vulture species driven by numerous factors particularly poisoning, belief-based use, electrocution and collision with energy infrastructure, habitat destruction, among others. Poisoning accounting for more than 60% of vulture deaths is driven by numerous factors, including illegal trade, human-wildlife conflicts, traditional uses, and indiscriminate pesticide use. Belief-based killings, where vultures' parts are used to make traditional medicine to cure ailments or bring good luck. It is the second largest cause of vulture deaths, accounting for approximately 29% of vulture mortalities on the continent.

In Tanzania, the issue of belief-based killings of vultures has been reported as one of the wildlife poisoning drivers in the country. In some of the Protected Areas, there have been reports of wildlife poisoning incidences and dead vultures found at the scene. In 2019, following an elephant poisoning incident in the Selous Game Reserve in Southern Tanzania, 10 vultures were killed and in 2020, over 50 vultures were killed in Wami Mbiki Game Reserve in the eastern part of the country. Other incidences have been reported in Maswa Game reserve and Serengeti National Park.

Recognising the urgency of this crisis, Nature Tanzania began implementing the project at Makao MWA in 2022. This project, funded by the Darwin Initiative through BirdLife International seeks to establish collaborations with traditional healers to address the threat of belief-based killings of vultures.

"The practice of poisoning, capture and sale of vultures to traditional healers is a significant problem in the country. Vulture parts particularly heads, claws and feathers are much sought by healers as they are used in traditional medicine," says Mгимwa.

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Emmanuel Mгимwa, Nature Tanzania's Executive Director

Dried vulture head ready for sale © Nature Tanzania

Since inception of the project, there have been several meetings and workshops between Nature Tanzania and traditional healers, with 34 out of 150 registered traditional healers in Makao WMA engaged so far on saving vultures from extinction. A key output from these discussions has been the need to use plant-based alternatives, as substitutes to vultures' body parts. The traditional healers identified a plant (locally known as *Viloto*) – said to have similar uses to that of vulture head in traditional medicine. Following these engagements, the traditional healers have been increasingly using this plant in their trade.

"These meetings have been very instrumental in raising awareness among traditional healers in our District, on the need to increasingly use plant alternatives to vulture parts", says Ngwesele, who is also the Chairperson of traditional healers from Mbushi village, one of the 10 villages in Makao WMA.

Following these deliberations, Nature Tanzania made a follow-up on the named alternative plant for vulture parts, aiming to get the specimen scientifically identified, and checking for its IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) status and distribution in Tanzania.

In addition, Nature Tanzania has engaged a supplier of the plant who indicated that the plant is readily available in three regions in the country including Katavi Region, Singida Region, and Kigoma Region. Consequently, Nature Tanzania Species Conservation Officer and the supplier, visited Kigoma Region and collected specimens of *Viloto* which were taken to Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Science (MUHAS), Institute of Traditional Medicine, for further analysis.

The alternative plant was identified as *Biophytum crassipes* by a botanist at MUHAS, and more follow-up on its distribution and IUCN status continues. "After finding it difficult to find vultures in their areas, we worked hard to identify an alternative for the vulture part. We were able to identify *Biophytum crassipes* as an alternative, and the plant works similarly to the vulture parts," notes Ngwesele.

"I am also encouraging my fellow traditional healers not to use vultures in traditional medicine and to use plant alternatives," he adds.

Biophytum crassipes plant © Nature Tanzania

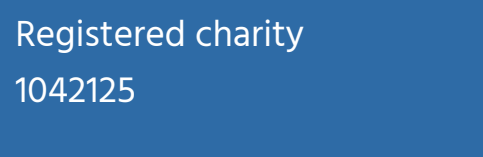
It was ascertained that *Biophytum crassipes* is readily available in the rainy season than the dry seasons. Traditional healers are now using the plant for their trade and have resolved agreed to stop using the vulture parts in preparation of traditional medicines and beliefs, as they will be focusing on the alternative plant. Further, Nature Tanzania is working on some trials to ascertain whether the plant can be grown in Makao WMA so that the plant can be easily found by traditional healers. Nature Tanzania aims at scaling up the project and reach out to traditional healers in other villages in Makao who are using vulture parts for medicine.

"This is just the beginning as we fight to address belief-based killings, and thus save threatened vulture species in Tanzania. We invite everyone to join this effort so that we do not lose the important ecosystem services offered by vultures," concludes Mгимwa.

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