

# THE VALUE OF VULTURES

BY E.M. FAY

Why do people decide they don't like, or even fear, a certain species of animal? Of course, it's common to have likes and dislikes, personal preferences - we all might love bunnies, but some also like snakes, and others loathe them - but in many cases, a *seemingly* inborn reaction to certain animals may have been unwittingly instilled in us as children, via books or movies, even cartoons. If, at a young age, we heard a parent say something negative about a particular animal, or saw them act afraid of something in nature, it's a good bet that we "caught" that antipathy ourselves; and unless the feeling was later dispelled by learning favorable facts about the animal, we probably kept that prejudice well into adult life.

One of the most maligned species, certainly amongst birds, is the vulture. Large members of the Falconiformes order, vultures are varied. All twenty species possess distinct bare heads and large crops (a pouch near the throat). Beaks are quite strong, for tearing tough food. Like many birds, their eyesight is acute; in the turkey vulture, the sense of smell is particularly keen.

The vulture's flight is quite graceful. They can ride air currents and stay aloft for hours with their broad, long wings. Whether they communicate a "find" to each other, or perhaps for another reason, when one comes across a dead animal, many others will appear on site, often flying in from miles away.

Body size and strength of beak determine the pecking order. But if hyenas, jackals, or other large mammals come on the scene, vultures will get out of their way. Vultures do not exclusively eat carrion. They also will eat garbage, and on rare occasions, may prey on small, vulnerable live animals.

One reason some people revile the vulture may be a distaste for anything to do with death or decomposition. Vultures dining on carcasses repulses the more squeamish among us. Yet, ironically, this is one of the very reasons we should appreciate and be grateful to vultures!

Speaking at a TED talk in Nairobi in 2012, Munir Virani explained this fact of life. Virani is a renowned raptor biologist, wildlife photographer, and Director of The Peregrine Fund Africa Program, a non-profit dedicated to preserving birds of prey.

Virani called vultures "natural garbage collectors," vital to a healthy eco-system. Unfortunately for them and for us, ignorance, greed, and over-development have put many vulture species in danger of extinction. Virani stated the case that we must pay more attention to these "unique and misunderstood creatures," change our misperception of the wrongly reviled birds, and save them now before it is too late.

Answering the question as to why vultures are not sufficiently valued, Virani says at least part of the problem was caused by Darwin. When he encountered turkey vultures on his travels, he initially deemed them "disgusting." In cartoon imagery, they're shown as goofy-looking or stupid. Writers and filmmakers usually represent them in a sinister light. And when Virani added that they are reminiscent of some politicians, his audience laughed knowingly. However, he continued, politicians do not clean the environment or halt the spread of contagious diseases - vultures do!

**When vultures clean flesh from carcasses, they are also killing bacteria that would otherwise spread to living animals, including humans.** One of the most deadly of these, anthrax, is absorbed by the noble vulture. Countless other animals could die if that were left unchecked. Without the presence of vultures, carcasses take up to four times longer to decompose, increasing the chance of spreading diseases



around the vicinity.

**Another serious health risk vultures keep in check is rabies.** In areas devoid of vulture activity, masses of feral dogs turn up at carcass dump sites. Virani called that a veritable "time bomb of rabies." In parts of India there has been a huge increase in rabies cases because of this.

Ignorance of vultures' very real, practical value has contributed to their destruction. Agricultural considerations are another problem. In Kenya, farmers are poisoning them collaterally when they poison predators they see as a threat to livestock. In South Asia, an anti-fever drug given to livestock, diclofenac, has been responsible for killing millions of vultures. India finally banned it in 2006, but not before four vulture species were pushed to the brink of extinction, with as much as 99 and 97 percent of two populations lost. (Telegraph, UK)

In West Africa, a horrific trade in dead vultures thrives for the purposes of witchcraft and fetishists. This could be discouraged through education and legislation.



Kenya is now building an enormous wind turbine farm. Wind turbines routinely slice birds in half - another constant peril. Given some thought, wind turbines might be redesigned so they stop killing all kinds of birds.

In Ancient Egypt, vultures were associated with motherhood and protection. With the cobra, they symbolized the unity of Upper and Lower Egypt. And in Hindu mythology, a Vulture God risked his life to save the Earth Goddess Sita. Munir Virani suggests that we adjust our outlook on vultures, recognizing the many services they perform for us.

In Tibet, where hard, rocky land makes subterranean burial difficult, vultures'

activity is part of a "sky burial." In Tibet and Mongolia, Vajrayana Buddhists see the body as an empty vessel, so no need to preserve it. They prefer to place the corpse on a mountaintop, leaving it to nature, where it is eaten, and called "alms for the birds."

**The critically endangered California Condor is a vulture.** Conservation efforts, only partially successful, have been made to save them from the brink. Eurasia and Africa boast 16 species of vulture, but 11 of those are frighteningly close to extinction right now.

#### **Practical Steps to Save Vultures:**

**Besides getting rid of our own mistaken notions about vultures, we can educate children about the very real benefits they provide. We can inform our elected representatives that we want official protection for the birds.**

The Peregrine Fund for Africa is conducting vital research, and putting transmitters on a small number of vultures to see where they go and how to help them. Virani advises: "Become active, make noise, write to your government, volunteer your time to spread the word."

**Although the vulture has long been a misunderstood bird, in truth, they are graceful creatures. As Munir noted, even Darwin changed his opinion when he watched them fly "effortlessly and without energy."**

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If more people knew the value of vultures, perhaps they'd see the beauty, too. Wildlife Watch agrees with Munir Virani that our world would be poorer indeed without vultures.

To support Munir's work with vultures, please donate to The Peregrine Fund: <http://tinyurl.com/knvbbcg>

TED talk: [http://www.ted.com/talks/munir\\_virani\\_why\\_i\\_love\\_vultures](http://www.ted.com/talks/munir_virani_why_i_love_vultures)