

Diclofenac Threat to Vultures

Why in news?

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The 104 birds bred at Rani, Assam face a serious threat by Diclofenac drug used in cattle.

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How is vulture population in India?

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- India hosts 9 vulture species, 5 of them the highly endangered Gyps species.
- Assam is naturally a suitable habitat for vultures.
- It is home to 6 species, including winter visitors from the Himalayas — the Himalayan and Eurasian griffons.
- The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC) in Assam at Rani, Guwahati has 104 vultures, brought in as chicks.
- It has 30 adults and sub-adults: all oriental white-backed and slender-billed.
- These are 2 of the 6 species found in Assam that are old enough to be set free.

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- The vulture population in Assam is presently battling toxic chemicals in livestock carcasses, due to Diclofenac use.

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How does diclofenac affect vultures?

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- Diclofenac is a painkiller, usually injected to cattle.

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- The digestive system of vultures is so evolved.
- This makes it possible to tolerate bacteria and natural toxins in putrefying meat.
- But they are vulnerable to chemicals such as diclofenac.
- Diclofenac present in the carcasses of cattle, injected as a painkiller, finds way into the vulture.

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- > In 1991 diclofenac was introduced in the country
- > Animals were given injected doses of the drug
- > Vultures, which scavenged on carcasses of animals treated with diclofenac, suffered renal failure and died
- > From 4 crore, the number of vultures in the wild dwindled to 1 lakh in 2007
- > The Centre banned veterinary use in 2006, but cattle owners procured the drug illegally

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What are the challenges in eradication?

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- **Diclofenac** - Diclofenac for veterinary use was banned in 2005 but it was continued to be made for humans.
- BNHS pressured the government into banning the vials (containers) of 30 ml or more in 2015.
- Humans need 3-5 ml while only 30 ml or more works for cows.
- But untrained veterinarians use the 30 ml vials for veterinary use, with fatal consequences for vultures.
- The last of the 2015 stocks of the big vials expire by December 2018.

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- This is thus delaying the freedom (release) for adult vultures being reared in captivity in the State.

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- **Pesticides** - Even after the expiry of diclofenac stocks, there is no guarantee that the birds will be safe.

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- The rampant use of pesticides by farmers and more than 70,000 tea gardens is another concern.

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- Villagers generally poison carcass of dead animals with pesticides to kill dogs, jackals and leopards that are a danger to livestock.

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- Unfortunately, vultures that feed on these carcasses become the unintended victims.

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- Recently, around 30 vultures, most of them Himalayan griffons, died in Assam, after feeding on the poisoned carcass of a goat.

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- **Life cycle** - Vultures take time to mature, pair for life, breed once a year, and live up to 70 years.

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- This extended cycle make captive breeding efforts challenging.

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What are the efforts to address this?

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- The VCBC takes various efforts to save the birds by reducing their exposure to the fatal drug.

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- Mutton is the only food given at the VCBC and goats are kept for 10-12 days before the feeding.

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- This is to ensure that traces of any toxic painkiller or other chemicals are flushed out.

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Source: The Hindu

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Quick Fact

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VCBCs

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- The VCBCs are set up by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) in association with State Forest Departments.

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- The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC) in Assam is at Rani, about 30 km west of Guwahati.

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- It is one of the 4 Vulture Conservation Breeding Centres in India.

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- The other three are in Pinjore (Haryana), Buxa (West Bengal), Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh).

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