



Use of poison baits in Cyprus: Recommendations to resolve human-wildlife and human-human conflicts

*LIFE WITH VULTURES: SAVING GRIFFON VULTURES IN CYPRUS THROUGH CONCRETE CONSERVATION ACTIONS
(LIFE18 NAT/CY/001018)*

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About the project

LIFE with Vultures (NAT/CY/001018) is a targeted conservation project for the protection of the Griffon Vulture in Cyprus. In this four-year endeavour (2019-2023), **BirdLife Cyprus**, the **Game and Fauna Service**, **Terra Cypria – The Cyprus Conservation Foundation** and the **Vulture Conservation Foundation** have joined forces to tackle the main threats that the remaining Griffon Vulture population is facing and prevent the island's most threatened bird of prey from becoming extinct. The project has a €1,375,861 budget and is co-funded (60%) by the EU's LIFE programme. More information for the project can be found at: www.lifewithvultures.eu.

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Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank all who have participated in the consultation meetings for their time, effort and input. The following stakeholders have been critical in gathering all the information and drawing up recommendations to mitigate and alleviate relevant issues in a fair and effective manner: The Veterinary Services, Game and Fauna Services, Department of Forests, Livestock Breeders, Shepherds, Hunters and other individuals who attended the meetings, Local Hunting Clubs and regional Hunting Associations, all involved NGOs and Environmental centres, the Department of Environment, the Department of Agriculture and finally the Cyprus Agricultural Payments Organisation.

Summary:

Human-human and human-wildlife conflicts drive the illegal placement of poisoned meat baits in countryside areas of Cyprus. This leads to deaths of both wild and domestic species, with severe consequences on vulnerable populations such as that of Griffon Vultures on the island. Griffon Vultures have suffered significant losses the last decade due to poisoned baits, with less than ten individuals left by May 2022. Consultation meetings have been held with relevant stakeholders to determine the possible motives and solutions to poison bait placement to ensure a safer environment for the recovery of the species. This report outlines several recommendations addressing both human-wildlife and human-human conflicts. Suggested solutions for human-wildlife conflicts were: studies on the impact of foxes on human activities, subsidized fencing for livestock units, targeted control of fox populations, compensation scheme for livestock losses due to predator attacks, and awareness raising on vulnerable species. Recommendations on human-human conflicts were: limiting the number of active hunting dogs, updating the process of obtaining a hunting license, enforcing the law on dogs more effectively, involving local hunting clubs to decrease tolerance of illegal activities, banning social media posts with photos of shot game and finally completing frequent patrols in high risk poisoning areas.

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The “LIFE18 NAT/CY/001018 - LIFE with Vultures” project:

Title

Saving Griffon Vultures in Cyprus through concrete conservation actions

Abbreviated title

LIFE18 NAT/CY/001018 - LIFE with Vultures CY

Duration

15th October 2019 – 14th October 2023 (4 years)

Budget

1.375.861 €

Funding

The project is 60% co-funded by the EU's LIFE programme

Beneficiary

- BirdLife Cyprus

Associated beneficiary

- The Game and Fauna Service
- Terra Cypria – The Cyprus Conservation Foundation
- The Vulture Conservation Foundation



The Cyprus Griffon Vulture Population Through Time

Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* were abundant in the first half of the twentieth century, with up to 140 individuals observed at a single carcass in the 1950s (Flint and Stewart 1992). In the latter half of the twentieth century reduced food availability, among other factors, caused drastic population declines, with 40 - 45 individuals remaining in 2004, and to less than 20 individuals thereafter (BirdLife International 2004). In recent years, one of their main threats is the illegal use of poisoned meat baits, which has led to over 18 fatalities since 2003, including two mass poisoning incidents in 2015 and 2022 (Figure1). Being on the brink of extinction in Cyprus, the species requires urgent conservation actions to ensure its survival and reproduction, including measures to boost its population and tackle serious threats for its survival, namely the illegal use of poison baits.

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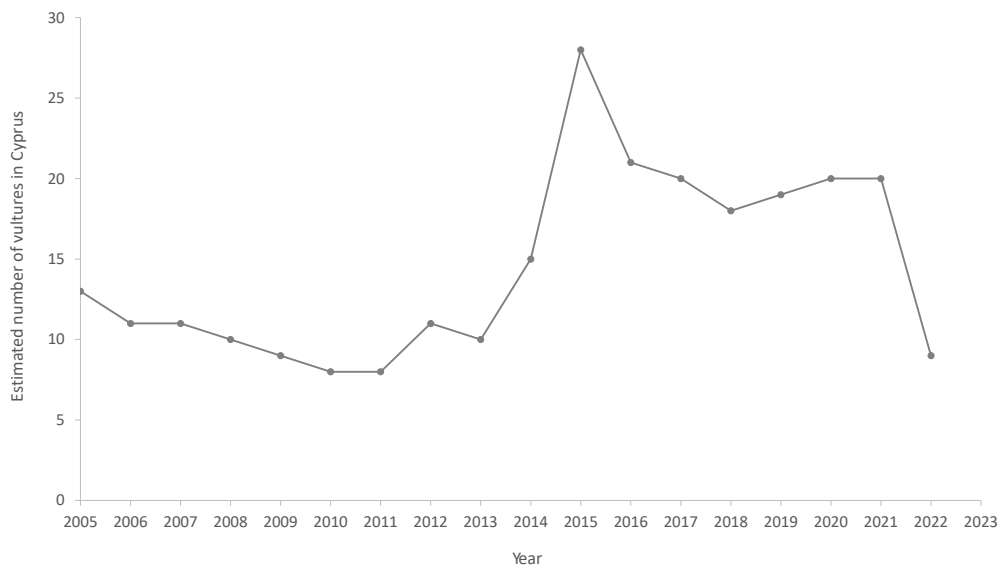


Figure 1: Estimated Griffon Vulture population in Cyprus between the years of 2005 - 2022 (Papadopoulos, 2013; BirdLife Cyprus ,2022)

The Widespread Use of Poisoned Baits in Cyprus

According to a study on Griffon Vulture population viability analysis (Phipps, W. L. 2020), if the current rates of poisoning incidents continue, the Griffon Vulture population of Cyprus will be driven to extinction by the year 2035. The extensive use of poison-baits (due to human-wildlife and human-human conflicts) also affects several other species. Due to its non-selective nature, a poison bait will not only kill the targeted animals, i.e. foxes, dogs, but also birds of prey such as Black kites, Griffon Vultures, Bonelli's eagles among other species. We estimate that most of the Griffon Vulture poisoning incidents in Cyprus are caused by accidental or secondary poisoning incidents because of the use of poison baits targeting mainly foxes and stray dogs.



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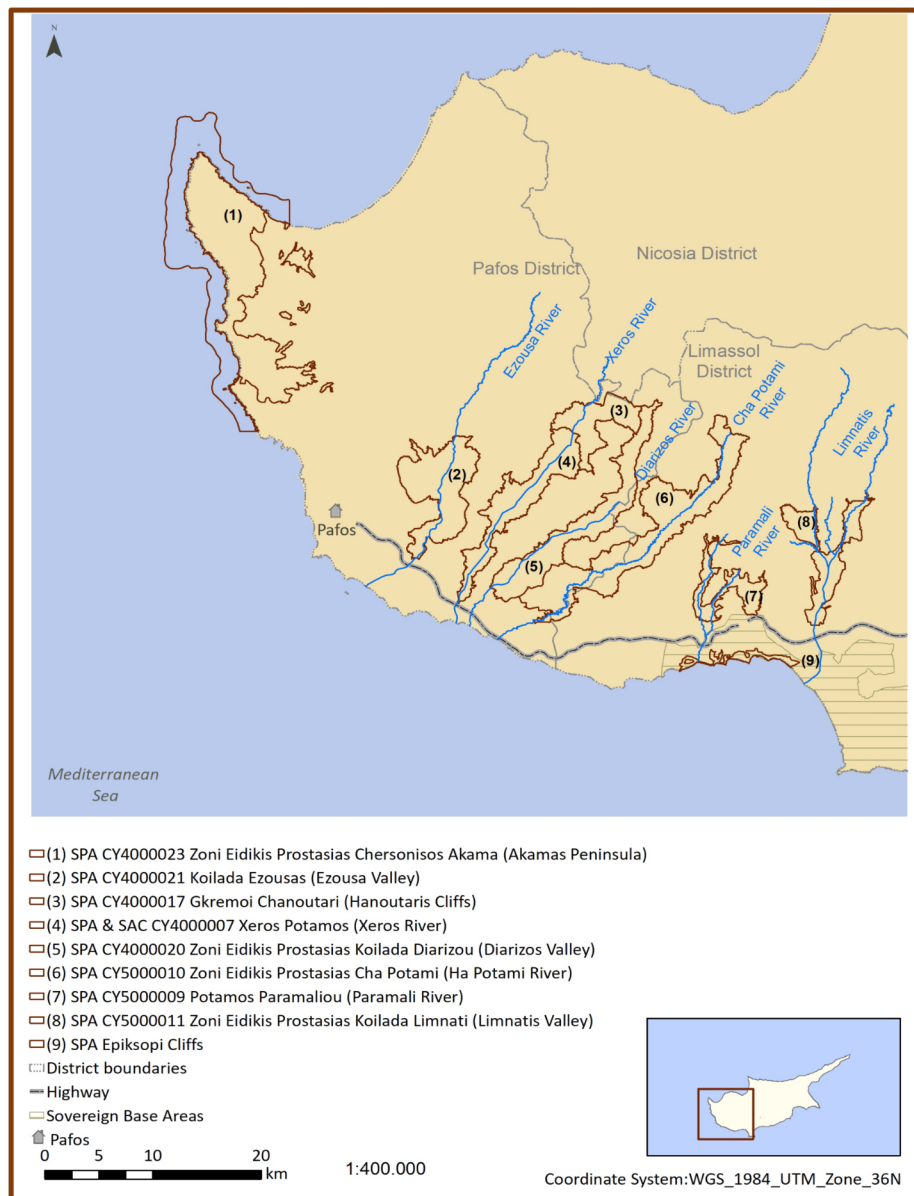
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Study sites

The project is targeting the main breeding, roosting and feeding areas of the Griffon Vulture, extending from the south (Limassol district) to the southwest (Paphos district) part of Cyprus, including the westernmost end of the island.

The actions of the project mainly focus on nine key areas identified for their vitality in the survival of the vultures. These sites are shown on the map, with site numbers 1-8 falling under the European Natura 2000 network, while Episkopi Cliffs is a Special Protected Area under the jurisdiction on the Sovereign British Bases.

Within these sites, there are several vulture feeding stations from where the vultures acquire a large portion of their food. Cliff faces and other appropriate breeding and roosting sites also characterise these locations.



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Recommendations & Operational Solutions to Resolve the “Human-Human” & “Human-Wildlife” Conflicts in Cyprus

Hunting and livestock rearing are the most common activities associated with the use of poisoned baits. Hunters use meat laced with pesticides to target either hunting dogs or foxes. Hunting dogs are targeted to minimize hunter-hunter competition as hunters are less likely to visit an area if their dogs are at risk from poisoning, freeing up hunting areas for others to exploit. Foxes are also targeted by some hunters to reduce their populations and therefore to reduce predation on game-birds. Shepherds on the other hand, target foxes and dogs with poisoned baits in order to protect their livestock from attacks by predators. The latter two motives for use of poisoned baits are categorized under human-wildlife conflicts while the former is a product of human-human conflict. The below recommendations were made in light of information gathered during consultation meetings with the following relevant stakeholders: The Veterinary Services, Game and Fauna Services, Department of Forests, Livestock Breeders and Shepherds, Hunters, Local Hunting Clubs and regional Hunting Associations, NGOs and environmentally aware individuals, Environmental/ Education centres, Department of Environment, Department of Agriculture and finally the Cyprus Agricultural Payments Organisation. These recommendations aim to alleviate human-human and human-wildlife conflicts related to the use of illegal poison baits.

Recommendations for human - wildlife conflict alleviation:

➤ ***In-depth study on the resident population of red foxes *Vulpes vulpes* on Cyprus***

A study of the ecology and behaviour of the red fox, with specific emphasis on its dietary habits, could provide useful information for the species and its potential management. Evidence of its dietary habits will provide important insight on the possible impact of foxes on game species, which will assist authorities to propose management measures of fox populations, game bird species. At the same time it is critical that the perception on foxes among the hunting and farmer community improves to improve the reputation of the species and also to shape the attitudes of locals affected by fox activity.

➤ ***Subsidies for fencing and improved facilities for farmers and livestock breeders.***

The provision of adequate/essential fencing will prevent foxes and stray dogs from entering livestock units, pens, and farms. Thus, subsidies for the improvement of fencing for both livestock breeders and farmers, could alleviate human-wildlife conflicts, with potentially fewer incidents of livestock losses recorded.

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➤ ***Targeted and localised control of foxes.***

An informed decision based on well-researched evidence can inform the potential need for controlled culling of foxes to reduce their numbers where necessary. This could contribute towards a significant reduction in the use of poisoned bait targeting foxes. With such scheme, livestock carers that are affected by loss of animals to fox activity, can report issues with foxes to authorities to assess situation and take measures where needed, instead of taking matters into their own hands through the use of poisoned baits. Of course, this should go hand-in-hand with relevant awareness raising on the issue of use of poison baits.

➤ ***Development of a compensation scheme for damages caused by foxes.***

It is widely admitted that foxes are considered the most targeted species by poisoned baits because they can cause losses especially to livestock breeders. Hence, a development of a compensation scheme for damages attributed to foxes, could reduce human-wildlife conflicts and the placement of poisoned baits. However, compensation schemes must strictly rely on reliable sources of evidence of a fox raid (such as bite marks on dead animals and the general fox population trends of the area) which will be pre-determined by well-informed sources to avoid miss-exploitation of the scheme.

➤ ***Improve awareness levels about Griffon Vulture.***

Increasing people's awareness in local communities (all over Cyprus) regarding the Griffon Vulture, is crucial to facilitate behavioural changes and observed reduced tolerance of poisoned baits in the countryside. This will be achieved through long-term communication and educational actions (especially in communities within the vulture's territory). It is worth noting that social outcry is a very important weapon to affect a poison user to abandon this dangerous and illegal practice. Furthermore, targeted educational and training workshops should also be addressed at livestock breeders/shepherds and hunters. Given that livestock rearing is one of the two main activities associated with use of poisons, raising awareness about the detrimental consequences of poisoned baits on wildlife species may mobilise individuals to find alternative, sustainable solutions.

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Recommendations for human - human conflict alleviation:

➤ Limitation on the number of dogs allowed during hunting period.

The large number of hunting dogs in specific areas has been proved to be a strong motive for the illegal placement of poisoned baits. Farmers and livestock breeders place baits to discourage hunters from hunting with dogs in and around the livestock facilities, while local hunters want to maintain dominance in their area so baits reduce hunter-hunter competition. Hence, the reduction on the number of the dogs allowed per hunter may reduce the arguments and disputes in the countryside. A smaller number of dogs per hunter will be more easily controlled, reducing case of dogs entering/ disturbing livestock units, farms or arable land.

➤ Upgrade and remodel the process of obtaining a hunting license.

Obtaining a hunting license in Cyprus is a straightforward, overly simplified process without demanding tasks, or specialised knowledge of the applicant. Hunting licenses must be acquired only once an individual has undertaken an educational and competency assessment process with training sessions (e.g. confident bird identification skills and other wildlife species, identifying ecosystemic value of wild species, basic ecological principles, relevant legislation etc.). The trainings must also have specific focus on environmental education and awareness.

➤ Better enforcement of the Law on dogs (184(I)/2002).

Despite the recent amendment of the legislation, obliging hunters to have their dogs listed on their license, it is widely admitted that the Law is not adequately enforced, especially in rural areas. Thus, increased enforcement of the Law on dogs is a crucial measure towards reducing dog numbers and therefore alleviating both human-wildlife and human-human conflicts. Law-enforcement could be achieved through increased political pressure to the relevant government officials, from organised groups and NGOs, to better overview and control hunters.

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➤ ***Involvement of Local Hunting Clubs.***

The involvement of local hunting societies is seen as essential for dealing mainly with human-human conflicts and the use of poison in general. Presidents and members of local hunting federations tend to have a well-informed, sensitive nature with a strong local sphere of influence. Many such local groups are keen to collaborate in conservation efforts and have the capacity to spread awareness in more effective and concrete ways. The ecosystem services provided by vultures as well as the serious threats they are facing could be advertised through well-established collaborations with such groups. This may decrease tolerance of harmful practices to the species and will potentially exert social pressure, stigmatising those who use poisoned baits.

➤ ***Ban on posting photos of dead prey on the internet.***

It is widely admitted that there is an informal feud between hunters on social media, regarding the amount of game species that they shoot. This, indirectly motivates hunters to hunt more game species by any means, and as a result, it generates disputes between hunters and conflicts at a human-human level. Hence, a ban on posting photos of dead prey on the internet, and especially on social media, will alleviate the existing conflicts among hunters and their disputes that sometime may cause the vengeful placement of poison to harm each others dogs etc.

➤ ***Frequent patrols in high risk poisoning areas, i.e. within the Griffon Vulture range, hunting areas, areas where practising hunting dogs is permitted, areas with livestock activity to check for poison use but also to raise awareness on the impact of poison bait use in a targeted manner to land users of these areas.***

A crucial aspect towards building a long-lasting relationship between people and nature is to increase local engagement in anti-poison efforts and efforts to increase the Griffon Vulture populations. Personnel from the relevant and competent authorities will be responsible to carry out regularly visits to the villages/communities that are within the Griffon vulture's range, with aim to keep locals informed, updated and engaged in actions for the conservation of the species.

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All the information about the project is available on the project website
www.lifewithvultures.eu

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