Pros and cons of the use of Supplementary Feeding Sites for the conservation of South Asian *Gyps* Vultures, and a Protocol for the establishment of a Vulture Restaurant.

Introduction

Vultures are some of the world's most threatened species with 16 of 23 species worldwide considered at risk of extinction (Birdlife International 2021). Of these, nine species are in the highest threat category, Critically Endangered. Globally, poisoning is considered the greatest threat to vulture populations, along with other threats such as electrocution / collision on power infrastructure, habitat loss and food shortages (Botha *et al*. 2017).

Supplementary feeding sites, often referred to as 'vulture restaurants', have been a feature of vulture conservation since they were first established in South Africa in the 1960s (Brink 2022). They have since been established throughout the world (Snyder & Snyder 2005, Gilbert *et al*. 2007, Oro *et al*. 2008). Vulture restaurants are an increasingly popular conservation option, potentially offering high profile, positive PR, community involvement and tourism opportunities. Although widely considered beneficial, recent research has highlighted potential issues surrounding the establishment of such feeding sites, even arguing that they cheat ecosystems of the benefits that scavenging can provide in a more natural system (Cortés-Avizanda and Pereira 2016). In a world of limited resources and conflicting demands, is a vulture restaurant the best use of such resources, potentially at the expense of other actions?

This document details SAVE's position on the establishment of vulture restaurants; after discussing the perceived benefits and disadvantages of such sites, we describe a protocol whereby the decision on whether to establish a supplementary feeding site can be made. The terms 'vulture restaurant' and 'supplementary feeding site' are used interchangeably and refer to any site where carcasses are left out for vultures to consume, irrespective of the original motivation (e.g. vulture conservation or disposal of carcasses) or source of the carcasses (Duriez *et al*. 2022). The same principles could also apply to cow shelters (*gaushalas*), commonly found in India and Nepal, that care for old, unproductive cows, and that leave the carcasses of deceased cattle in the open for vulture consumption (Judal *et al*. 2025), rather than disposal through incineration.

The potential benefits of establishing a vulture restaurant.

One of the main reasons for establishing a vulture restaurant is to supplement the food available to birds, especially where food shortages are considered the main threat to the vulture population (e.g. Cambodia, Legrand *et al*. 2025), to increase either survival or productivity. Providing supplementary food to Spanish Imperial Eagles *Aquila adalberti*, a facultative scavenger, resulted in increased productivity due to reduced sibling aggression (González *et al*. 2006). However, supplementary food did not lead to increased productivity in either Bearded Vultures *Gypaetus barbatus* (Margalida 2010) or Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres* (Schabo *et* al. 2017). In fact, in Bearded Vultures, supplementary provision of food has led to a reduction in mean population breeding success (see below; Carrete *et al*. 2006a, b). Poisoning is considered the most widespread cause of vulture declines worldwide (Botha *et* al. 2017), and the provision of safe food (i.e. free of contaminants), is another major reason for the establishment of a vulture restaurant (Snyder & Snyder 2005, Gilbert *et al*. 2007). This also applies to areas where vultures have become extinct as breeding species, to attract them into safe areas (e.g. in Namibia, Mossy Earth 2026).

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Supplementary feeding has played an integral role in the reintroduction and subsequent monitoring of California Condor *Gymnogyps californianus* (Snyder & Snyder 2005). Food is provided to newly released 1-to 2-year-old captive-reared condors, ensuring they receive lead-free food and increasing their survival. Supplementary feeding is also necessary to capture wild condors to monitor blood lead levels and treat those that have been recently exposed to lead (Cortés-Avizanda *et al*. 2016). The vulture restaurant in Nawalparasi District, Nepal has also played an important monitoring role, with confirmation that White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* whose GPS tags had stopped working were still alive, thus increasing the reliability of annual survival estimates (Mallord *et al*. 2024). At this restaurant, vultures released from the captive-breeding population were fed twice a week to aid their introduction to the wild (Ankit B. Joshi pers. comm.). This regularity of feeding was important as when the rate of provision was reduced, there were increased movements of released vultures and consequently increased mortality because, having spent several years in captivity, they were ill-equipped to find their own food (Mallord *et al*. 2024). Lastly, in Cambodia, where vulture densities and numbers are low, simultaneous surveys at four vulture restaurants have been carried out on an annual basis to estimate minimum population size and trends (Legrand *et al*. 2025).

Although not the main driver for their establishment, vulture restaurants can play an important role in boosting eco-tourism (DeCandido *et al*. 2012). International tour groups will often include a visit to a vulture restaurant within their itineraries (e.g. Naturetrek), which offers visitors amazing opportunities to observe and photograph vultures. Education regarding the role and plight of vultures can be aimed at two separate audiences. In Nepal, advocacy work by NGO Bird Conservation Nepal has got the Asian Vulture Crisis on to the school curriculum in both Kathmandu and Nawalparasi (location of the main vulture restaurant). School children regularly visit the restaurant to watch vultures feeding and learn more about their ecology (Pers. Obs.). Vulture restaurants can also be used to educate visiting tourists and encourage them to support vulture conservation and spread the message more widely (Wildanimalinfo.com).

The potential risks to establishment of a vulture restaurant.

Although the aim of providing supplementary food may be to change the foraging behaviour of vultures, e.g. to ensure provision of poison-free food and prevent vultures from feeding on contaminated carcasses (Gilbert *et al*. 2007) or to aid in a reintroduction programme (Snyder & Snyder 2005), disruption of the natural foraging behaviour of vultures may not be considered a favourable outcome. There is a concern that birds will become habituated to provisioned food and lose their natural foraging tendencies (Anderson and Anthony 2005). Although the presence of supplementary feeding sites does alter the foraging behaviour of vultures, evidence suggests that birds will continue to forage more widely, searching for ‘wild’ carcasses (Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres*, Kane *et al*. 2016; California Condor, Bakker *et al*. 2026). However, it is important to understand the target species. In Bearded Vultures, which are not naturally social foragers, unlike *Gyps* vultures, provision of supplementary food has resulted in changes in foraging behaviour, with congregations of non-breeding individuals increasing competition for food (Carrete *et al*. 2006a), and territoriality breaking down with the formation of trios rather than pairs, which reduces mean population breeding success (Carrete *et al*. 2006b).

Attracting vultures to vulture restaurants can increase intraspecific competition resulting in lower food intake for younger birds. Adult Eurasian Griffons *Gyps fulvus* are dominant over juvenile and immature birds and will dominate a carcass, gaining access to the best quality food, leaving younger birds to feed on scraps (Duriez *et al*. 2012). This was particularly the case at so-called ‘heavy’ supplementary feeding sites, where there was regular provision of carcasses. Young birds

preferentially fed at 'light' sites (irregular carcass provision), where there were fewer birds and less competition (Duriez *et al*. 2012).

As well as resulting in large numbers of target species, vulture restaurants can also attract predator species. In South Africa, the relative abundance of two predator species, Brown Hyena *Hyaena brunnea* and Black-backed Jackal *Canis mesomelas* both increased when supplementary food was being provided to vultures, although it is unknown whether this was due to increases in survival, productivity or immigration (Yarnell *et al*. 2015). Increased predator abundance can, naturally, lead to increased predation risk, which was shown for artificial nests (simulating the nests of ground-nesting birds; Cortés-Avizanda *et al*. 2009), although there are many caveats surrounding the use of artificial nest studies to infer the predation risk to real nests (Weidinger 2001, Zanette 2002). In addition to predators, vulture restaurants can also attract other scavengers, which can compete with target vulture species (Anderson and Anthony 2005). In India, the loss of vultures due to poisoning by diclofenac has resulted in large increases in the number of feral dogs *Canis familiaris* (Markandya *et al*. 2008), including at carcass dumps (Misher 2024). This has led to competition for food between vultures and dogs, whereby vultures try to avoid feeding with these facultative scavengers. For instance, Eurasian Griffons at a very large carcass dump at Bikaner in Rajasthan, western India, change their temporal foraging patterns, feeding at carcasses when dogs are not around (Misher 2024). In contrast, Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* at carcass dumps in Gujarat (also western India) avoided dogs spatially by avoiding carcasses that were frequented by large numbers of dogs (Judal *et al*. 2025). A build-up of non-target scavengers can also have unforeseen socio-economic consequences. For instance, in parts of India, large numbers of Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* congregate at carcass dumps, which can lead to severe crop damage in surrounding agricultural areas (V. Prakash pers. comm.). Increasing numbers of feral dogs can also lead to human-wildlife conflict in communities close to a vulture restaurant (A.B. Joshi pers. comm.). As a result of the potential build-up of facultative scavengers and predators, it will be necessary to consider fencing off an area where carcasses will be deposited (Moreno-Opo *et al*. 2012).

Due to their feeding habits, vultures are at risk of infection from bacterial, viral and mycotic microorganisms (Plaza *et al*. 2020), and large congregations of vultures at vulture restaurants run the risk of exposing the birds to disease as well as cross-infection between birds (Blanco 2018, Marin *et al*. 2018). Pig carcasses disposed of at vulture restaurants in Spain have been shown to be the source of *Salmonella* infection in both Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffons. This highlights the importance of ensuring a safe supply of carcasses, i.e. disease-free, as well as free of other contaminants such as pesticides and toxic veterinary drugs. Disease associated with medication given to pigs, especially in intensive farming systems, have been found in vultures feeding on supplementary food (Blanco *et al* 2019). In Nepal, mortality of White-rumped Vultures was reduced following changes to the hygiene regime, which included rotational feeding, at both a local scale (shifting feeding sites by 50 m for provisioned carcass) and larger scale (moving feeding sites by several kilometres) (Mallord *et al*. 2024). An increase in the number of mammalian facultative scavengers can lead to an enhanced risk of diseases spreading as the frequency of contact between animals increases (Ogada *et al*. 2012), e.g. the occurrence of rabies and subsequent death in Brown Hyenas and Black-backed Jackals that were attracted to supplementary food in South Africa (Yarnell *et al.* 2015). This is also a threat to human populations (Markandya *et al*. 2008, Frank and Sudarshan 2024).

Establishing and running a vulture restaurant can be expensive. In France and Spain, the creation of a new feeding station costs between €20,000 ($21,900) and €50,000 ($54,700), plus additional maintenance fees of €20,000 ($21,900) per year (Cortés-Avizanda *et al*. 2016). Although costs elsewhere may not reach these levels, the weekly provision of buffalo carcasses at a single restaurant in Cambodia costs $40,000 per annum, a cost borne entirely by three national /

international eNGOs (Legrand *et al*. 2025). Therefore, the financial implications of establishing a vulture restaurant should not be underestimated, and it is important that there is a funding plan in place before embarking on the enterprise. Long-term sustainability must be considered as provision of supplementary food may need to be continued for a long time, especially in areas where vulture populations are dependent on such food, e.g. Cambodia (Legrand *et al*. 2025). Should the provision of food need to be stopped, e.g. due to lack of funds, this needs to be carried out slowly so as to not unduly stress the birds. In Nepal, income is generated from the sale of bones, skins, and dung, as well as tourist revenue from visitors attending feeding events. However, financial challenges persist, particularly in restaurants with low visitor numbers. Revenue generation alone is not sufficient to cover expenses, so donors are still relied upon to support running of these restaurants (Ankit B. Joshi, pers. comm.).

In Cambodia, vultures are now conservation-dependent, reliant on artificial sources of food for their survival (Legrand *et al*. 2025). This has helped stabilise vulture populations in Cambodia but has implications for the long-term costs and sustainability of vulture restaurants. Some of the major operational costs of vulture restaurants include feeding and caring for the cows, salaries for caretakers, and the transport of carcasses to designated feeding areas. Vulture restaurants in Asia will often be dependent on the local community for its smooth running, including the provision of carcasses to be fed to the vultures. At the primary restaurant in Nepal, in Nawalparasi District, local people provide old and unproductive cows to the on-site cow shelter, where the animals are cared for until they die when the carcass can be provided for vultures (A. B. Joshi pers. comm.). The safety of the meat is ensured by quarantining newly arrived cattle for a minimum of a week. If the cow dies within that period, it is buried. Otherwise, after the natural death of the cows, their meat is provided to the vultures at the feeding site. This process minimizes the risk of contamination with NSAIDs. The local community looks favourably upon this restaurant and people are happy to contribute old cows to the shelter (Ankit B. Joshi pers. comm.) and benefit from the increase in tourism (Adhikari and Bhattarai 2017). However, at another Nepali vulture restaurant, at Gaidahawa in Lumbini Province, only a small proportion (17%) of the local community that responded to a questionnaire (n = 310) said that they were willing to contribute old cows to the vulture restaurant (Pandey *et al*. 2024). One of the main issues was a lack of assistance in transporting cows to the shelter or carcasses to the restaurant.

Conclusions

Cortés-Avizanda *et al*. (2010) wrote that “Future legislation should encourage the opening of numerous feeding stations supplied with low quantities of food to mimic the original condition of temporal and spatial unpredictability of carcasses and to maintain ecological relationships within the scavenger guild”. Unpredictable resource distribution, both spatially and temporally, is likely to increase scavenger diversity at carcasses, favouring less dominant species (Cortés-Avizanda *et al*. 2010). In an Asian context, unpredictable resources may benefit scarcer species such Slender-billed *Gyps tenuirostris* and Red-headed Vultures *Sarcogyps calvus*, which tend to be heavily outnumbered by White-rumped Vultures at vulture restaurants. Although the establishment of several small supplementary feeding sites may be logistically challenging, the provision of carcasses at cow shelters could go some way to mimicking the ‘original condition’ described above (Judal *et al*. 2025). This could involve a network of shelters within a region providing carcasses for vultures; although spatially predictable, carcass provision would be temporally unpredictable, i.e. occurring only when a cow dies at the shelter. This idea is currently being developed in the Far West of Nepal as part of a Darwin Initiative-funded project aimed at declaring a second safe Vulture Safe Zone in the country while enhancing local livelihoods.

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Ultimately, in isolation, vulture restaurants will not be enough to reverse the declines of vulture populations without addressing the major drivers of those declines. There is a need for an integrated programme to eliminate the main threats to vultures (Piper 2006). While the provision of lead-free carcasses to newly released California Condors is fundamental to their survival and the success of the reintroduction programme (Kelly *et al*. 2014), instigating bans on lead ammunition is still vital, as lead poisoning is still the primary cause of mortality for Condors, leading to reduced survival and population multiplication rates (Bakker *et al*. 2026). Similarly, although supplementary feeding reduced White-rumped Vulture mortality associated with diclofenac, it didn't eliminate it as birds continued to forage on contaminated cattle carcasses (Gilbert *et al*. 2007). The use of vulture restaurants in the conservation of Asian *Gyps* vultures was considered a temporary measure until the main threat – accidental poisoning by the veterinary drug diclofenac – was eliminated (Gilbert *et al*. 2007). Only once the ban on the veterinary use of diclofenac was achieved (in 2006) did vulture populations in South Asia begin to stabilize or partially recover (Galligan *et al*. 2020, Prakash *et al*. 2024).

Step-by-step guide to establishing a vulture restaurant.

There are many things to consider before making the decision to establish a vulture restaurant. **It should be remembered that not doing so might be the right decision!** The following questions should be addressed before any decisions are made.

1. Why is a Vulture Restaurant needed? Does establishing a restaurant supersede other potential conservation actions? Is there a programme addressing the key threats to vultures in your country / region?
2. Do you have a funding plan in place? Can you ensure long-term sustainability?
3. Do you have support from the local community? What is the attitude of local people towards carcasses being left out in the open for vultures? Are livestock owners willing to provide either old, unproductive cows or carcasses for the restaurant? How frequently / regularly will carcasses be provided? Are there ways for the local community to benefit from the presence of the vulture restaurant?
4. Do you have a safe location, e.g. away from powerlines, railway lines, wind farms and busy roads? For instance, mortality caused by electrocution on nearby electrical infrastructure at a cow shelter in Tanahun, Nepal (Rasaili 2022) has been significantly reduced by the simple action of moving the area at which carcasses are left (Ankit B. Joshi pers. comm.).
5. Will you be able to fence off an area to prevent access to carcasses by predators and other facultative scavengers? Although the fence needs to be high enough to keep out animals, one must ensure that vultures can safely clear the fence after taking off to leave. The area will need to be large enough to allow enough space for vultures to safely land and take off again.
6. Do you have access to safe carcasses? How will you ensure food is poison-free? Do you have access to quarantining facilities, e.g. as part of cow shelter? In Nepal, the safety of the meat is ensured by quarantining newly arrived cattle for a minimum of a week. If the cow dies within that period, it is buried. Otherwise, after the natural death of the cows, their meat is provided to the vultures at the feeding site. This process minimizes the risk of contamination with NSAIDs.
7. What hygiene protocol have you in place, i.e. cleaning regime. Is the site large enough to practice rotational feeding to prevent build-up of pathogens?
8. Consider your target species. E.g. Vulture Restaurants will especially benefit dominant and socially gregarious *Gyps* vultures, but not necessarily more solitary species, such as Egyptian Vultures, Bearded Vultures or Red-headed Vultures.

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