

Vulture Conservation Initiatives in the Moyar Valley Vulture Safe Zone, Tamil Nadu

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In Tamil Nadu, Arulagam, a SAVE Partner, is engaged in setting up a Vulture Safe Zone (VSZ) for the state. Arulagam was established in 2002 to echo the voice of the voiceless, and protect threatened flora and fauna by involving targeted stakeholders through participatory action programmes. In 2011, Arulagam initiated its vulture conservation work in three districts of Tamil Nadu, namely Coimbatore, The Nilgiris, and Erode with the support of



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Arulagam initiated its vulture conservation work in three districts of Tamil Nadu in 2011

the Bombay Natural History Society and Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. These districts are situated in the western part of the State, bordering Karnataka and Kerala. The Nilgiris district contains an established nesting site of vultures, and much of the work is focused on the Moyar Valley VSZ within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. With its limited resources, Arulagam's work focuses on a small area of about 30 sq. km, under the guidance of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department and in partnership with SAVE (Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction). The working area was chosen based on the breeding colonies of White-rumped Vulture and Indian Vulture, with a population of 49 and 12 nests (minimum count) respectively. Recent estimates suggest that more than 140 White-rumped Vultures, 30 Indian Vultures, and 12 Red-headed Vultures live in the landscape.

There are about 165 villages located in and around the VSZ, with approximately 17,36,000 inhabitants, predominantly of the Irular, Kurumbas, and Toda tribes, that are indigenous pastoral communities with cattle rearing as one of their main occupations.

Arulagam has used its limited resources to undertake broad, diverse, and appealing education campaigns to "rebrand" vultures to be seen as friends and benefactors of society. These campaigns draw from the social

Arulagam is a SAVE Partner engaged in setting up a Vulture Safe Zone (VSZ) in Tamil Nadu, India

surveys conducted among diverse stakeholders, including farmers, herders, the common public, veterinarians, pharmacists, and government staff.

Vultures are often portrayed negatively by cartoonists and writers alike, who use them as metaphors for cunning, death, desolation, and so on. If looks are not the vultures' forte and they have had bad press to boot, how could they make it to stardom? It was difficult to change such deeply ingrained attitudes, but not impossible. All that was needed was an image makeover for vultures, with a realistic positioning of their role in environmental services.

"When did you last see them?" was how "small talk" started with the elders. The people were engaged in discussions on what had happened to these birds and why they were disappearing. Once discussions got going, vital information on the declining population of vultures in the state (and the country) was gradually shared. A pamphlet on the importance of vultures and reasons for their decline, information about harmful and safer veterinary drugs was distributed.

Vulture Trophy – Volleyball Tournament

Youth in the Nilgiris love volleyball. Arulagam conducted a tournament called 'Vulture Trophy Volleyball Tournament' to convey the message on vulture conservation to the youth. During the tournament, the public announcement system was used to broadcast the message of vulture conservation and the ill effects of diclofenac, carcass poisoning, and forest fires. Interested youth were enrolled as "Vulture Guardians".





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Commemorative Tree Plantation

Terminalia arjuna is a preferred nesting and roosting tree for vultures. To commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, a drive was initiated with the support of Tamil Nadu Forest Department, to plant 150 saplings of this tree.

Street Plays and Street Corner Meetings

Performing arts are an effective tool to convey messages to the public for the need to conserve vultures. Street plays were performed and pamphlets distributed to the public at street corners, cattle fairs, veterinary camps, festival gatherings, and other such events.



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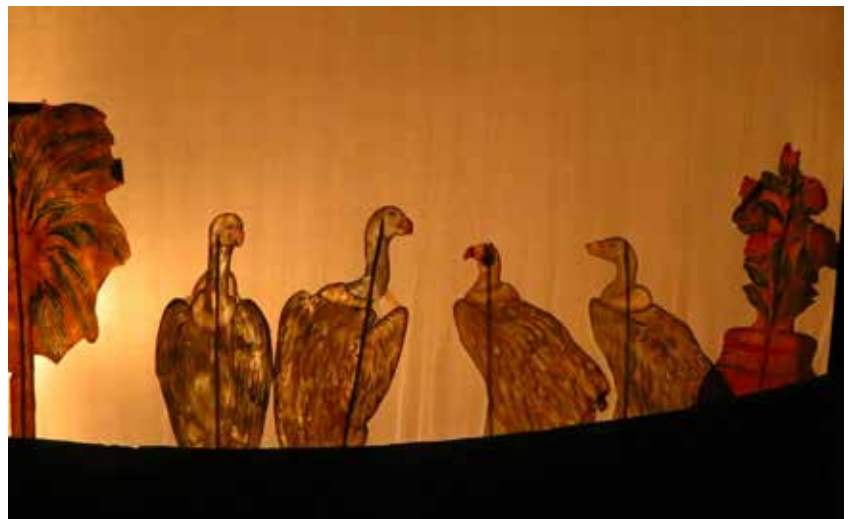
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Selfie with a Vulture

A life-size cut-out of a vulture was installed at the Botanical Garden, Udhagamandalam for children to pose for a selfie with the bird. All the participants were urged to inform Arulagam of any sightings of the bird in their region.

Puppet Shows

Educational programmes on conservation awareness, using art as the medium, easily reach people. Puppet shows were conducted to convey the issues facing vultures. Such shows were not only performed in villages, but also at the CMS COP 13 meeting at Gandhinagar, Gujarat, with active support from SACON, Coimbatore.



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Celebration of Vulture Awareness Day

The first Saturday of September each year is celebrated as International Vulture Awareness Day. A variety of activities are conducted for sensitizing the public on this occasion. One such event was a flash-mob formation of a vulture in flight by 600 students, which created a huge impact on the minds of students.



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Reaching out to Children

The Gyps Carnival was organized to portray the role that vultures play in cleaning animal carcasses and to draw attention to their unique adaptations such as keen eyesight, disease resistance, and enormous appetite. Arulagam sought the support of the Indian Air Force to address the children about the remarkable flight capabilities of the

bird. Air Force NCC cadets were also invited to explain the process of flight with a model, and how aircraft were designed with inspiration from birds. More than 3,000 children across four age groups participated in an art competition in which they learnt about vultures by conservation artist Rangunath Krishna. Tattoo sessions with vulture drawings were also organized to attract the youth.



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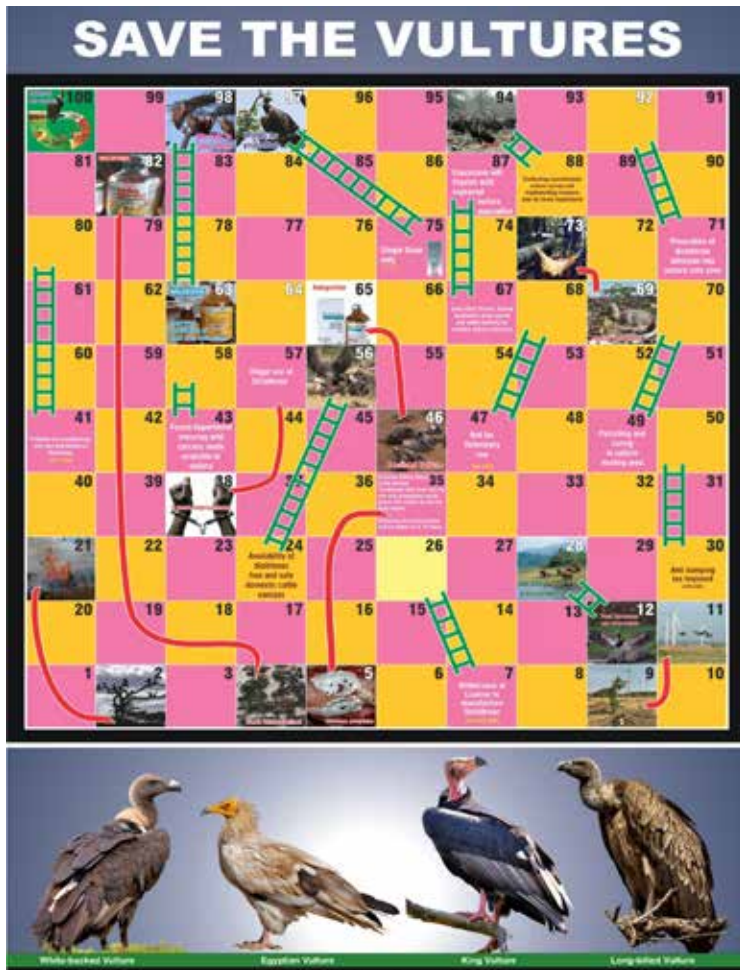


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Motorbike Rally

A 500 km Motorbike Rally was conducted with the Tiruppur Information Technology Association (TITA), starting from Tiruppur and covering the three states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, to spread awareness on vulture conservation, and on the need to shun harmful

veterinary drugs. Pamphlets were distributed and meetings conducted at important street junctions, as well as interactions with cattle owners. A vulture message put up on a display board on Arulagam’s office jeep, also covered a distance of about 1,50,000 km by road.



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Vultures & Ladders

The Snakes and Ladders board game was modified to incorporate the Do's and Don'ts of vulture conservation. Conservation messages were effectively communicated by this method. Snake images were avoided to discourage negative opinions on snakes.

Thus, Arulagam has embraced all opportunities to promote simple and consistent messages on vulture conservation to all stakeholders within their ambit, over a decade in the Moyar Valley Vulture Safe Zone. The ‘Vulture’ population are slowly laddering up. Thanks to the State Government for restricting Vulture harmful drugs ‘ketoprofen’, and ‘flunixin’ in the vulture safe zone area. But, still, we have to go a long way. ■

