



The EWT's perspective on Vulture Safe Zones in southern Africa

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is dedicated to conserving threatened species and ecosystems in east and southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

What is a Vulture Safe Zone?

A Vulture Safe Zone (VSZ) is an appropriately sized geographic area where targeted conservation measures are undertaken to address the key threats relevant to the vulture species present and to sustain viable wild populations. VSZs are developed in southern Africa to complement national and international efforts to reduce the impact of existing and emerging threats to stabilise and promote recovery of existing vulture populations.

The VSZ concept arises from the joint CITES/CMS [Multispecies Action Plan for Vultures](#). In VSZs, conservationists¹ work with landowners, government agencies, and communities to secure large tracts of suitable habitat where land is managed in a vulture friendly manner and the threats to vultures are markedly reduced, so vulture populations can thrive.

Establishing Vulture Safe Zones in Southern Africa

Process for establishing a VSZ

Although the process behind the establishment of VSZs varies depending on the prevailing threats relevant to specific properties, the recommended actions (convened in South Africa through the National Vulture Task Force) adopted by the EWT and other members of the Vulture Safe Zone Alliance are as follows:

1. The property/ies undergoes a comprehensive site assessment based on a standardised checklist and interviews with the property, reserve, or park management/owner(s). This is usually done in conjunction with a site visit by an EWT staff member. Built into the site assessment is an engagement and awareness-raising component aimed at individual landowners and the broader community to generate interest and support for the VSZ initiative.
2. Once a site assessment has been completed, a report is sent by the EWT to the property management and/or owner(s), outlining all existing threats, mitigation options, and other aspects that need consideration for the property to qualify as a VSZ².
3. In consultation with property management and/or owner(s), a timeline is then developed to implement all measures needed to address the key threats to vultures on the property. These may include, for example, the phasing-out of lead ammunition, mitigating impacts of wind

¹ In this document we refer to ourselves as the conservationists driving the process, but any conservation entity can drive it.

² A Vulture Safe Zone may comprise a network of smaller properties that are committed to becoming vulture safe.

farms (on or near the property in question), mitigating high-risk/unsafe power lines, and safe-proofing water reservoirs to prevent vulture drowning.

4. A written agreement between property management and/or owner(s) and the EWT provides formal consent to proceed with the mitigation measures. This agreement formalises the establishment of the VSZ, ensuring a continued commitment to adhere to the criteria stipulated in the original site assessment report.
5. Once all mitigation measures have been implemented and the respective sites audited to reflect adequate mitigation of all known threats, the site is declared a VSZ.
6. The EWT undertakes annual site visits and works closely with the property management and/or owner(s) to monitor threats to vultures, provide specialist input and guidance for the sustained conservation of vultures, assist with threat mitigation, and ensure that the property is managed in a vulture-safe manner.

Acknowledging that this process takes time and that landowners' commitments to these measures will vary, we have adopted a staggered approach to phase out various threats from each property over time. The time needed to establish a VSZ, from the initial site assessments through to full and effective mitigation of key threats, can vary significantly depending on the status and complexity of threats on the property. Protected areas and reserves, for example, often have fewer existing threats to vultures and can reach VSZ status within six months from the initial assessment. Livestock and agricultural farms, game farms, hunting farms, and communal land, on the other hand, present more complex and challenging threats that require time to phase out. The use of leaded ammunition, for example, can only be phased out over 1–3 years as we encourage additional landowners, hunters, and culling operators to reduce the use of leaded ammunition and options for lead-alternative ammunition are made known and accessible.

The EWT's long-term vision for most VSZs spans at least ten years. We work to establish a persistent conservation presence across the landscape. We engage extensively with landowners and communities on the ground to ensure that the VSZ status of properties is sustained into the future, benefitting both vultures and property owners. By proclaiming areas as VSZs, we value and recognise the efforts of landowners towards vulture conservation. This recognition is critical for driving further incentives to continue and sustain efforts to protect vultures on these sites.

Benefits to landowners of declaring a VSZ

Apart from the wide-ranging conservation benefits to our highly threatened vultures and a suite of other wildlife, landowners can also benefit from VSZs through the following:

- *Restoration and maintenance of the vital ecosystem services* provided by vultures: Vultures remove carcasses and organic waste from the landscape, helping to maintain healthy ecosystems and reduce the outbreak and spread of disease; as well as reducing carcass availability to other scavengers, such as Jackal and Bushpig, that may proliferate and benefit from surplus food in a given landscape.
- *Improved ecosystem functioning and land management* through the protection of flagship species and habitat. Improved habitat and species integrity will result in a more productive landscape for both farming practices and wildlife.
- *Tourism potential* associated with the presence of these charismatic vulture species on VSZ properties.
- *Collaboration with a broad VSZ network*, that currently includes over 350 individual farmers and more than 20 protected areas comprising of approximately 2 million ha across southern Africa; a valuable platform and network to access vital knowledge, share ideas, discuss challenges and solutions for improved land and livestock management.

- *A sustained presence of the EWT* in the VSZ landscape to assist with wildlife challenges, including human wildlife conflict, as well as the conservation, monitoring and research of vultures and other key species.
- *Being part of an important international vulture conservation initiative.* The VSZ network and community continues to expand throughout southern Africa, and is becoming one of the most exciting, landowner driven, conservation initiatives in the region.

Challenges

Although the establishment of a VSZ and the resultant mitigation of threats will lead to a significant reduction in vulture mortality, there is still an unavoidable possibility that vultures will be killed within some of the established and developing VSZs. Poisoning of vultures, for example, is extremely challenging to eradicate, as it is often opportunistic and linked to wildlife poaching in protected areas or used in the control of livestock predators. Although we can go to great lengths to remove poisons from the landscape, change attitudes, raise awareness around the use of poisons, and enhance the response to poisoning events, it is near-impossible to ensure that no poisoning occurs. Similarly, while threats from energy infrastructure can be significantly reduced, collisions and electrocutions on power lines are challenging to completely eradicate. Although work is done to safe-proof priority high-risk lines and other energy infrastructure, ensuring that all electrical infrastructure is vulture safe is near-impossible. Given the complex and dynamic nature of many threats to vultures in southern Africa, the goal is to achieve an 80–100% reduction in vulture mortalities once a VSZ has been established in a region and to work towards achieving stable and growing populations.

Along with site assessments, it is important to establish baselines of vulture mortalities within a given VSZ to measure the reduction in vulture mortality resulting from VSZ establishment and to assess progress towards defined targets. Understanding the effectiveness of mitigation approaches allows us to refine and improve our methods to support the ultimate goal of safe zones for vulture populations into the future. VSZs are therefore long-term projects that involve developing long-term relationships and ongoing action.

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