

## Conditional nod to the Girnar Ropeway project

The Girnar Ropeway project in Gujarat gets in-principle approval subject to six specific conditions. They include minimum disturbance for the long-billed vulture, Girnari Giddh habitat, cafeteria for vultures, increase in the height of two towers along the ropeway, a cess on ticket turnover revenue for conservation and setting up of a technical monitoring group.

The long-billed vulture, *Gyps indicus* is one of the 20 most endangered birds in the world. The species has been included in the IUCN red list of threatened animals. The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Mumbai has reported that the vulture population, especially the Indian white-backed, long-billed and slender-billed vultures has declined almost 99.9% in recent times.

Further studies established in 2004 that the presence of the drug Diclofenac, used widely as a painkiller for livestock in the Indian subcontinent, was found in the tissues of dead cattle and was proving fatal for the vultures. It caused kidney failure in these birds. The study also revealed that 11.1% of the livestock carcasses available to vultures were contaminated with the drug. Another major threat to the vultures is from the loss and deterioration of habitat.

The loss of vultures has important economic, cultural and human health consequences. Vultures have helped to clean up and remove dead livestock and even human corpse. An immediate impact has been the explosion in the feral dog population.

The construction of a ropeway from Bhavnath Taleti Ambaji Temple in the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary at Junagarh has been under consideration of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India, for over a year. The ropeway project was on the hold since September 1995. But it was only after the declaration of the Girnar Reserve Forest as the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary in May 2008, that the Central Government approval has been necessitated.

A technical group of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife believes that the construction of the ropeway might cause the local extinction of these vultures. The Committee visited the site in last December and has advised against the construction of a ropeway.

On 7 February 2011, MoEF had given clearance to this project subject to six conditions. The Government of Gujarat will conduct a study to consider an alter-

nate alignment of the ropeway project, preferably along the Datter/Bhesan side, with a view to ensure that it does not cut across the prime vulture habitat and minimizes disturbance to the nesting, roosting and ranging sites of long-billed vultures and other wildlife species, and submit a report within two months.

The height of the ninth and tenth tower of the ropeway will be increased to avoid disturbance to the vulture nesting sites located in the area. A high-resolution camera will be placed on the ninth tower to monitor the movement of vultures and if required, the movement of cabins on the ropeway will be regulated to avoid any accidental collision of vultures with the cabins.

A cafeteria for vultures will be constructed at an appropriate location, to be decided in consultation with the experts, to provide supplemental feed to the vultures apart from attempting to divert their movement away from the ropeway.

A cess of Rs 5 per ticket or 2% of the ticket turnover revenue, whichever is higher, will be imposed. This will be given to the Gir Lion Conservation Society for conservation-related activities in and around the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary, with equal focus on long-billed vultures.

A technical monitoring group of officers from the Gujarat Forest Department, and local voluntary organizations concerned like BNHS and WWF will be set up to advise on safety protocols and to monitor the implementation of the conditions governing the clearance of the ropeway project.

The Girnari Giddh population that will be affected by the ropeway project is between 20% and 25% of the total population of long-billed vultures in Gujarat, but less than 10% of the vulture population in the estate. The ropeway project would minimize man-animal conflict in the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary.



Long billed vulture.

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