

TAMIL NADU'S LAUNCHES MISSION TO SAVE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED VULTURES

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Feathered friend:A white-backed vulture being trained to fly in Siryur near Mudumalai Tiger Reserve.M. Sathyamoorthy

Alarmed at the 96% decline in India's vulture population between 1993 and 2003, the Central government put into place two action plans to protect the species at the national level — the first in 2006 and the second, ongoing plan for 2020-2025. One of the important action points in this nationwide plan is the formation of State-level committees to save the critically endangered population of vultures.

Acting on it, the Tamil Nadu Government formed a State-level Committee to set up an institutional framework for the effective conservation of vultures, which almost went extinct in the country at the beginning of the 21st century. A formal order was issued by Supriya Sahu, Additional Chief Secretary, Environment, Climate Change and Forests, on Wednesday.

In Tamil Nadu, four species of vultures are found — the Oriental white-backed vulture, the long-billed vulture, the red-headed vulture, and the Egyptian vulture. "The first three are residents and can be found in the landscapes of the Nilgiris and Sathyamangalam," S. Bharathidasan, secretary of Arulagam, which works for vulture conservation, said. "There is evidence of Egyptian vulture breeding only at one site in Dharmapuri," he said.

The committee, apart from the senior officials of the Forest Department, also has other experts, including K. Ramesh from the Wildlife Institute of India, S. Muralidharan of SACON, Vibhu Prakash of the Bombay Natural History Society, and two locals involved in conservation — B. Ramakrishnan of the Government Arts College, Uthagamandalam, Mr. Bharathidasan of Arulagam. The committee, which has a two-year tenure, will take steps for monitoring the conservation and recovery of existing vulture sites.

Vultures play a key role as nature's scavengers, keeping the environment clean. Their social and ecological significance cannot be underestimated, Ms. Sahu said, adding "It is the last level scavenger."

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