





## Establishing the First Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone to Address the Southern African Vulture Crisis

Progress Report

Prepared for the Convention on Biological Diversity

November 2021

### Project Summary: 1 July – 15 November 2021

Over the reporting period from July to November 2021, although we did not reach all targets due to COVID-19 restrictions, we *completed* our key project objectives:

- *Objective 1: To initiate the establishment of the first southern African transboundary vulture safe zone (tVSZ) to slow and eventually reverse the decline of vulture species within our focal area; and*
- *Objective 2: To improve the response to wildlife poisoning events to reduce the loss of vultures to intentional and unintentional poisoning.*

In total, the team spent three weeks on the ground engaging with landowners across the study site, undertaking site assessments, signing landowner agreements to commit properties to the tVSZ initiative and, importantly, improving our understanding of the threat landscape across the tVSZ. We completed our Wildlife Poisoning Response Training at key sites in South Africa and Botswana and distributed six poisoning response kits to key stakeholders within our tVSZ. Full details below and in the progress table.



Above: *A habitat well worth protecting.* September 2021: The Limpopo River in the dry season, where the water level and flow drops significantly, and small pools develop along the river's course. Our Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone is largely actioned to protect the mature trees that vultures nest on, as well as the ancient riparian habitat that flanks the Limpopo River, and to remove the key threats to vultures within the surrounding vulture rich landscape.

## Objective 1

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) project team spent two weeks over September/October along the South African side of the tVtSZ engaging with landowners and developing commitment from key properties to be included in the initiative. We visited the following properties during this time and added some additional properties to the tVtSZ project: Tweestroom 2 MR, Krenggatbok 3 MR, Roly Poly 4 MR, Junction 3 MR, Bievack 14 MR, Tugela 171 MR, Uzutu 170 MR, Umzumbi 21 MR, Du Plessis 18 MR, Weederdoper 55 MR, Tule 56 MR, Selous 60 MR, Essexvale 61 MR, Gwaai 62 MR. The managers of Limpokwena Nature Reserve (Bievack 14 MR) will also represent their sister property, Zingela Nature Reserve, which covers an additional 27 000ha. We are in discussion with additional properties along the north-western section of the Soutpansberg mountains also, an area of importance to Cape Vultures. Following up from our BBI tVtSZ project, we are currently planning a trip to the area in the first quarter of 2022 where we will have an open day for surrounding farmers and landowners to discuss the importance of the project, relevance to them, and also how they can get involved in future. There are many smaller properties, which would collectively create a very important area for vulture conservation along the Limpopo River. We undertook three more site assessments on properties bordering the Limpopo River and committed approximately 41,000 ha of land to our tVtSZ initiative.



Above: Our Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone project officer, John Davies, surveying raptor nests along the Limpopo River in the western section of our Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Involving landowners in the surveys was an incredible productive way to build relationships, raise awareness and commit landowners to managing their properties in vulture safe manners.

Raptors Botswana is our implementing partner in Botswana for our tVSZ that are currently working with landowners predominantly within the Tuli Block region. The goal here is to get landowners in the Tuli area to commit to managing their properties in a vulture safe manner. Over the reporting period, Raptors Botswana engaged with the landowners of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve (NTGR) in the Tuli block region of Northeast Botswana with the goal of the reserve becoming the first Vulture Safe Zone in Botswana. The Limpopo and Shashe Rivers in this region, plus the other rivers in the reserve, provide ideal habitats for vultures and other raptors to nest in. The herbivores in the reserve killed and eaten by resident carnivores, provide plentiful and safe food for vultures there all year round, including in the nesting period between May to November. There are also plentiful water holes in the reserve there with clean and palatable water.



Above. The riparian landscape typical to the Limpopo River. This river system forms the heart, or perhaps artery, of our tVSZ, with important vulture breeding habitat in the large trees that flank the Limpopo River - critical sites to protect from disturbance and development.

Our engagements and site assessments with the landowners of the NTGR are far down the line and an important MOU between them and Raptors Botswana, representing the tVSZ in Botswana, was signed. That would make the reserve the first Vulture Safe Zone in Botswana. The NTGR is made up of 39 different properties and in total is 70,120 hectares. An important product of our tVSZ work in the NTGR has been the reserves commitment to burying their unsafe powerlines to ensure that they do not pose an electrocution and collision risk to the local vulture population. Reducing threats to vultures in this landscape will be an important step in helping our vultures recover from the crisis they are presently in. We plan to work with the rest of the Tuli block region in 2022 to also move towards making the whole area a VSZ.

## Objective 2

We conducted a further two Wildlife Poisoning Response Training workshops within key sites of the VSZ, training 20 more individuals from the Northern Tuli Game Reserve and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks in Botswana (28-29 October 2021) and 12 individuals from Insimbi Legacy Projects, the Blouberg Farm Safety and Security Forum, Alldays Wildlife Communities & Research Centre, Wildlife Rescue and the Mabula Ground Hornbill Project at the Chinaka Lodge near Alldays in Limpopo (25-26 October 2021). A total of six Wildlife Poisoning Response Kits were issued to various stakeholders at both venues for deployment and use in their areas of operation. The draft Wildlife Poisoning Response Strategy

for the Tuli North Game Reserve was also finalised and will be published and implemented by the end of January 2022.

Table 1. Summary of the trainees trained in Wildlife Poisoning Response Training for our BBI project within our Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone over 2021.

Date	Location	Organisation	Area	Female	Male	African	Other	Total Learners
26-28.01.2021	Tuli North Game Reserve	TNGR, DNPW	Botswana	2	17	17	2	19
28-29.04.2021	Blouberg Nature Reserve	LEDET, SANParks, SAPS & EWT	RSA, Limpopo	5	15	18	2	20
25-26.10.2021	Chinaka Lodge, Limpopo	Various	RSA, Zim, Limpopo	8	4	0	12	12
28-29.10.2021	Tuli North Game Reserve	Various	Botswana	2	18	18	2	20
Total				17	54	53	18	71



Above: Wildlife Poisoning Response Training presented to a second group staff from the Tuli North Game Reserve and DWNP in Botswana during October 2021.



Above: During the training conducted at Chinaka Lodge in Limpopo to 12 individuals from various stakeholder groups, including landowners, we handed over two wildlife poisoning response kits to interested stakeholder organisations.

### Challenges and Lessons Learnt

Due to various COVID-19 related restrictions, we experienced challenges with travel and direct landowner engagement across our project site, which resulted in initial delays in some project activities and reduced numbers of target sites we could focus on. Over 2021, however, we caught up on many of proposed activities. Despite being able to secure local essential services permits to travel and move around project sites, international travel was tough and slow. Traveling to rural Zimbabwe to undertake our site assessments and Wildlife Poisoning Response Training was particularly challenging. Further, our implementing partners, BirdLife Zimbabwe, that were identified for the Zimbabwean side of the tVSZ, had their own challenges travelling and undertaking site assessments in the very rural, remote areas identified in our tVSZ. This led to us not reaching our proposed targets in Zimbabwe, an aspect of the current project we aim to pick up on and complete in early 2022, in particular within the rural communities across the banks from Mapungubwe National Park.

A vital aspect we have reinforced working in this dynamic, remote landscape across international borders, is the need to establish local implementing partners for each country identified within our tVSZ. We have also recognised that a permanent field officer stationed locally within the tVSZ is absolutely necessary for the next phase of the project; to develop a conservation presence in the landscape; build relationships with a broad network of



landowners; and to effectively execute and implement the next phase of work we have planned for the tVSZ. We are currently fundraising hard to cover this position and appoint a permanent field officer for this project.

### **The future of the Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone: where to from here?**

This project, with the vital seed funding provided by the Bio-Bridge Initiative (BBI), played an important springboard for facilitating the initial phases for the establishment of the first international Vulture Safe Zone within the vulture rich landscape along the Limpopo River. We have a long-term vision for this landscape, and our activities undertaken as part of our BBI tVSZ project have allowed us to establish an important network of landowners to start working with to improve the protection status of the tVSZ and remove the key threats to vultures within this landscape. This form of conservation work starts with leveraging support from local farmers, reserves and communities, and is the strategy that makes this work so effective. We have secured a small grant of R325,000 from the Charl van der Merwe Trust to further develop our BBI tVSZ project in 2022, and have submitted two significant funding proposal applications, one to Anglo American and the de Beers Mining Group, to take our tVSZ project to its next phase. If successful, this will enable us to grow the network of landowners fully committed to the project and initiate the direct mitigation of the key threats we have identified during the first phase of the project. We are excited to take this work forward and will be partnering with our Carnivore Conservation Programme at the EWT, as well as a handful of key stakeholders and in-country implementers identified in this project, to start actively protecting vultures and carnivores in the tVSZ.

We would like to thank the BBI for the vital funding to get this work off the ground, and we are excited about the next phase of work we will be initiating in early 2022.



Above: The breath-taking landscape typical to our Transboundary Vulture Safe Zone. The area is a mosaic of National Parks, reserves, farms, game farms, hunting concessions and communal land.

The following table summarises the progress made to date:

Objectives	<p><i>Objective 1:</i> To initiate the establishment of the first southern African transboundary vulture safe zone (VSZ) to slow and eventually reverse the decline of vulture species within our focal area.</p> <p><i>Objective 2:</i> To improve the response to wildlife poisoning events to reduce the loss of vultures to intentional and unintentional poisoning.</p>						
Expected outcomes	Activities and timetable	Description of activity	Outputs	Performance indicators	Baseline	Progress against the expected outcomes and objectives – mid-term report	Progress against the expected outcomes and objectives – final report
<p>1. Initial contact is made with: a) relevant landowners and draft pledges are secured from ~10 farmers to manage their properties in a vulture-friendly manner; and b) relevant government departments show buy-in to the establishment of the proposed</p>	<p><b>Activity 1.1:</b> Identification of key stakeholders to participate in the VSZ project</p> <p>Start date: 15 March 2021 End date: 31 July 2021</p>	<p>1. Facilitate and coordinate meetings to announce the VSZ project concept to target partners and stakeholders. 2. Identify key stakeholders to participate in the VSZ project. 3. Establish willing properties, protected areas, communities and farms to incorporate into the long term VSZ project</p>	<p>1. Key landowners have signed draft pledges to work towards managing their properties in a vulture safe manner and a network of relevant government officials is established.</p>	<p>1. A database of at least 350 farmers who have expressed interest in participating in the VSZ. 2. Number of signed pledges stipulating the vulture-friendly farming activities they will undertake.</p>	<p>No available conservation network and stakeholders in place to coordinate, implement and establish a vulture safe zone in an important vulture region.</p>	<p>1. <i>Completed. Several key meetings have been held with target partners and stakeholders and a successful press release was made to announce the project.</i></p> <p>2. <i>On track: We have identified and met with five implementing parties. We have identified a number of properties to implement the VSZ project.</i></p> <p>3. <i>On track: We have established a network of properties willing to become VSZs, we are following up at each site to secure signed pledges.</i></p>	<p>1. <i>Completed. We have established a database of 353 farms interested in participating in our tVSZ.</i></p> <p>2. <i>Completed. The final number of implementing partners was three, these include Raptors Botswana (Botswana), BirdLife Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe) and BirdLife South Africa (RSA).</i></p> <p>3. <i>Completed. In total, we secured signed landowner/reserve agreements from 10 properties comprising of large tracts of land adjacent to the Limpopo River (2 reserves in Botswana and 8 properties</i></p>

<p>VSZ (Month 1-2).</p> <p>2. Upon completion of the project, site assessments and landowner engagements will be conducted at 10 key properties, leading to an understanding and comprehensive map of the threats, their extent, and scope on all focal properties within our proposed VSZ to guide the longer-term project.</p> <p>3. By project completion, over</p>	<p><b>Activity 1.2:</b> Assessment and ranking of each partner property</p> <p>Start date: 30 March 2021 End date: 31 August 2021</p>	<p>1. Conduct a systematic survey at ten key properties to establish the presence and extent of threats to vultures on properties and land across the proposed VSZ</p> <p>2. Assess and rank each property according to the threats identified</p>	<p>2. A map and comprehensive understanding of the threat landscape on 10 properties guides/informs the next phase of work to address these major threats and establish a VSZ</p>	<p>3. Number of survey reports from at least 10 properties within the FSZ.</p>	<p>No information available on the threat landscape within proposed vulture safe zone. Presence and extent of key threats to vultures poorly understood. No landowners engaged with to establish vulture safe zones on their properties.</p>	<p>1. <i>On track: We have completed six surveys so far and aim to complete a further series of surveys to investigate the threats on key properties.</i></p> <p>2. <i>On track: to be completed once surveys are complete and data has been consolidated and analysed,</i></p>	<p><i>in South Africa) and informal, verbal commitment from 29 key properties within our tVSZ (28 in South Africa and 1 in Zimbabwe). We aim to work with these properties in 2022 to secure signed agreements to formally incorporate them into our tVSZ.</i></p> <p>1. <i>Completed: Eight Site assessments were conducted over the project and landowner agreements were drawn up with these key properties. Fewer assessments made due to COVID restrictions and travel challenges to Zimbabwe.</i></p> <p>2. <i>Completed: Along with our assessments, we have submitted reports with key threats identified and a mitigation plan to key landowners that were committed to the tVSZ.</i></p>
--	---	--	---	--	--	---	--

<p>100 individuals at five sites within known key poisoning hotspots within the proposed VSZ are upskilled to respond effectively and rapidly to wildlife poisoning events in the area.</p> <p>4. An improved capacity to treat and handle surviving wildlife at poisoning events and decontaminate a site.</p>	<p><b>Activity 2.1:</b> Training on poisoning response protocols</p> <p>Start date: 1 March 2021 End date: 31 July 2021</p>	<p>The training will cover both theoretical and practical aspects and will be conducted at five key sites for a total of 100 trainees, including rangers, and other law enforcement officials. It will up-skill these trainees in poisoning response protocols within the wildlife poisoning strategy.</p>	<p>3. Anti-poaching Units, field rangers, and other law enforcement personnel trained to effectively respond to and handle wildlife poisoning incidents, reducing their impact on species and the environment, and help in the improvement of prosecution rates of poachers and identification of poisoning hotspots.</p>	<p>4. Number of trainings delivered in at least five sites; 5. Number of participants to local level trainings, ensuring a balanced participation of male and female participants;</p>	<p>Low capacity and protocol for key response units and local stakeholders to respond effectively to wildlife poisoning events.</p>	<p>1. <i>Minor delays due to COVID: 39 individuals have been trained from sites in Botswana and South Africa. Further training of at least another 65 people have been confirmed for September/October 2021.</i></p>	<p>1. <i>Completed. A total of 71 individuals were trained (17 females and 54 males; see Table 1). Fewer numbers reached due to COVID restrictions and travel challenges to Zimbabwe.</i></p>
	<p><b>Activity 2.2:</b> Issuance of a basic Wildlife</p>	<p>This field kit contains all the equipment and</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>6. Number of Wildlife Poisoning</p>	<p>No poisoning response kits distributed to key</p>	<p>1. <i>On track: WPR kits are in production and will be</i></p>	<p>1. <i>Completed. Six WPR kits were issued to various stakeholders at</i></p>

	<p>Poisoning Response (WPR) Kit to every operational unit/section in the VSZ</p> <p>Start date: 1 June 2021 End date: 31 September 2021</p>	<p>materials required to conduct a proper investigation and decontamination process of a wildlife poisoning scene.</p>		<p>Response Kits distributed.</p>	<p>individuals to assist with the management and safety of individuals at wildlife poisoning events within the proposed VSZ landscape. Reduced ability to save surviving poisoned wildlife.</p>	<p><i>distributed following the next phase of trainings.</i></p>	<p><i>venues for deployment and use in their areas of operation. Fewer WPR kits distributed than planned due to COVID restrictions and travel challenges to Zimbabwe.</i></p>
	<p><b>Activity 2.3:</b> Drafting and preparation of WPR protocols</p> <p>Start date: 1 June 2021 End date: 31 September 2021</p>	<p>1. Draft WPR protocols 2. Prepare protocols for relevant properties</p>	<p>4. The drafting of wildlife poisoning response (WPR) protocols for the VSZ and the printing of an aide memoire that will assist with knowledge retention among trainees</p>	<p>7. Number of WPR protocols drafted for relevant properties and aide memoires distributed</p>	<p>No SOP in place to facilitate the effective response, management and coordination of vulture poisoning events.</p>	<p>1. <i>On track: WPR protocol to be issued towards the end of the activity cycle.</i></p>	<p>1. <i>Completed: The draft Wildlife Poisoning Response Strategies for key properties were finalised and will be published and implemented by the end of January 2022.</i></p>



N/A	Monitoring and Reporting	1. Producing mid-term and final reports with respective attachments showing the implementation of activities 2. Producing final expenditure report	5. Mid-term report 6. Final report, including a roadmap of long-term cooperation 7. Final expenditure report	All reports submitted and approved by donor in accordance with the timeline provided in Clause 6 of the SSFA	N/A	N/A	N/A
-----	--------------------------	---	--	--	-----	-----	-----