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AFRICAN BIRD OF PREY SANCTUARY

9 May 2016

Dear Paul

An update on the Bearded Vulture Breeding Program at the African Bird of Prey Sanctuary,
adjacent to the proposed Isundu 765/400 KV Substation
and turn-in transmission lines.

In pursuit of professional accuracy, a principle to which you undoubtedly adhere, I need to bring to your attention some recent developments regarding our onsite activities and their significance in the national management plan for the conservation of the Bearded vulture species.

A recap on the conservation status of the Bearded Vulture:

The Bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) is a large, iconic and highly specialized bird of prey, unique in both behaviour and adaptation. In 1984, Hiraldo et al divided the species in two, with each sub-species occupying the opposite hemisphere of the world. The last 320 odd individuals of the southern sub-species reside in the Maluti-Drakensberg mountains. Their population is in severe decline and has now been regionally up-listed to 'critically endangered'.

The S. Krueger et al 2014 study confirmed that the *Gypateuas barbatus meridionalis* subspecies has:

- Suffered a 32 to 51% occupied territory decline
- Shows a 27% breeding distribution decline
- And a 20% population density decline

Conversely, in 1978 a group of conservationists in Europe started an EEP (European Endangered Species Program) for the northern sub-species. Since then this network, now coordinated under the VCF (Vulture Conservation Foundation), has bred over 422 bearded vultures in captivity and have subsequently released and repopulated birds in the Alps, Spain and the Cévennes mountains. The success of this conservation breeding program has

resulted in the northern Bearded vulture population going from being recorded as extinct in the wild in Europe to being listed as 'near threatened'.

From this, two facts pertain. If we cannot prevent our ex-situ population decline, then our priority conservation action must be to first establish a genetic reserve in the form of a captive population. Secondly, by following the proven methodology of the European breeding management-model, we stand a high chance of breeding success ourselves. To date the European programs have, in fact, bred more birds in captivity than we have left in the wild.

The South African Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) for *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis*, compiled in 2013, identified captive breeding as a proposed action should the conservation status of the species warrant it. The African Bird of Prey Sanctuary was the organization recorded in this document to undertake the venture. On the 18th of April 2015, due to the perilous future and continued decline of the Maluti-Drakensberg Bearded vulture population, the Bearded Vulture Taskforce confirmed that the time was right to initiate such a breeding program. Last year, in the immediate 2015 winter breeding season, the African Bird of Prey Sanctuary, in conjunction with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, undertook a pilot project (utilizing available skills, expertise and resources) to reap second eggs from two nests. Both these eggs hatched and the chicks were successfully raised at the Sanctuary where they now live with the resident adult female.

The long-term objective of such a captive breeding program is two-fold:

- Firstly to establish an ex-situ genetic reservoir of breeding stock for the African subspecies (between 20 and 30 birds)
- and secondly to be able to produce viable chicks for reintroduction, to bolster the in-situ populations, whether in current habitats or new territories.

The relevance of all this in relation to the proposed construction of the Isundu Sub-station is the following:

- 1) The Bearded vulture is one of the few species significant enough to warrant a biodiversity management plan (BMP) governing its conservation. And the African Bird of Prey Sanctuary is recorded as the implementing agent of the captive breeding operations in this legislated document that has been approved and signed by the Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs. (See Government Notice No. 350 of 8 May 2014 in Gazette 37620)
- 2) Since our last communications, the conservation status of the Bearded vulture in the regional red data book has been formally up-listed from *Endangered* to *Critically Endangered*.
- 3) In November 2015 Dr Sonja Kruger and I went to Europe, presented our work at their international conference and met with EU representatives of the Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF) who now endorse our operations and proposed breeding plan for the species.

- 4) The idea of a captive breeding project is becoming a reality. This necessitates planning the construction of further a further nine dedicated enclosures as permanent homes. Following the precautionary principal, however, which is obviously imperative in the management of a critically endangered species, it is in no way viable to establish this breeding group immediately alongside a substation of the proportions that is planned.
- 5) As the next breeding season approaches it is necessary to expand project borders to include Lesotho. This is to be formalized imminently at the next Bearded Vulture Task Force meeting (17th to 19th May 2016) with Lesotho government representatives, again necessitating continuity of plan as the project is taken to an international level.

I am sure that you have already been cognisant of the negative effect that Eskom's proposed substation would have on the breeding of any extremely vulnerable avian species (a fact that has of course already been brought to your attention in our previous discussions). So, this correspondence will probably merely serve to confirm your current determinations that, should the construction of the substation proceed, then as a mitigation measure the Sanctuary would have to be moved to another location. I merely wish, however, to bring your attention to these advancements.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shannon Hoffman', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Shannon Hoffman