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Indian Vulture Reintroduction — BNHS Releases 15 Birds at Melghat

8 January 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED

ENVIRONMENT

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WHY IN NEWS

The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) released 15 critically endangered Indian vultures (*Gyps indicus*) at Melghat Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, on January 8, 2026 — a landmark conservation milestone in India’s effort to reverse one of the worst wildlife collapses in recorded history.

THE CRISIS: 99% POPULATION COLLAPSE

India’s vulture population — once numbering in the tens of millions — collapsed by more than **99%** between the early 1990s and the 2010s. The cause was identified in 2004: **diclofenac**, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) used to treat livestock pain. Vultures feeding on carcasses of cattle treated with diclofenac suffered acute renal failure and died within days.

Vulture species	Population (1980s est.)	Population (2010s est.)	Change
White-rumped vulture (<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>)	40 million	~10,000	-99.9%
Indian vulture (<i>Gyps indicus</i>)	Millions	~12,000	~-99%
Slender-billed vulture (<i>Gyps tenuirostris</i>)	Millions	~1,000	~-99.9%

In 2006, the Government of India banned diclofenac for veterinary use — though human-formulation diclofenac (allowed to be repurposed) continued to cause secondary poisoning until stricter enforcement began in 2015.

BNHS CONSERVATION BREEDING PROGRAMME

The **Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS)** — India’s premier wildlife conservation body, founded in 1883 — operates three Vulture Conservation Breeding Centres (VCBCs):

Pinjore, Haryana (with Haryana Forest Department)

Rani, Assam (with Assam Forest Department)

Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (with MPFD)

The January 8, 2026, release at **Melghat Tiger Reserve** (Amravati district, Maharashtra) involved **15 Indian vultures** (*Gyps indicus*) bred in captivity and fitted with GPS/GSM satellite tags for post-release monitoring. This is the **largest single reintroduction event** in India’s vulture recovery programme.

MELGHAT TIGER RESERVE — CONSERVATION SIGNIFICANCE

Melghat Tiger Reserve holds a special place in Indian conservation history:

First tiger reserve established in Maharashtra (1974); one of the **original nine** tiger reserves under **Project Tiger** (launched April 1, 1973)

Located in **Gavilgarh Hills**, a southern offshoot of the **Satpura Range**, Amravati district

Total area: ~1,677 sq km (core: ~361 sq km + buffer: ~1,317 sq km)

River network: Catchment area for five tributaries of the **Tapti River** — Khandu, Khapra, Sipna, Gadga, and Dolar

Wildlife: Bengal tigers, leopards, sloth bears, wild dogs (dholes), gaur, Indian giant squirrel

Adjacent sanctuary: Dnyanganga Wildlife Sanctuary (205 sq km, Buldhana district) forms part of the buffer zone

Melghat’s mosaic of teak forests, grasslands, and river valleys provides the optimal nesting and foraging habitat for vultures — large soaring birds that require thermals, open landscapes, and access to carcasses.

WHY VULTURES MATTER: ECOLOGICAL ROLE

Vultures are nature’s sanitation system. Their near-complete loss had cascading consequences:

Feral dog population explosion: Dogs replaced vultures as primary carcass feeders, multiplying India’s feral dog population by an estimated 5–7 million and increasing rabies transmission.

Anthrax and disease spread: Vultures’ highly acidic stomach (pH ~1) destroys pathogens like anthrax, brucellosis, and rabies virus. Dogs and rats, lacking this capability, spread pathogens instead.

Economic cost: A 2019 study (*PNAS*) estimated the vulture collapse cost India over **USD 34 billion** through increased human mortality from rabies alone (2000–2005).

CONSERVATION MEASURES — INDIA’S RESPONSE

Measure	Year	Details
Diclofenac ban (veterinary)	2006	MoEFCC + Dept. of Animal Husbandry
VCBC network established	2001–2009	BNHS + 3 state governments
Vulture Safe Zones (VSZs)	2011 onwards	Districts declared diclofenac-free
Melghat Vulture Conservation Reserve	2010	Maharashtra’s first vulture reserve
Melghat field release	Jan 2026	15 birds, GPS-tagged

Safe alternative to diclofenac: Meloxicam (approved 2006), tolfenamic acid, and ketoprofen have been endorsed by BirdLife International as vulture-safe NSAIDs.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Gyps indicus (IUCN: Critically Endangered); diclofenac – veterinary ban 2006; BNHS (est. 1883, Mumbai); Melghat Tiger Reserve (Maharashtra; first; 1974; Project Tiger 1973); Satpura Range; Tapi River tributaries.

MAINS GS-3:

Biodiversity conservation – extinction debt, species recovery programmes; human-wildlife conflict; One Health framework; role of carrion birds in ecosystem services.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIAN VULTURE (*GYPS INDICUS*):

IUCN Status: **Critically Endangered** (since 2002)

WPA 1972 Schedule: **Schedule I** (highest protection)

Wingspan: 1.9–2.5 m; soars on thermals up to 11,000 m

Decline cause: Diclofenac in cattle carcasses → acute visceral gout → death within 72 hours

BNHS:

Founded: **1883**, Mumbai | India's oldest wildlife conservation body

Notable works: Salim Ali (ornithologist); Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan

Hosts: Vulture Conservation Breeding Centres in Pinjore, Rani (Assam), Bhopal

MELGHAT TIGER RESERVE:

State: Maharashtra | District: Amravati | Established: **1974** (one of original 9 under Project Tiger)

Tiger population (2022 census): ~79 tigers

Location: Gavilgarh Hills, Satpura Range southern extension

Rivers: Tapi tributaries — Khandu, Khapra, Sipna, Gadga, Dolar

PROJECT TIGER:

Launched: **April 1, 1973** | Current reserves: 55 (as of 2024)

Statutory body: NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority) under WPA 1972 (amended 2006)

India tiger count (2022): **3,167** — 75% of global wild tiger population

DICLOFENAC AND VULTURE SAFE ALTERNATIVES:

Veterinary diclofenac ban: India **2006**; Pakistan + Nepal ban: 2010

Safe NSAIDs: Meloxicam, Tolfenamic acid, Ketoprofen

Human-formulation diclofenac (multi-dose vials): continued cause of poisoning until tighter controls

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Vulture Safe Zones (VSZs): Districts with zero veterinary diclofenac availability + monitoring

India has 9 vulture species; 3 are Critically Endangered (*Gyps bengalensis*, *Gyps indicus*, *Gyps tenuirostris*)

Neophron percnopterus (Egyptian vulture): Endangered IUCN; Schedule I WPA

World Vulture Awareness Day: First Saturday of September

Sources: BNHS, MoEFCC, The Hindu

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