

# TEDTalks, Munir Virani

## Why I love Vultures

00:12	I would like to talk to you about a very special group of animals.
00:16	There are 10,000 species of birds in the world. Vultures are amongst the most threatened group of birds. When you see a vulture like this, the first thing that comes to your mind is, these are disgusting, ugly, greedy creatures that are just after your flesh, associated with politicians. (Laughter) (Applause) I want to change that perception. I want to change those feelings you have for these birds, because they need our sympathy. They really do. (Laughter) And I'll tell you why.
00:52	First of all, why do they have such a bad press? When Charles Darwin went across the Atlantic in 1832 on the Beagle, he saw the turkey vulture, and he said, "These are disgusting birds with bald scarlet heads that are formed to revel in putridity." (Laughter) You could not get a worse insult, and that from Charles Darwin. (Laughter) You know, he changed his mind when he came back, and I'll tell you why. They've also be associated with Disney — (Laughter) — personified as goofy, dumb, stupid characters.
01:29	More recently, if you've been following the Kenyan press — (Laughter) (Applause) (Cheers) — these are the attributes that they associated the Kenyan MPs with. But I want to challenge that. I want to challenge that. Do you know why? Because MPs do not keep the environment clean. (Laughter) MPs do not help to prevent the spread of diseases. They are hardly monogamous. (Laughter) (Applause) They are far from being extinct. (Laughter) And, my favorite is, vultures are better looking. (Applause) (Laughter)
02:18	So there's two types of vultures in this planet. There are the New World vultures that are mainly found in the Americas, like the condors and the caracaras, and then the Old World vultures, where we have 16 species. From these 16, 11 of them are facing a high risk of extinction.
02:36	So why are vultures important? First of all, they provide vital ecological services. They clean up. They're our natural garbage collectors. They clean up carcasses right to the bone. They help to kill all the bacteria. They help absorb anthrax that would otherwise spread and cause huge livestock losses and diseases in other animals. Recent studies have shown that in areas where there are no vultures, carcasses take up to three to four times to decompose, and this has huge ramifications for the spread of diseases.
03:10	Vultures also have tremendous historical significance. They have been associated in ancient Egyptian culture. Nekhbet was the symbol of the protector and the motherhood, and together with the cobra, symbolized the unity between Upper and Lower Egypt. In Hindu mythology, Jatayu was the vulture god, and he risked his life in order to save the goddess Sita from the 10-headed demon Ravana. In Tibetan culture, they are performing very important sky burials. In places like Tibet, there are no places to bury the dead, or wood to cremate them, so these vultures provide a natural disposal system.
03:52	So what is the problem with vultures? We have eight species of vultures that occur in Kenya, of which six are highly threatened with extinction. The reason is that they're getting poisoned, and the reason that they're getting poisoned is because there's human-wildlife conflicts. The pastoral communities are using this poison to target predators, and in return, the vultures are falling victim to this.
04:16	In South Asia, in countries like India and Pakistan, four species of vultures are listed as critically endangered, which means they have less than 10 or 15 years to go extinct, and the reason is because they are falling prey by consuming livestock that has been treated with a painkilling drug like Diclofenac. This drug has now been banned for veterinary use in India, and they have taken a stand. Because there are no vultures, there's been a spread in the numbers of feral dogs at carcass dump sites, and when you have feral dogs, you have a huge time bomb of rabies. The number of cases of rabies has increased tremendously in India.
04:53	Kenya is going to have one of the largest wind farms in Africa: 353 wind turbines are going to be up at Lake Turkana. I am not against wind energy, but we need to work with the governments, because wind turbines do this to birds. They slice them in half. They are bird-blending machines. In West Africa, there's a horrific trade of dead vultures to serve the witchcraft and the fetish market.
05:19	So what's being done? Well, we're conducting research on these birds. We're putting transmitters on them. We're trying to determine their basic ecology, and see where they go. We can see that they travel different countries, so if you focus on a problem locally, it's not going to help you. We need to work with governments in regional levels. We're working with local communities. We're talking to them about appreciating vultures, about the need from within to appreciate these wonderful creatures and the services that they provide.

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05:50	How can you help? You can become active, make noise. You can write a letter to your government and tell them that we need to focus on these very misunderstood creatures. Volunteer your time to spread the word. Spread the word. When you walk out of this room, you will be informed about vultures, but speak to your families, to your children, to your neighbors about vultures.
06:11	They are very graceful. Charles Darwin said he changed his mind because he watched them fly effortlessly without energy in the skies. Kenya, this world, will be much poorer without these wonderful species. Thank you very much. (Applause)

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