International Vulture Awareness Day

**FRESH TO DEATH**

Contrary to popular belief, vultures are very hygienic birds, and often gather around waterholes to bathe and preen.

**TILL DEATH DO US PART**

Most vulture species mate for life.

**BEAUTY IS MORE THAN FEATHER DEEP**

You’d like to keep eagles around. You think parrots are pretty. You care about owls, they’re cute. You share pictures of swans—they inspired a ballet after all. But you don’t think much about me, I’m not cute or pretty. But I do reduce the spread of disease, I do clean up the ecosystem. And I think that’s worth your attention.

**HE IS HEAVY, ‘CAUSE HE’S A VULTURE**

Vultures cannot fly well at all. Were it not for thermal currents, vultures wouldn’t be able to stay airborne for long—they’re simply too heavy.

Celebrates International Vulture Awareness Day - 5 September | birdlife.org.za
INTRODUCTION

Vultures are an ecologically vital group of birds that face a range of threats in many areas that they occur. Populations of many species are under pressure and some species are facing extinction.

On the first Saturday in September, the aim is for each participating organisation to carry out their own activities that highlight vulture conservation and awareness.

LESSON PLAN

Read through the lesson plan in order to organise your Eco-Club session. Make use of the vocabulary list at the end of this lesson plan. Any word that is bolded in red in the lesson, will be in the vocabulary list.

Thereafter, follow the numbered steps in order to conduct your lesson.

Read the writing on the pictures carefully and share these with the children – there is some lovely information on vultures on these posters.

Vulture species are often divided into two groups: Old World and New World. Old World vultures are found in Africa, Asia and Europe, while New World vultures inhabit the Americas. Surprisingly, these two groups are not genetically related, but they do share similar biological traits.
International Vulture Awareness Day – 3 September 2017

STAGE 1 – ENERGISER

ACTIVITY

Activity 2: Hippos Fly!
Activity relevance to the topic: Learning Vulture Names
Time: 10mins

1. The children should spread out, facing the leader. Each child should have enough room to make full "flapping" movements with their arms, just like a bird would.

2. The leader calls out "Ducks Fly", "Owls Fly", "Vultures Fly", “Doves fly”, “Hippos fly”...and so on. The leader should try and call out the names as quickly as possible. Be sure to include the names of vultures:
   - White-backed vultures fly
   - Lappet-faced vultures fly
   - Bearded vultures fly
   - White-headed vultures fly

3. When the leader decides, they should call out the name of animals that doesn’t fly. For example:
   - Hippos fly
   - Elephants fly
   - Mice fly
   - Lions fly
   - Lizards fly
   - Use your imagination 😊

4. Here’s the fun part:
   - If the animal that is called out really does fly, the children should continue flapping their "wings".
   - If the animal is one that does not fly, then the children should stop flapping.

5. If the children continue flapping their wings when they shouldn’t, they should sit down. They can join in again after a few rounds of the game.
STAGE 2 – THEORETICAL LESSON

OBJECTIVES
Children learn all about vultures – why they are important for our eco-system, and why they are endangered.

DISCUSSION
Discussion – All about vultures
Time – 15mins
Location – Under the trees

1. Using the Vulture Trivia Eco-Mentor Notes below:
   a. Talk to the children about these facts about vultures. You might want to guide them / have them guess, rather than just reading the facts to them (for example ask them: How many species of vulture do you think there are?)
   b. Make sure that you have fully explained each point to the children

2. Talk to children about the importance of, and threat to, vultures.
   - There are 23 vulture species in the world. They are relatively adaptable birds found in a range of habitats, but even so, 14 species are considered either threatened or endangered.
   - Vultures are relatively social and often feed, fly or roost in large flocks. Vultures are carnivorous and eat carrion (decaying / rotting flesh of dead animals). They prefer fresh meat but are able to consume carcasses that may have rotted so much as to be toxic to other animals.
   - This gives vultures a unique and important ecological role because they help prevent the spread of diseases from old, rotting carcasses.
   - Vultures have excellent senses of sight and smell to help them locate food, and they can find a dead animal from kilometres away. Because of this, vultures often have large territories and spend a lot of time soaring to locate their next meal.
   - It is a myth that vultures circle dying animals waiting to feed. These birds are powerful fliers and soar on thermals while they look for food. When they locate a carcass by smell, sight or the sound of other birds feeding, they approach it quickly before other predators find it.
   - Vultures have bare heads and often bare necks so that when they feed on rotting carcasses, bacteria and other parasites cannot burrow into their feathers to cause infections. This allows the birds to stay healthier while feeding on material that would easily infect other animals.
   - Vultures have relatively weak legs and feet with blunt talons, though they do have powerful bills. If a carcass is too stiff for them to rip open, they will wait for another predator to open the flesh before they feed. This is why vultures are often seen with other carrion-eating animals (like jackals, hyenas, Marabou Storks, etc.)
   - A vulture’s stomach acid is significantly stronger and more corrosive (causes something to break / wear down) than that of other animals or birds. This allows these scavengers to feed on rotting carcasses that may be infected with dangerous bacteria, because the acid will kill that bacteria so it does not threaten the vulture.
   - While vultures eat mostly dead animals, they are capable of attacking and will often prey on extremely sick, wounded or weak prey. This is more common if food has been scarce / limited and there are no carcasses nearby.
• It is a myth that vultures prey on healthy livestock, but they are still regularly mistreated by farmers and people who believe the birds to be a threat to their animals. They may, however, prey on dead livestock and afterbirth or stillborn animals in breeding herds.
• Because vultures have weak feet and legs, they do not carry prey back to their chicks. Instead, they will gorge (eat large amounts) at a carcass and regurgitate (bring up/vomit) food from their crop to feed their young.
• Vultures urinate on their legs and feet to cool off on hot days, a process called urohydrosis. Their urine also helps kill any bacteria or parasites they’ve picked up from walking through carcasses or perching on dead animals.
• When threatened, vultures vomit to lighten their body weight so they can escape more easily into flight. Vomiting also serves as a defence mechanism to deter predators that may be threatening the birds.
• Vultures face many threats that are endangering their populations. Poisoning is the biggest threat to vultures, primarily from toxins and poisons in the carcasses they eat.

Importance of Vultures
• The vultures keep our environment free of carcasses and waste and this way they restrict the spread of diseases like anthrax and botulism (bacteria spreads through the body and produces toxins which cause illness or even death)
• The vultures help in reducing the number of rats and flies
• Vultures alert landowners to any dead animals on their lands.
• Vultures have an important eco-tourism value – tourists travel to many areas to see vultures (bird watching)

Threats to vultures
• Direct and secondary poisonings
• Power line electrocutions
• Loss of available safe food
• Disturbance at breeding sites
• Habitat destruction
• Drowning in farm reservoirs
• Illegal killing and collection of vultures for traditional medicine and for predicting the lotto numbers
STAGE 3 – DIRECT EXPERIENCE

OBJECTIVES
Practising vocabulary from the lesson. Making connections from the theoretical lesson.

ACTIVITY
Activity 2: Poisoned Carcass
Time: 10mins

1. This is an outdoor activity. Mark off a rectangular shaped area in the sand (bigger than 10m / 15m). Remind children that vultures are the “cleaners” in the environment, eating and cleaning up dead animal carcasses.

2. A farmer has decided to place a carcass with poison out in a field to get rid of jackals on his farm.

3. One player is selected to be ‘POISONED CARCASS’ and stands in the middle of the rectangle. The rest of the players line up on the side-line. They should be split into jackals and vultures.

4. When the ‘POISONED CARCASS’ shouts out ‘VULTURES’, the players run to the other side-line with the POISONED CARCASS trying to tag as many vultures and jackals as possible. Once the vultures and jackals reach the side-line they are safe.

5. The vultures and jackals that get tagged DIE (from eating poisoned carcass) and must stand still at the spot where they are tagged. A dead creature cannot run. The game continues until POISONED CARCASS has touched all the vultures and jackals.

DEBRIEF
It is important to point out to the children that both vultures and jackals died – meaning that the poisoned carcass killed much more than the intended target. It was put there to kill the jackal, but it ended up killing the vultures, too.

Revise with the children why vultures are important in Eco-Systems.
STAGE 4 – DEBRIEF

When the lesson is finished, the children divide into pairs. Each takes a minute to think of a question, based on the lesson they have just had. The aim is to try to ‘stump’ the other, by asking tricky questions about what they learned. Then the roles are reversed.

Make sure that you have revised the important parts of the lesson with the children too:

- Why vultures are important in an eco-system
- Why vultures are endangered
**EXTRA BITS AND PIECES**

**YOU KNOW YOU’RE A VULTURE WHEN...**

Your mom pukes on your nest because "she loves you."

Vultures vomit around their nests to put off predators.

**IT’S GETTIN’ HOT IN HERE, SO POOP ON ALL YOUR TOES**

New World vultures have the unusual habit of defecating on their legs to cool themselves down by evaporation.

**BIRD’S EYE VIEW**

A vulture’s vision is up to eight times better than that of a human’s.
VOCABULARY

- **Ecologically** - relations and interactions between organisms and their environment
- **Vital** – very important
- **Adaptable** - able to adjust to new conditions
- **Habitats** - the natural home or environment of an animal, plant, or other organism
- **Carnivorous** – eating meat
- **Carrion** - the decaying / rotten flesh of dead animals
- **Toxic** - poisonous
- **Territories** - an area that is occupied and defended by an animal or group of animals
- **Myth** - a widely held but false belief or idea
- **Thermals** - an upward current of warm air
- **Corrosive** – able to break something down
- **Electrocutions** – being killed by electricity

REFERENCES

- [http://www.vultureday.org/](http://www.vultureday.org/)