

RAPTORS DROWNING IN FARM RESERVOIRS IN SOUTH AFRICA

SOLUTIONS

There are simple and effective solutions to the reservoir drowning problem. Johnson (1991) proposed the use of plastic floats to reduce the drowning of owls and raptors in cattle drinking troughs, while Craig & Powers (1976) suggested either draining the tanks when not in use, or floating a large block of wood in the water to allow the birds to escape.

In southern Africa, it is believed that the problem can be overcome by employing one or more of the following methods:

- (1) Attaching a wooden plank, log, ladder or branch to the wall of the reservoir onto which a drowning bird can grasp and lift itself out of the water (Anderson undated; Anderson & Taljaard 1994a, 1994b). These structures serve as a platform from which raptors and other birds can drink (MDA & AWAM pers. obs). This method is cheap and effective, and is therefore recommended. The wooden structures may however need to be replaced every few years.
- (2) Keeping the reservoir full, as it would then be easier for a bird to climb onto the wall.
- (3) Covering the reservoir with nylon mesh, as was proposed for the KGNP by Herholdt (1995). This method is, however, expensive and the material may not survive the harsh southern African climate.

(4) Providing alternative, more natural, drinking places on the ground (Butchart 1988).

The implementation of these recommendations needs to be concentrated in the arid areas of southern Africa, specifically in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa and in Namibia. The solution to the problem, however, relies upon close cooperation with landowners. Farmers can be convinced to modify their reservoirs by: (1) making them aware of the negative impact of drownings on raptor populations and (2) informing them that rotting carcasses pollute their reservoir water, often rendering it undrinkable for humans, livestock and game (these reservoirs then have to be emptied and cleaned). These methods are being advocated with some success during extension programmes of the Northern Cape Nature Conservation Service and Raptor Conservation Group in the Northern Cape. No drownings have been reported from the more than 300 reservoirs that have been fitted with these structures.