Novel study using new technologies outlines importance of California condor social groups

July 16 2013

The intricate social hierarchy of the California condor, an endangered species, is something that could not be studied until recently due to the severe reduction of this population in the wild. The first formal study on this species, based on remote video observation of reintroduced populations, indicates that the species has a complex system of interactions based on dominance. The study further indicates that, with the effect of human disturbance and lead poisoning removed from the equation, an individual bird that does not successfully integrate into the structure will have reduced survivability.

"We were able to engage in this effort due to the use of new technologies that allow us to observe these newly reintroduced groups without disturbing them," said James Sheppard, a conservation biologist for the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research. "This ongoing study provides us information about these unique birds that was essentially lost when the populations disappeared in the wild and will help us with our ongoing efforts to recover this species."

The California condor was reduced to little more than a dozen individuals in the 1980s before a collaborative captive-breeding program raised the population to a status where this species could be reintroduced into the wild again. The study, which appeared in a recent issue of *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, outlines the fluidity of the bird's hierarchical social structure and the role dominance plays among the

group.

Provided by Zoological Society of San Diego