

DYING IN THE "SAFETY" NET (Part One)

Dr Stewart Metz

http://www.charliesbirdblog.com/~charlie/conservation/ind_parrots_01.html

Most conservationists would probably agree that the bans on the importation of wild-caught birds, which have been recently imposed by many nations only under threat of a pandemic of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), are a good thing-- both for people and for wild birds. The majority would likely also agree that such trade bans should be made permanent, and that the wildlife markets dealing in endangered species, such as the infamous *pasar burung* of Indonesia, should be closed down for once and for all.

The Secretariat of [CITES](#) () argued against such a ban, citing concerns that it would drive the trade underground and hurt impoverished stakeholders who carry out much of the bird trapping. However, such thinking is effectively refuted in a statement issued by the Species Survival Network (www.ssn.org/Documents/news_articles_H5N1_EN).

At the same time as legal importation of wild-caught birds is being restricted, collaborative efforts to interdict the illegal trade in wild birds are being mounted on a number of fronts. These include several taskforces of the members of [ASEAN](#), a cooperative initiative between the governments of the Philippines and Indonesia, and a US-led global Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking (to name a few). Such efforts should reduce the smuggling of endangered species; minimize the possibility of the introduction of HPAI (which is just as likely to thrive in the unhygienic and crowded, mixed-species conditions of the smuggler's den as in those of live bird markets); and decrease the entry of other, albeit non-zoonotic diseases into the pet bird market, such as psittacine beak and feather disease, Newcastle disease, and herpesvirus.

So far, so good. Except that lost in this equation seems to be any consideration of the fate of the birds caught in this dragnet.

In fact, there has been trouble on this front for quite some time, with psittacines representing the most dramatic case in point.

In Brussels in 2004, several hundred parrots were put down in one quarantine center (and 450 birds in another center) merely because they had passed through the same customs inspection center during the "at-risk period" when HPAI-positive hawk-eagles had passed through. However, all tests for the parrots subsequently returned negative for H5N1. Also in 2004, 28 smuggled **Indonesian Cockatoos** (*Cacatua moluccensis* and *Probosciger aterrimus*; both on Appendix 1 of CITES) were confiscated at CKS Airport in Taipei. Although samples for avian influenza testing were obtained, the birds were immediately 'culled' without waiting for the test results. The next day, tests on all 28 returned negative. Quarantine was not even considered.

A similar fate befell 500 smuggled Indonesian parrots, probably cockatoos (species uncertain) confiscated by the authorities of the Philippines in 2005. They were apparently immediately sacrificed without further considering the use of either quarantine or laboratory testing for the presence of avian influenza. 346 lovebirds from Europe were killed in the Philippines merely because the plane that shipped the birds had made a brief stopover at Bangkok airport and HPAI might somehow have contaminated the shipment. I have been told by an authority who deals with the illegal wildlife trade on a daily basis that these examples are only "the tip-of-the-iceberg."

How sad an irony it is that wildlife officers and customs agents - the last lines of defense for these beleaguered birds against their captors - have instead at times become their executioners! And from the point of view of conservation, such culling would seem to at least partially vitiate the purpose of anti-poaching effects.

I don't know what breeders of wild-caught parrots, and of other birds, will be doing with their "stock" when they are no longer able to sell them overseas but it seems unlikely that they will continue to pour money into breeding operations which are no longer profitable. The likely outcome will either be the unfortunate death of more birds, or attempts to sell these wild-caught breeder birds at low cost. Even if they are able to find local buyers, these birds are unlikely to make good pets, and the bargain-buyer is unlikely to make the most compassionate owner.

In Indonesia, euthanasia is the solution of last resort in veterinary practice, and requires the approval of two veterinarians and an official of the Forestry Department. Confiscated parrots are not culled but are often kept in the facilities of the confiscating officers--either the KSDA (Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) or the Department of Forestry.

However, these departments lack the funding, expertise and facilities to properly care for psittacines and in my experience in Central Maluku, the mortality rate among confiscated parrots is extremely high. Once again, the wild birds, victims as "innocent bystanders" of either a virus or of illegal trade, are caught up and die in what should be their safety net!

Ironically, there has yet to be described (to my knowledge) a single case of a large and/or endangered parrot contracting H5N1--indeed, we now know that the Pionus which caused all the furor in the U.K. was probably 'blameless' in this regard.

Can anything be done for these birds?

Certainly all of them should be quarantined and tested for HPAI (as is routinely done in the US and UK). None should be culled as a "knee-jerk" reflex, merely because it is more convenient to vilify them and kill them immediately, than to follow a rational, scientific protocol befitting not only living creatures, but in most cases, endangered species. In addition, I maintain that many of them **should** and **could** be repatriated to their country of origin and some even released back into the wild. That proposal is bound to raise some eyebrows among conservationists. I will address the "Why" and the "How" next...

DYING IN THE "SAFETY" NET (Part Two): Conservation and the "Power of One"

Dr Stewart Metz

http://www.charliesbirdblog.com/~charlie/conservation/ind_parrots_02.html

In the first part of this blog, I expressed my concern about an issue that has been tucked away from our consciousness - the fate of birds (especially those of endangered species) after they have been confiscated either from smugglers or from legal traders. The reasons for such confiscations range from the illegal trade in endangered or protected species, to the concern over the possibility that the birds might harbor highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI).

Let me do something in Part Two of this blog which is not "supposed" to be done, at least in traditional, scientific, population-based conservation work: *put a face on the problem.*

Exemplifying the panic over avian influenza are the cockatoos in the photograph below:



Captioned "Five of 28 parrots smuggled by an Indonesian traveler into Taiwan wait in a cage before being destroyed as a precaution to stop the spread of bird flu." (story by Chiu Yu-Tzu entitled "Parrots put down after seizure at airport" from The Taipei Times, November 4, 2004, available on-line at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2004/11/04/2003209608>, photograph by Chu Pei-The) it shows 5 of the 28 cockatoos (*C. moluccensis* and *P. aterrimus*; both listed on Appendix 1 of CITES) which were killed in CKS Airport in Taipei simply out of fear that they might harbor HPAI. Had the officials waited 24 hrs, they would have received test results showing that all 28 cockatoos were free of the disease.

This occurred despite the fact that there has yet to be reported a single well-documented case, which I am able to find, of a large parrot or cockatoo shown to contract HPAI. This apparent low sensitivity of psittacines to the H5N1 virus is doubtlessly only relative; surely psittacines can contract the disease under the right conditions (indeed, **budgerigars** are susceptible to H5N1 experimentally). However, the point is that judicious application of quarantine and testing for HPAI should be sufficient to detect any cases and save most of these magnificent birds from needless culling.

In the case of confiscation from smugglers, problems exist not only when discovered at Customs or other control points within the country of importation, but also within the country of exportation. In Indonesia, at least in the provinces of Maluku and doubtless much of West Papua and elsewhere, a substantial number of the confiscated birds die in the hands of government officials despite their best intentions. Many officials of the Balai Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam (Regional Offices of Conservation and Natural Resources) or of the Departemen Kehutanan (Department of Forestry) are often unable to identify endangered species of psittacines, no less care for them. Many wild birds may have starved to death because they were receiving fruits and vegetables from the market place which were not recognizable to the wild birds as "food" - having just been poached from the forest. Thus, despite rescue from the "frying pan", these unfortunate birds have merely been falling into the fire!

So the question must be raised: **Should we care about these few individual birds in the face of massive problems (zoonotic diseases, smuggling) involving birds in far greater numbers?**

Well, first, we are not really talking about just a "few" - the numbers go into the thousands, and those are only the totals of the limited number of cases which have reached the attention of the media. Furthermore, when we talk about certain species of Indonesian or Philippine parrots, we should consider the fact that the numbers surviving in the wild are only in the hundreds or thousands: viz., the **Citron-crested cockatoo** *Cacatua sulphurea citronocristata* (under 2000 left); the **Philippine or Red-vented cockatoo** *C.haematuropygia* (fewer than 2000 left); or the *abbotti* and *sulphurea* races of *C. sulphurea* (which range from under 10 to under 100 individuals left). Furthermore, the case of the individual bird should become more cogent when one considers that it is the breeding adults, and not the young, which are routinely taken.

Secondly, if even a fraction of these birds could be repatriated and rehabilitated, possibly for re-release, I believe that each one could serve conservation well by standing (or flying!) as an icon to teach present and future generations about pride in native wildlife, and the cruelty and waste involved in the trade in wild birds. Indeed, both the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna](#) (CITES) and the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN) state clearly that "return to the wild makes a strong political / educational statement concerning the fate of animals and may serve to promote local conservation values." (IUCN Guidelines for the Placement of

Confiscated Animals; Approved by the 51st Meeting of the IUCN Council, Gland, Switzerland, February 2000; virtually identical statement in CITES, Conf. 10.7, "Disposal of confiscated live specimens of species included in the Appendices")

While "conservation interests are best served by ensuring the survival of any many individuals as possible" (IUCN, 2000), this approach does not define the minimum number of individual animals which is required to subserve a conservation function, only that important messages can be conveyed to local peoples about the value of endemic wildlife and the need for their conservation.

Let's take an example. In September of 2004, Pak Joel Katayane (an Forestry officer in Manusela National Park on Seram Island in the Middle Moluccas of Indonesia) was tipped off by colleagues of the NGOs with which I am fortunate to work or collaborate (the Indonesian Parrot Project and Yayasan Wallacea) that a well-known smuggler from Sulawesi - Andi Samsudin - had a shipment of cockatoos and parrots which he had bought

from the indigenous Nuaulu tribe.



In the photograph on the left Pak Katayane stands beside the confiscated **Salmon-crested cockatoos, Eclectus parrots and Red-cheeked parrots** he subsequently seized. Some of these birds did not survive because no adequate government

program was available to care for them, but some were able to be transferred to a Rehabilitation Facility. (Photo courtesy of Leonardo Sahubarua, used with permission.)

Samsudin was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to jail. As a result, Pak Joel received literally several hundred "Thank-you"s from all over the world, an unheard-of response which made him a local hero of sorts and greatly increased his stature.

In part as a result, anti-smuggling efforts have markedly intensified in the National Park and this intensified effort has spread to the Conservation and Natural Resources officials who monitor the port on nearby Ambon Island. In turn, as an additional sequela of this confiscation, a Rehabilitation Center was begun on North Seram to provide safe haven for these birds. Several of these cockatoos are housed there now, where they are now cared for by ex-trappers who used to poach some of the same species of birds.

The point is that this outcome demonstrates the power of pride, **and the message carried by just a handful of birds**. Some of those cockatoos are close to being released back into the Seram forest after over a year of rehabilitation, observation and complex medical testing (required to provide the highest assurance possible that release can be carried out without endangerment to resident bird populations). When and if they are released, this *pelepasan* (bahasa Indonesia for "the act of liberating") will certainly be a major event which will be celebrated by all in the district, including the children.



Salmon-crested cockatoos at rest and play at the Rehab Center of the Indonesian Parrot Project on Seram (www.indonesian-parrot-project.org).

Photos by the Author

I therefore believe that preventing individual birds - who represent both endangered species, and the magnificent avifaunal heritage of their countries of origin - from being allowed to die in the hands of their SHOULD-BE rescuers, does comprise a relevant effort in "Applied Conservation".

This value can be expressed either by

- release back into the wild (if such a release follows appropriate safeguards for the welfare of all wildlife involved and is coordinated well with local authorities,

- indigenous peoples, media and if the results are properly written up and reported);
or
- by utilizing the concept of the local bird sanctuary where local people can come to see indigenous wildlife, often for the first time. (It is striking how few people in Indonesia have ever been in a forest, let alone seen a wild parrot, and many don't even know what a cockatoo is.)

As with people, there can be substantial power embodied in the number "One"!

Is repatriation logistically feasible?

Dr. Lester Louis Lopez is a veterinarian working with the MyZoo Volunteer Group Foundation in the Philippines (www.myzoofoundation.org/MYZrescuecenter.html); this group in turn works with the Wildlife Rescue Center of the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau of the Philippine government. Dr. Lopez is currently well along in a plan to repatriate a substantial number of Indonesian psittacines illegally brought to the Philippines. The birds are being tested for relevant diseases and then will likely be transferred to the Pusat Penyelamatan Satwa-Bali (The Bali Wild Animal Rescue Center), under the direction of Drh. Wahyu Widyayandani. This is one of 9 such centers throughout Indonesia which receive confiscated wildlife - including avifauna - from Indonesian authorities for rehabilitation and possible release back into their native habitats, following IUCN guidelines. The Philippines and Indonesian governments have already given permission for this repatriation.

Repatriation is a complex process, but one which has begun to instill in both governments and their respective local communities, a sense of the value of these animals unique to Indonesia, and the need to conserve them. In fact, CITES itself makes the following statement : "CITES *requires* that repatriation of CITES-listed animals to the country of export be considered as an option for disposal by a confiscating authority..." (emphasis mine; citation provided above). Of course, testing for avian influenza will now be routinely added to the usual veterinary screening and laboratory testing as part of any repatriation process.

It must be emphasized that release of confiscated birds entails considerable potential risks to the native birds populations (and to the released birds themselves) if not done properly; it cannot be carried out cavalierly, as a "feel-good" exercise, or as a facile disposal mechanism for unwanted birds. [Snyder , N. et al. (eds.) Parrots. Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan 2000-2004. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK, 2000 , Chapter 2 (esp. pp. 22-24)] . The World Conservation Union states that "even if there is a very small risk that confiscated animals have been infected by exogenous pathogens, the potential effects of introduced diseases on wild populations are often so great that this should preclude returning confiscated animals to the wild." Some conservationists have



argued that the monies used in such projects could be better employed elsewhere, and even use cost-saving as a reason to support euthanasia over release into the wild. Obviously, I am arguing for a different point of view in selected cases.

But there is another factor (also rarely brought into discussions of conservation) and that is the humane or welfare aspect of the conservation of individual birds. Should we allow these birds to be killed on moral grounds - in the absence of good reason, lacking scientific justification and especially following the sad journey to which their lives have already been reduced?

And is not this argument bolstered by recent consensus statements reassessing the intelligence of birds? At an international consortium of neuroscientists, the neocortex-like cognitive functions of the avian pallium were recognized*. In a rather unique feat of virtual scientific unanimity, the participants concluded that "this realization of a relatively large and well developed avian pallium that processes information in a similar manner to mammalian sensory and motor cortices sets the stage for a re-evaluation of the cognitive abilities of birds." This, in conjunction with a host of other studies suggesting that at least some birds species possess complex and advanced intelligence and emotions, sets the stage for an escalation of the ethical argument to an even higher plane. [*The Avian Brain Nomenclature Consortium. "Avian Brains and a new understanding of vertebrate brain evolution" *Nature Reviews:Neuroscience* : 151-159, February, 2005]

To my knowledge, the saving of life and prevention of suffering is not mentioned in [CITES](#) or [IUCN](#) documents as a primary goal, although it is clearly stated that conservation programs (including release back into the wild) must vouchsafe the humane treatment of the animals during such programs. But will it not require changing attitudes towards wildlife - just such a paradigm shift - person-by-person, one by one, in the countries where trapping still exists, if the culture of the bird-in-a box, the rare-bird-as-status-symbol, and the societal tolerance of the grotesque bird markets, are ever going to change?

How better to really teach the lesson that wild birds - especially those species that are endangered - belong in nature, or as ProFauna Indonesia puts it, "*Lebih Indah di Alam*" (More Beautiful in the Wild) than as with birds and villagers both as individuals? Repatriation with release, or Sanctuary with teaching, are just two ways to begin to introduce these concepts. The confiscated bird is, in my opinion, an excellent icon which, if chosen wisely, can be used to embody the concept of the value of endangered wildlife, indeed of Life itself. The IUCN presents euthanasia as an option for the disposition of confiscated animals, noting the triad of its lack of expense, positive anti-smuggling message, and interdiction of exogenous disease or alien species. However, the anti-smuggling message derived from euthanasia (if there is one) is both circumscribed and transient and usually does not reach the children; it fails to emphasize the uniqueness, beauty, and intelligence of the birds; and in fact, poses an anti-conservation, "throwaway bird" message.

Killing birds in the name of "bird flu" or allowing them to die in the facilities of wildlife or customs officers cries out for a solution, because those practices are terribly inhumane, stultifyingly unscientific, and a waste of a conservation opportunity and money. They make a mockery out of anti-poaching programs by killing the very animals which one is allegedly trying to save, free in the wild.

In my training in human medicine, I was taught never to lose sight of the individual patient as we search for cures to human diseases. So, too, in conservation practice, I maintain that saving these individual creatures not only has great ethical merit but a large conservation lesson to teach.

It may not win a Nobel Prize, but achieving it surely would be a noble prize.