

INDONESIAN cockatoos

RETURNING SMUGGLED WILD PARROTS TO THEIR FOREST HOMES

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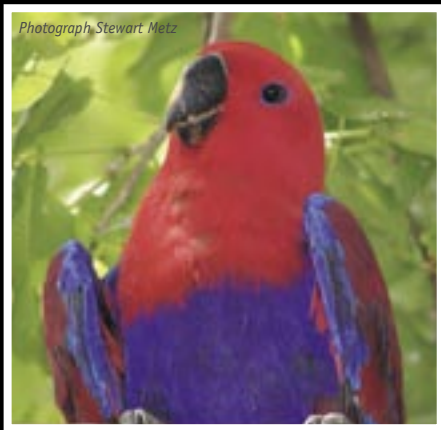
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Introduction

Indonesia, like Australia, is home to some of the world's most spectacular parrots. Despite persistent problems with poaching and corruption, evidence suggests that attitudes towards wildlife smuggling may be slowly changing. Therefore, the tone of this overview is cautiously optimistic for the future.

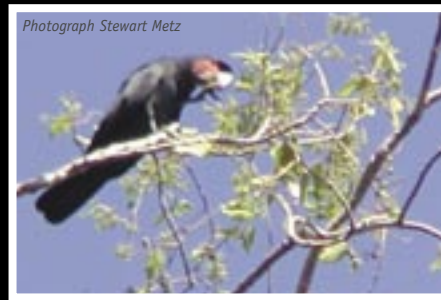


Photograph Stewart Metz
Female Eclectus parrot in the Raja Ampat Islands off the northwest coast of West Papua.

The status of Indonesia's CITES 1 Cockatoos

There are five Cockatoos on Appendix 1 (the highest level of protection) of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES); four are found in Indonesia. These are: the Seram (Moluccan or Salmon-crested) Cockatoo *Cacatua moluccensis*; the Palm cockatoo *Probosciger aterrimus* (also found, of course, in New Guinea and Australia) the Goffin's *C. goffini* which is probably not greatly threatened at all; and the Lesser Sulphur-crested *C. sulphurea* (which was added to Appendix 1 just

last year at the CITES meeting in Bangkok). The fifth is the Philippine or Red-vented cockatoo.



Photograph Stewart Metz
Palm cockatoo eating fruits of *Canarium* tree on Batanta Island, off the northwest coast of West Papua

An uplisting for the Lesser Sulphurs has long been needed for they are in grave peril. The Citron-crested Cockatoo (*C. sulphurea citronocristata*) is found only on Sumba Island in the Lesser Sunda chain of islands, in a total remaining population of perhaps 2000 birds, according to recent surveys by BirdLife - Indonesia. Biologists hold that the population capable of breeding comprises only about 1/4 to 1/2 of the total population of parrots counted in any census; if so, there might only be 500 breeding Citrons, or 250 pairs, a dangerously low number. Now consider how frightening it is that recent word on the streets of Bali was that there were 25 wild Citrons available for purchase on the black market!

The decline in Citron Cockatoos have been precipitous. Though usually attributed largely to trapping for the pet trade (and even some hunting for target practice), it has paralleled the astonishing loss of forest habitat on Sumba induced by logging. None of the other subspecies (*parvula*, *sulphurea*, and *abbotti* races) is large either, with the latter being confined to perhaps 8 individuals on a single

(Masakambing) Island (observation of 1994, confirmed in 2000).

The situation is quite different with regards to the Seram cockatoo. It is endemic with certainty only to that island; it is extinct on Saparua and Haruka Islands despite what is still written. It has been observed on the nearby island of Ambon, although it unclear whether these are true endemics or introduced birds. In 1998-1999, a survey of cockatoo populations was carried out in Western Seram by a team led by Dr. Margaret Kinnaird from the Wildlife Conservation Society. This work yielded a minimum, conservative estimate of 60,000 Cockatoos remaining on Seram (M. Kinnaird et al. Biological Conservation 109:227-235, 2003).

While this figure might sound high, it is not a cause for complacency. The fraction capable of breeding and/or the breeding success rate, however, might be particularly low for this species given 4 facts:

- Their long life span: many birds might be past breeding age;
- very high pressures from poaching (described below); by one estimate based on interviews (Kinnaird), as many as 6% of the population might be trapped per year
- slow reproductive cycle and unknown (but possibly low) fledging success rate**; and
- trappers on Seram mostly poach adult birds, not chicks, an approach tending to deplete the number of breeding birds

** Although unknown for Indonesian Cockatoos, overall breeding success for Australian black and galerita Cockatoos in the wild ranges only between 22 and 42%, as tabulated in S. Murphy et al. J. Zoology. 261: 327-339, 2003

Together, these facts make this population very susceptible to locally precipitous (and eventually widespread) declines in cockatoo numbers, a fact well-known to trappers. Depletion of Cockatoos on the western part of the island led poachers to move to the East and North in 1991-2, introducing cockatoo trapping there. However, initial capture rates of 100-150/month could not be sustained and fell to under 20/month in 1995 and after 1996, essentially no birds could be found in the area. Concomitantly, prices per bird rose dramatically (personal communication by ex-trappers to Bonnie Zimmerman; used with permission) Similar comments were made to Dr. Kinnaird and co-workers in interviews carried out during the Seram census: 60 of 70 respondents questioned thought that "the Cockatoo is becoming rare."

The chain of infamy: breaking the links

Trappers sell to middlemen who transport the birds to local markets in the western half of Indonesia, or to exporters. Many of the illegally-trapped birds remain within Indonesia, especially in Java, kept in cages as symbols of wealth and "prestige". Project Bird Watch (PBW; www.indonesian-parrot-project.org) is working with its collaborators in the Yayasan Foundation (a local Indonesian non-governmental organization;

www.yayasan-wallacean.org) to reduce trapping, and smuggling by middleman, and more recently, by working towards their release back to freedom following confiscation of poached birds by the Indonesian authorities.

Trapping and smuggling

One can't eliminate trapping simply by passing laws - if for no other reason than ethics: the villagers' subsistence may depend on the few dollars which it brings in. However, PBW has been successful in eradicating the trapping of Cockatoos in the area surrounding two villages on North Seram and one village in West Papua by:

1. provision of economically advantageous alternatives, such as small-scale eco-tourism (for which the ex-trappers act as bird guides and porters) and
2. setting up agricultural projects (such as the collection of the nuts of the "Kenari" tree which are a favored food of the Cockatoos and Great-billed parrots *Tanygnathus megalorhynchos* and which are sold from our website as food for companion parrots, with all proceeds returned to the villagers). These projects are coupled to
3. village improvements (such as the building of medical clinics) which create sustained good will and over the years, are gradually leading to a change in attitudes towards bird trapping as a 'dirty business'.

One must be able to look behind closed doors of the middleman-smuggler so that effective measures can be taken to stop that trade. A group of volunteers in Indonesia known as ProFauna Indonesia (www.ProFauna.or.id) has carried out several significant undercover investigations. In one, they reported stunning findings on the illegal bird trade in West Papua and Northern Maluku involving many psittacines, especially *Cacatua alba*



Triton cockatoo hen peers out of her nesthole on Batanta Island, West Papua, Indonesia

(Umbrella Cockatoo) and *C. galerita triton* [Triton Cockatoo; for details, see PsittaScene, Vol. 15, May, 2003; PARROTS Magazine, July, 2003, pp. 32-3]. A follow-up study was then commissioned by Project Bird Watch on Seram Island which revealed that trapping of Seram Cockatoos was rampant, although absent in areas where PBW was working. Transport of birds off the island was facilitated by easily-purchased but illegal permits, or by hiding