

A Second Chance at Freedom:

The Emergence, in Indonesia, of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release for Wild Cockatoos and Parrots

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The plight of wild cockatoos, parrots, Birds of Paradise and other spectacular avifauna in Indonesia is quite severe. ProFauna Indonesia (formerly KSBK) has provided important insights into the chain of trapping, transport, sale and smuggling of these birds (see PsittaScene, May, 2003; Parrots Magazine, July, 2003 for details). KSBK was formed with three people in 1994 and now has swelled to more than 800 members, mostly young, unpaid volunteers. They have provided important information about smuggling and trade through undercover investigation and ‘raids’ on the bird markets, often at considerable physical risks to themselves. However, when a non-government organization (NGO) such as ProFauna detects illegal activity and (with luck) is able to confiscate smuggled birds, what is their fate? This critical issue is rarely discussed even in the work of ProFauna.

Part of my introduction to this issue came in February, 2004 when I participated in a conference hosted by ProFauna Indonesia in Malang, Indonesia. Immediately adjacent was one of only five Wild Animal Rescue Centers (‘PPS’) in Indonesia. This one was PPS Petung Sewa. The others are: PPS Cikananga, PPS Tegal Alur (Jakarta); PPS Yogyakarta; PPS Bitung (Manado, North Sulawesi). Protected animals confiscated by, or surrendered to BKSDA (the Conservation Unit of the Forestry Department) may have a short stay in a Transit Center, after which they go to a PPS. Dr. Wita Wahdya Wadyayandani (“Dr. Wita”) is Executive Director of the Transit Center in Bali and at the meeting showed me around PPS Petung Sewa (in addition to translating my talk at the symposium into Indonesian). The job of a PPS is to vet- check and quarantine the animal. I was gratified to see her obvious devotion to animal welfare, a deep passion reflected in the faces of the volunteers at the Symposium. I was able to see their quarantine center and was generally impressed by the good care and appearance of most of the birds. Even more impressive was the enthusiasm of the caregivers and their hunger to learn more about looking after the needs of wild psittacines.

Once the animal is healthy, it is transferred to one of four rehabilitation centers or socialization centers. The rehabilitation is designed to permit these animals (birds, but also other animals, especially primates) to stand a reasonable chance of survival after being returned to the wild. Animals are euthanized only as the very last resort. This work is supervised by the NGO named PILI (standing for Indonesian Environment Database Center) which is funded by the Gibbon Foundation. Socialization centers are often the next step for birds, where they are re-exposed to their natural habitat and diet. Pet cockatoos are said to be hard to rehabilitate after they have developed the ability to talk. (see K. Durin and I. Harsaputra; The Jakarta Post, March 5, 2004).

A Case in Point: Little Jiwa Halus

As promising as this sounds, the system remains burdened not only by huge fiscal limitations, but by a ponderous bureaucracy. Case in Point: While we were in Ambon (the small island southwest of Seram), I wanted to go to the Bird Market to look for evidence of continued bird smuggling. Sadly, many lorries and lorikeets were readily seen stuffed into small wooden crates in large numbers in. One lorry (tentatively identified as a blue-eared lorry) was in a small cage with its mate, who was dead and was only removed after we arrived. Other birds there were one purple-naped lorry (a highly –endangered species), black-capped lorries and a male and female *Ecliptus* pair. But, perhaps most dramatically, was a very sad-looking juvenile cockatoo sitting on a metal perch, in a dark room, with no food or water. Although his eye rings were not an especially dark blue, it is unclear to me whether he is a Triton cockatoo or possibly a medium- or lesser-sulphur crested cockatoo (see Fig.1.), since he was a juvenile. The feathers on his chest, even from a distance, looked matted and filthy and I was afraid that he might be self-mutilating.

We asked how much he was being sold for and were told “150,000 Rupiah” (about \$18). By the next day, the asking price had sky-rocketed to “500,000 Rupiah” or about \$60, because “the bird talks”, a claim which we never substantiated. We didn’t argue, but took him to our hotel. He was clearly underweight and presumably unweaned. When I tried to feed him sweetened milk with a spoon, all the liquid came gushing out in a stream from a perforation of his crop (Fig. 1), either from mechanical or thermal cause. (There was no visual evidence of burn injury.). I named him “Jiwa Halus”, Indonesian for “Gentle Soul.”

Fig. 1. Jiwa Halus, immediately following his ransom-rescue. The milk exiting the hole in his crop is partly visible.

Now what to do?

We now had a sick bird on our hands with no obvious way to get him to a Transit Center. We contacted Dr. Wita and she said that she could accept Jiwa Halus temporarily in the Transit Center once he was in Bali. But how to get him there? Transport of protected but trapped wildlife requires signed permits from BKSDA at both the destination and arrival sites. But the Ambon office of the BKSDA was closed for two days due to a holiday; we had to be in Seram and my time in Indonesia was running out. Fortunately, the offices of the Forestry Department on Seram were open. Their enthusiasm especially that of a young man named Jon, for saving animals was tangible. They proudly told about their confiscations of illegally-obtained animals, including cockatoos, even from military officers who take them home as “oleh-oleh“ (souvenirs). However they had no authority to release any confiscated birds on site in Seram, but rather had to get the birds to Ambon , hopefully for release into wild—but on Ambon, not Seram. They could only suggest returning to Ambon and knocking on the door of the members of BKSDA, hoping that they might answer the door despite the holidays.

The Holding Facility of the BKSDA: The fate of Jiwa Halus hangs in the balance.

In the car on the way to the BKSDA offices, the light and stimulation affected Jiwa Halus in a very positive way. He began to look around with great curiosity and a much happier countenance than in the darkened room in the Market. Fortunately, several of the BKSDA officers were at home and were glad to show us their holding facilities for birds. It was located near the market and down a narrow street. Many of the birds (Salmon-crested cockatoos, one Goffin's; several Tritons, an Eclectus, two Victoria crowned pigeon, a fruit-dove and several lorries) were housed together in a simple wire flight (Fig.2).

Fig. 2. A partial view of the outside holding facilities for birds at the BKSDA office in Ambon.

The birds, looked surprisingly healthy, and moved about readily or even flew a few feet. One, obviously a pet, would repeat to any approaching stranger "Hi, Echo!"

Inside, the scene was less encouraging since lack of additional caging required that some birds stay mostly in the dark. Among these less fortunate birds were two juvenile Palm cockatoos, and one older one (Fig. 3). They looked quite depressed (physically) and their cheek patches were only a very pale red (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 A Palm cockatoo in the indoor room at the BKSDA office. Note the very pale color of the cheek patch.

The BKSDA explained that their budget for food was very low. Therefore, we splurged at the market and brought back all the fruit, veggies and nuts we could carry, and left about \$30 US in Rupiah with them for additional food, and promised that Project Bird Watch would try to provide support to them in the future. However the Chief Officer who was needed to provide the two letters of transport still had not returned. And technically, it was illegal for us to have even bought the cockatoo. The best they could do for us was to look the other way if we just "happened to have the bird."

It was painful for me to return home without news of the outcome. Shortly thereafter, I did receive some very happy news from Ceisar and Leonardo, who are the colleagues and friends in Indonesia of the members of Project Bird Watch. The permits had finally been granted and Jiwa Halus first arrived at the BKSDA office in Bali and then after 2-3 days there, he was to be transferred to one of the PPS. There, they claimed that the hole in his crop has disappeared in two weeks! (We did warn them to watch carefully for any weakness of the crop wall, which might require suturing.)

Lessons for the Future: The Emergence, in Indonesia, of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release for Wild Cockatoos and Parrots

This infrastructure for rescuing birds in Indonesia—although still limited-- was somewhat more positive than I had expected. Through our networking, I am hopeful that a chain of collaboration had been tentatively established, which includes ProFauna Indonesia; the BKSDA on Ambon and Bali; The Forestry Department on Seram; the PPS at least in Malang; the Transit Center in Bali; and ourselves. However, important ethical issues remain. If a confiscated bird is uninjured and is still on the island of its origin, it seems reasonable that it be immediately released into the wild. But what if it has already been transported to Ambon—should a Seram cockatoo be released in the Hila Peninsula on Ambon? And what if it has made its way all the way to market in Jakarta and is traumatized, ill, or accustomed to humans? Could it survive another deadly and traumatic transportation? If so, would they import ‘big-city microbes’ with them back to the remote islands from which they first came?

Any views are likely to be controversial, just as they are with freeflying companion birds. However over time, I have come to support the view that a Second Chance at freedom—or to experience once again a “Taste of Life”-- is better (for a bird who can fly, is in reasonable health and is not a pet) than a life sentence in the prison of a bird cage, even if it comes with a high risk. This is also the feeling of members of ProFauna Indonesia. A better approach is to re-release confiscated birds into the wild after extensive rehabilitation. This is the approach taken by BirdLife Indonesia working on Sumba (Indonesia) to conserve the critically endangered citron-crested cockatoo and hornbill. However, that is a lengthy, expensive and labor-intensive proposition and involves confiscated birds which have never left Sumba.

What can you do to help rescue, rehabilitate and release Indonesian psittacines which have been trapped but are still wild? Project Bird Watch/The Indonesian Parrot Project (www.indonesian-parrot-project) is optimistic that much can be done, with the circle of collaboration mentioned. For example, Project Bird Watch is funding an undercover investigation to monitor smuggling (especially Salmon-crested cockatoos and Great-billed parrots) on Seram. Hopefully the Parks Service can confiscate these birds and immediately release them. We also hope to aid them in identification of birds, information on feeding, etc. Project Bird Watch is also planning to establish a very simple holding facility on Seram itself so that recently caught psittacines can be given a few days of rest and rehabilitation if needed. The BKSDA has a critical need for funding their holding facilities (especially to provide adequate food and housing), as do the PPS. You can contribute to each of these through donations to Project Bird Watch who will pass on 100% of these donations to rescue specific birds in need.

You can imagine my reaction when I saw this follow-up picture of Jiwa Halus, crop healed, feathers grown in and clean.

There is a Chinese poem from the T'ang Dynasty:

“From distant Land there came a gift—
a scarlet parrot with colored plumage
like a peach blossom; so clever that
it could speak like men;
So, as with clever men
They put it in a cage
Where it sits wondering
When it shall taste of life again.”

Many Seram cockatoos (and other birds) end up, similarly, like prisoners in jails.

The national park on Seram is called Manusela. It means “Bird of Freedom.” But birds that are trapped, transported, sold or exported clearly are not free. We need to try to give them a Second Chance. Even from as far away as the U.S., U.K., or other areas, we can facilitate this process. We hope that you will work with us toward the vision of this Second Chance, and help to rectify the cruel loss of their First Chance.