

RTD12 Bird trade: conservation strategy or extinction catalyst?

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After Ernesto C. Enkerlin Hoeflich distributed written materials, and Steven R. Beissinger, Ranjit Daniels and Peter Mawson presented introductory talks, this RTD examined issues of sustainability and impacts of the bird trade on birdlife.

1 Issues

The sustainable use of wild populations of plants and animals has emerged as a strategy for conserving biological diversity. Even so, assigning economic value to wildlife through sustainable use is controversial and may accelerate the rate of decline of many populations (Beissinger, 2001). Shipping birds around the world risks establishing exotic species and spreading otherwise geographically restricted pathogens, both of which may affect native birds deleteriously.

1.1 International bird trade

The international bird trade is a multimillion dollar business. The U.S. was the largest importer of live wild-caught birds prior to the 1992 Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA), which prohibits the importation of birds listed on CITES I and II, including all parrots, unless they originate from licensed breeding or sustainable harvesting programs. As a result, the number of imported birds dropped from 150 000–200 000 birds a year in the 1980s–early 1990s to 3 500 birds a year in 1994–1997, and poaching may have decreased (Wright et al., 2001). It is still unknown whether wild populations have started to recover. Currently, the EU and Japan are the biggest importers of live wild-caught birds; and the smuggling of eggs is perhaps an increasing problem.

1.2 Internal bird trade: three examples

Australia enacted a total embargo on the import and export of live wild-caught birds in 1961, which invigorated the breeding of species already in captivity at that time. The internal trade in wild-caught native birds, at least in Western Australia, has declined through a change of culture among plant crop growers, licensed trappers, and aviculturists (Mawson and Johnstone, 1997).

India exported 3.5 million birds per year prior to a total ban on international trade in 1980. However, over 300 out of

1200 native species are still traded internally, despite the Wildlife Protection Acts of 1972 and 1991. This trade is driven by economic as well as socio-cultural and political forces. Most birds are used for ritualistic release; and the declaration of different species as pest or protected has become increasingly politicized.

Mexico, which has a long tradition of keeping and trading live wild-caught birds, became a significant but unregulated source, and a transit center for Neotropical, Australian and Asian species, for the U.S. market in the 1970s. The 1992 legislation banning trade in live native birds pushed the bird trade underground. In 1995–1996, the UMA (Units for Management and Sustainable Use of Wildlife) allowed sustainable harvesting of native birds.

1.3 Sustainable harvesting of wild birds

Trade can be as threatening to parrots as habitat destruction, as many parrots can adapt to changing habitats. Parrots are nest-limited, resulting in low population growth rates. Any sustainable harvest rate has to be set at well below the rate of productivity in wild populations of given size because of the effects of environmental stochasticity (Beissinger, 2001). Practices of sustainable harvest require local control and permanent identification of legally harvested individuals (e.g., Kummerfeld et al., 2002). Because parrots are difficult to assess in the wild, the data needed for setting sustainable harvest or export levels, such as population size and range, habitat requirements and movements, etc., are generally incomplete.

1.4 Economics and ethics in the bird trade

Because the demand for parrots far exceeds production from captive breeding, it induces local people to harvest or poach for the bird trade. Yet the economics of the bird trade are poorly understood, and many assumptions may not hold true. For example, supplying markets with legal birds not only seems unlikely to reduce illegal trade, but instead may stimulate it by generating increased demand. Statistics for the current volume of illegal trading do not exist, but it may be sizable as it is thought to follow the same routes as the illegal drug trade.

Many assumptions supporting the sustainable use

of wild birds have not been scrutinized and may not be tenable. For example, sustainable harvesting may not benefit local communities, because of the volatility of the market, with its boom-and-bust cycling of popular species (Robinson, 2001). The benefits of avitourism as an alternative to bird trade are questionable because the species and places of interest to tourists are usually very different from those used to source the bird trade.

A dilemma is also posed by the large numbers of wild-caught birds that are confiscated at national borders or are of degraded condition due to captivity. Returning such birds to the market may be counterproductive; and returning them to the wild is questionable if not impractical, because the origin of traded birds is often unclear and because of the potential for introducing diseases into wild populations.

2 Outcomes and recommendations

Stimulated discussion led to the following conclusions:

1. The principles of the American Ornithologists Union for guiding the international trade in live birds (Beissinger et al., 1991, 2001) could serve as a model for worldwide application.

2. Equitable human development in areas where birds are endangered by trade is a better solution for conservation than encouraging bird trade.

3. Self-sustaining, profitable breeding of captive birds, especially of highly desirable color mutants, should be encouraged for internal markets.

4. The public needs to be made more aware that captive-bred birds make better pets and breeders than wild-caught birds.

5. It is not true that captive breeding of wild-caught birds helps conservation through its potential for reintroducing species that have lost their habitat. Reintroductions, even if successful (Brightsmith et al., 2003), cannot replace

the local “culture” of birds with higher cognitive abilities or the genetic markers of natural populations that could be used for evolutionary studies.

6. Efforts by organizations that are dedicated to rescuing confiscated and undesirable birds need to be coordinated and guided.

7. Import and transport bans are more realistic and effective than export bans in curbing bird trade.

8. The establishment of an IOC Standing Committee on bird trade was considered, but it was agreed that further discussions were needed to clarify the mission and goals of such a committee. One of the most pressing needs may be the collection and dissemination of scientific and socio-economic data that relate to the bird trade.

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