



The Worldwide Trade in Wild-caught Parrots

By Rosemary Low

In 1993 the Wild Bird Conservation Act became law in the USA. It banned the importation of wild-caught parrots except in certain rare circumstances. In an American avicultural magazine published last year, the Editor commented: “Having traveled in countries that pillage their own wild flora and fauna for profit, the WBCA *may do more good than harm.*”

This was not a strong assessment of the value of the Act and perhaps underlines that many Americans are unaware of its benefits, to themselves and to wild-caught parrots that are traded for profit, at a great loss of life and with a serious impact on the populations of many species.

Unfortunately, in Europe we are not yet concerned enough to follow the example set by the USA. During the period 1997 to 2000, more than 469,600 wild-caught birds were officially imported into Europe. I would strongly endorse the importance of the Wild Bird Conservation Act and the need for similar legislation to be passed in Europe and elsewhere. At the present time the World Parrot Trust is campaigning for a ban on the importation of wild-caught parrots in the European Union. A petition to stop the trade has been signed by more than 16,000 individuals in 83 countries. I would urge all true bird lovers to sign the petition. (You can do so on-line: www.worldparrottrust.org then click on Sign the Petition.)

This trade is cruel, wasteful and unnecessary. The arguments in favour of its continuation, often heard in Europe, are all invalid and based on misconceptions. They include the following.

“New blood” is needed: false

Many breeders state that “new blood” is necessary to maintain the rarer species in aviculture.



Past history shows that enormous numbers of certain species have not resulted in them being established, simply because they are not “commercial”. One example is the Orange-flanked or Grey-chinned Parakeet (*Brotogeris pyrrhopterus*) from western Ecuador and extreme northern Peru. It was heavily exploited during the 1980s before which it was abundant in the wild in its limited area of distribution. Then from 1983 to 1988 at least 60,000 birds were exported. Most of these had been taken from nests and hand-reared. They were very popular as pets in the USA. Despite the tens of thousands exported, it is now a rare bird in aviculture, with probably fewer than ten breeders in the USA. Last year I made extensive enquiries and advertised in several avicultural magazines in the UK but I was unable to locate a single bird. If a species cannot be established in aviculture when 60,000 were exported during an eight-year period, the argument that trade in wild-caught parrots should continue in order to provide unrelated birds for breeding, is not convincing. The total population of the Grey-cheeked Parakeet, which is now classified as Endangered, is estimated to be only about 15,000 birds – just one quarter of the number exported in that five year period. In this case trade had a lasting impact on its numbers and, due to deforestation, there is now no possibility for recovery.

Trapping supports local communities: false

Some purchasers of wild-caught parrots purport to believe that they are contributing towards the financial support of local communities. In most cases, except perhaps in India, catching parrots makes very small sums of money for trappers. In Mexico, Katherine Renton is studying the Lilac-crowned Amazon (*Amazona finschi*) where the trade in the native Amazons is highly detrimental. She told me: “It is often falsely assumed that those involved in parrot trapping are poor and hungry. This frequently is not the case because it requires a certain economic level to maintain and transport the birds, as well as a level of business acumen to trade in birds. Having become familiar with the individuals in the community who are involved in parrot trapping, it is surprising to find that they are not the poorest members, but tend to have means of employment, large houses and good vehicles.”



In Argentina poor peasants and men who fell trees and make charcoal, collect nestling Blue-fronted Amazons. In 1991, they were paid about US\$4 for each one. The limited economic benefits of this trade are short-lived and have a high cost in terms of environmental degradation (especially destruction of parrot nest sites) and loss of resources. Most of the profits of the parrot import trade go to already wealthy middlemen in the importing countries. They make such large profits that they are totally unconcerned by the high level of mortality.

Breeding rare parrots is contributing towards their conservation: false

Some breeders claim that by breeding the rarer parrots, which are still being imported from the wild, often illegally, they are contributing to their conservation. In the UK there was the unfortunate case of the breeder who obtained wild-caught Lear's Macaws, a critically endangered species, and was sentenced to 2 ½ years in prison as a result. He claimed that his sole aim was the conservation of the species. One weekly avicultural magazine received many letters in his support, with the opinion that his sentence was harsh and unjustified. They were apparently unable to comprehend that his action, and the actions of others who buy such birds, are the reason why the species, with a population of about 250 birds, is critically endangered. Unfortunately, it is very hard to get the conservation message across to many breeders, most of whom have no interest in parrots in the wild.

A major reason why private breeders cannot participate in breeding programmes for endangered species is the disease-risk. In the past couple of decades viral diseases have had a very serious impact on parrot collections worldwide. These diseases are the result of mass export of wild-caught parrots, where birds are held in insanitary and overcrowded conditions. Wild parrots have lived with these viruses for eons but in times of stress they surface. Also, when birds from different continents are kept in the same premises, they encounter viruses to which they have no resistance, with fatal consequences. I refer to outbreaks of psittacine beak



and feather disease (Pbfd), proventricular dilatation disease, Pacheco's disease and others. Many of them surface in breeders' aviaries, no matter how good the conditions are. The high incidence of disease in collections where various parrot species are kept means that releasing captive-bred birds poses an unacceptable risk to the wild population. This is why breeding and release programs of endangered species must normally be *in situ*, such as those for the Echo Parakeet (*Psittacula eques*) on Mauritius and the Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vittata*) on Puerto Rico.

Such breeders claim that it is important to have wild-caught birds to maintain genetic variability in captive stocks of the rarer species, and that the young can be used for restocking wild habitats when a species becomes extinct. The fact that hand-reared birds are usually poor candidates for release is another reason why private breeders are unlikely to participate in the conservation of endangered parrots. Although many are bred in captivity, most are hand-reared, in order to maximise production (and income).

CITES

More recently, the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) has had some impact – but not enough – on controlling export. This is the only global treaty designed to protect endangered fauna and flora from excessive trade. According to the degree of threat which dealing in wild-caught birds would impose, parrots and other fauna are listed under three Appendices. On Appendix I are the species threatened with extinction on which trade would have a catastrophic effect. On Appendix II are species that could be threatened if export was not regulated effectively. Trade in these species is permitted if it is sustainable and the specimens were obtained legally. Also on Appendix II are the offspring – but not those of the first generation – of species on Appendix I. The treaty was signed in March 1973. On June 6 1981 nearly all members of the parrot family, excluding those listed in Appendix I, were placed on Appendix II. At the time of writing, 136 countries were signatories to CITES.



Unfortunately, some countries that trade in enormous numbers of wild-caught parrots are not signatories and many countries that are signatories still have a large import trade. Annual export quotas are set by some countries but the quota system does not work because CITES documents accompanying bird exports are frequently forged or used on more than one occasion.

Parrots on Appendix II continue to be trapped and exported although no research has been carried out on most species and it is not known whether trade is sustainable. Annual quotas, such as those established by the governments of Guyana and Argentina, were apparently not based on research and might have been, or still are, in excess of sustainable trade levels.

In some instances, a parrot species has been traded in large numbers even before its habitat was known to science. During the 1980s hundreds of Blue-throated Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) were trapped for international trade, possibly as many as 1,200, yet the area in which this macaw occurs was not discovered until 1992. By 1998 eight locations were known and the total population was estimated at no more than 100 to 150 individuals. Since then numbers might have fallen at several sites. Fieldwork carried out last year suggested that only 50 to 100 birds have survived, making this the rarest macaw in existence and one of the rarest of all parrots. It seems that fewer than ten pairs breed each year, of which perhaps only five to seven pairs are successful. There is no evidence to suggest that the species' decline was caused by habitat destruction as enormous tracts of apparently suitable habitat remain. The decline has been brought about solely by trapping for trade.

Species with high mortality

In other continents, some parrot species are trapped and exported despite the fact that their survival is almost nil. The Long-tailed Parakeet (*Psittacula longicauda*) seldom survives more than a few months, at most, in captivity. Breeding successes have been very few and have



never been sustained over the long term. In the year 2000, 648 were exported from Malaysia. It is unlikely that any are alive today. Many do not even survive the journey, partly because they are badly packed, to save transport costs.

Another species from Malaysia with a low survival rate is the little Blue-rumped Parrot (*Psittinus cyanurus*). The same is true of the export of Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots (*Loriculus galgulus*) from Malaysia, although a small number of birds are bred in captivity. Clearly, the export trade is solely aimed at making money with absolutely no consideration for the birds involved. While this should not surprise anyone, trade in species with an exceedingly high mortality should be outlawed. Unfortunately, it is likely to be many years (if ever) before ethics play any part in the export trade.

Trade in Indonesia

In July this year the Indonesian organisation KSBK (Animal Conservation for Life) issued a report on the parrot trade in Indonesia. It indicated that in the province of North Maluku, for example, 15,000 parrots are trapped annually. There is no limit to the numbers of some species (such as the Umbrella Cockatoo) that can be trapped. The birds are sent to Jakarta and Bali. In Java, many of these parrots are sold in markets. The psychological torture suffered by such intelligent birds as cockatoos when they are removed from their natural environment into harsh and unstimulating conditions results in feather plucking, mutilating their own flesh and in death. Such highly social birds as cockatoos cannot tolerate solitary confinement and must have the company of their own species or a sympathetic human companion if they are to thrive. Sadly, the ethics of the trade in wild-caught cockatoos and other highly intelligent parrots is seldom considered because comparatively few people have any understanding of their capacity for suffering.

The National Army of Indonesia (TNI) is involved in this trade. Soldiers returning from duty



bring hundreds of parrots back in warships. Species include Umbrella Cockatoos, Chattering Lories and Violet-necked Lories. With the smaller parrots, such as Violet-necked Lories, dozens of birds are packed so tightly into wooden boxes that they can hardly move. Heat and lack of food causes high mortality at this stage especially when birds are let uncovered in open boats and when waiting to board an aircraft. People involved in the trade are unable to comprehend that survival and therefore profits would be higher if the birds were more humanely packed.

From January to March 2002 KSBK, supported by the RSPCA, carried out an investigation into parrot trade in five markets in Java. The most traded species was the Black-capped Lory. Other *Lorius* lorries, *Eos* lorries, Eclectus, Green-winged King Parrots and *Tanygnathus* parrots were the species most heavily traded. Trade quotas have been broken many times, yet the local forestry department (KSDA) continues to issue trapping and transport permits. Dealers in Jakarta and Bali ship to Pakistan, Qatar, Taiwan -- and Italy and Spain. Most of these birds are erroneously reported as captive-bred.

Of the species trapped, 47% are “protected” by law. Trade has resulted in the local extinction of Moluccan Cockatoos, Red and Blue Lories, Purple-naped Lories and Chattering Lories, and in the near global extinction of the Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. Yes, this familiar companion bird is a critically endangered species due to elimination of entire populations by trappers.

During the 1980s trade in the popular species was so high it was feared that some species, such as the Moluccan Cockatoo, would become extinct. Between 1981 and 1984 it was believed that 4,000 to 9,000 Moluccans were exported annually. Between 1993 and 1990, CITES figures showed that 66,654 Moluccans were exported to countries that were signatories of CITES. That was a shocking statistic, to which one must add exports to non-CITES countries, domestic trade



within Indonesia and the birds that died before export.

Australia

Australia does not allow the export of parrots or the capture except of certain species that are considered to be agricultural pests, such as some white cockatoos. Greater Sulphur-crested Cockatoos used to be removed from the nest in large numbers for the pet trade. However, this seldom happens now because psittacine beak and feather disease (Pbfd) is rife in wild nests. Dealers do not want the risk of the disease being transferred to other birds on the premises. One result of this is that whereas a few years ago no breeder would give aviary space to such a common and inexpensive bird, the demand for the pet trade is now being met by breeders.

India

In India there is a total ban on the bird trade. This ban cannot be enforced. Every year approximately 50,000 parakeet chicks (representing between 20% and 30% of the parrot trade in India) are collected. Most of these chicks are Ringnecks (*Psittacula krameri manillensis*), aged between two and four weeks. Also collected are Alexandrine, Moustache, Slaty-headed, Blue-winged and Blossom-headed (*Psittacula eupatria, alexandri, himalayana, columboides* and *roseata*). Chicks are removed from their nests from February to April by using lengths of curved wire tied to a rope inserted into nesting cavities. Chicks collected by local or visiting trappers are sold to dealers, who pass them on to the main dealers. They are then sold in open markets. Some are smuggled to western Asia through Nepal and Pakistan.

Until 1991, India was a major exporter of parakeets. Between 1981 and 1990, 300,000 parakeets of five species were exported. The main importing countries were the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and France. Thousands of parakeet chicks are seized from markets but in the absence of rescue centres most of them die because there is no one to feed them. A government release states: "More wildlife volunteers need to come forward to help check the



widespread trade of these hapless creatures.”

The Arab States

Large numbers of wild-caught parrots are imported into the Arab States, including Appendix 1 species. For example, during 2002 many Indonesian cockatoos were imported into Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, including Moluccans, Tritons, Lesser Sulphur-crests and Citron-crests. A prospective buyer took the precaution of carrying out blood tests on 40 of these cockatoos. About 90% of them proved positive for psittacine beak and feather disease. This included two Palm Cockatoos that died a few days after being imported. The majority of these cockatoos will die from diseases contracted as a result of trade.

Bahrain does not permit the importation of parrots from Indonesia. However, because of a trade agreement with Jordan, which pre-dates CITES, wild-caught parrots can enter Bahrain from Jordan and other Arab states. Importation is now mainly confined to the winter months of December to February. Previously, parrots imported during the hotter months seldom survived for more than a few days because they could not tolerate the extreme heat.

Bahrain imports hundreds of Ring-necked Parakeets from Pakistan, chicks that are still being hand-fed. They arrive packed into wooden crates, like day-old poultry chicks. These chicks are landed at Bahrain airport. To circumvent the law, which does not allow importation of birds from Pakistan for health reasons, they are then driven across the border to Saudi Arabia. There a veterinary certificate stating that they are free of Newcastle's disease is obtained, and they are immediately driven back to Bahrain, a round trip of about five hours. These chicks go without food for many hours.

Large numbers of Grey Parrots are also imported. Many of these have Psittacine beak and feather disease. Bahrain also imports captive-bred parrots, such as lorries, from Germany. After



the required seven-day quarantine period they are offered for sale at low prices in open-air markets.

The situation in the South American region is different. There is already a much wider understanding that parrots and other birds bring ecotourists and dollars. Many trappers have realised that their knowledge of the birdlife can be used to greater financial advantage as a bird guide for a tour company, and that this occupation has long-term financial gain for the region. Trapping the bird life does not. Despite this, it continues unabated in many regions.

Exporting countries

Over the past few decades, there have been changes in the main countries exporting neotropical parrots. Brazil banned the export of its fauna in 1967, Costa Rica and Venezuela did likewise in 1970 and Colombia in 1973. In the early 1970s the major exporters were Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Paraguay. By the early 1980s, Belize, Ecuador, Mexico and Colombia had ceased to export wild-caught birds and the major exporters were Argentina, Bolivia, Guyana, Honduras and Peru. In 1984 Bolivia banned the export of wildlife and Argentina was the single largest exporter of neotropical parrots for several years. Guatemala banned export in 1986 and Honduras in 1990. By the 1990s most of the parrots exported to Europe came from Guyana and Nicaragua. It should be noted that most of these countries retained a large internal trade in wild-caught parrots and the illegal export and smuggling of many species continued as before. Many parrots cross borders illegally.

International trade figures for the year 2000 and incomplete figures for 2001 (available from WCMC, Cambridge) show the following exports in order of volume of trade for selected species:

PARROT EXPORTS



	Year:	2000	2001
AFRICA			
Senegal Parrot: five states		39,541	14,421
Grey Parrot: nine states		34,282	23,109
Timneh Grey Parrots: three states		6,332	2,660 *
Ringneck Parakeets: Africa and Pakistan		27,675	11,478 *
SOUTH AMERICA			
Monk Parrot (Quaker Parakeet):			
Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay		12,923	3,381
Lesser Patagonian Conure: Argentina		10,275	4,120
Orange-winged Amazon:			
Guyana		6,844	6,997
Suriname		3,411	2,196
Total:		10,255	9,193
Red-lore Amazon	Nicaragua	2,262	*
Mealy Amazon	Guyana	753	752
	Nicaragua	553	*
	Suriname	352	256
	Total:	1,658	1,088
Blue-fronted Amazon	Argentina	1,678	1,252
Yellow-fronted Amazon	Guyana	892	762
	Suriname	483	414
	Total:	1,375	1,176



White-fronted Amazon	Nicaragua	1,297	8
Yellow-naped Amazon	Nicaragua	673	*
Finsch's Amazon	Mexico	73	355
Yellow-lored Amazon	Mexico	42	48

* Totals incomplete at time of going to press

Note that two Mexican species (one endemic) appear on this list. After nearly 20 years of prohibiting export of its fauna, Mexico changed the regulations. This was being strongly challenged by conservationists, at the time of going to press.

The effect of trade

One of the reasons why Amazons have fared badly in comparison with other parrots of similar size is, of course, their popularity as pets. Across their range, hundreds of thousands of chicks are taken from the nest every year, and large numbers of some species are trapped as adults or young birds. The most destructive practice is that of destroying nest sites to obtain chicks. In 1991, researchers in the Argentine Chaco region who studied the impact of trade on the Blue-fronted Amazon there, estimated that approximately 100,000 of its nest trees were destroyed or damaged between 1981 and 1989 by poachers when they stole chicks from nests (Bucher *et al*, 1992).

Conservation biologists and aviculturists have engaged in much debate over the relative importance of habitat loss versus poaching for the pet trade in the decline of parrot populations, especially those of Amazons. Habitat loss has had grave effects on many species; combined with poaching of chicks from nests, the effect can be catastrophic. A study in the late 1990s of the international trade in parrots listed by CITES found that 1.2 million parrots were exported



between 1991 and 1996, with the majority of those birds coming from the neotropics. These figures are thought to be a gross underestimate of the actual numbers of birds taken from the wild because they exclude pre-export mortality, which has been estimated to reach 60% of all birds trapped or taken from nests.

International trade figures do not account for the substantial illegal international trade and the equally serious domestic trade. When these factors are taken into consideration, the number of chicks taken from the wild in the neotropics was estimated at 400,000 to 800,000 *per year* from 1982 to 1986. This almost certainly means that many parrot populations have declined significantly.

Data was collected between 1979 and 1999 from investigators conducting ecological or behavioural studies of neotropical parrots (Wright *et al*, 2001). There was probably a bias towards studying threatened species, because much of research funding is directed towards species of conservation concern. This bias probably explains the preponderance of Amazon species. The data were collected in 23 studies in 14 countries. Between 1979 and 1999, 4204 nest attempts were recorded. The average poaching rate was 30%. Four studies reported more than 70% of nests poached. Only six species escaped having their young stolen from the nest. If a nest failed, nesting by pairs (various neotropical parrots) in the same year was extremely rare: only 1% of pairs nested again. (This is an important statistic that will surprise most aviculturists.)

The estimates of poaching levels were considered to be conservative. In most cases researchers probably provided some protection to nests under study by inhibiting poaching. Researchers inadvertently leading poachers to previously unknown nests is unlikely because of the conspicuous behaviour of many parrots around nests, and because of the tendency to reuse nest sites over many years. Most of the populations studied were protected from poaching in some



form (legally, or active patrolling of nesting areas by armed guards).

That the Wild Bird Conservation Act had the effect of lowering nest poaching was shown in the ten species for which direct comparison was possible: the poaching rate was 48% before the Act was passed in 1992 and 20% after the act became law. Nest poaching over all study sites was lower after 1992 (26%) than before (36%). Poaching was higher in unprotected sites than in protected sites for the four species (Red-lore, Double Yellow-head, Green-cheeked and Yellow-naped Amazons) for which direct comparisons could be made.

The European Economic Union (EEU) accounted for more than 75% of all parrots legally imported in the three years immediately following the enactment of WBCA. It seems likely that if importation bans similar to those of this Act were brought into the EEU, poaching rates would decline even further. A ban does not have universal support because of the number of traders (some of them illegal) who make much money from selling wild-caught birds. Many people buy imported Amazons, Greys and macaws because they are cheap, with no understanding of or no concern for the damage the trade does to wild populations.

The USA was the largest importer of wild-caught parrots until 1993, when the Wild Bird Conservation Act became law. This Act prohibited the importation of wild-caught birds, except in the case of permits granted to individuals who participate in a recognised avicultural breeding group who co-ordinate the importation of one particular species. No wild birds can be imported for commercial reasons. Some closed-ringed pet birds are allowed to enter the USA from approved CITES-member countries' breeding facilities. Appendix 1 species could be imported only under a special permit.

Internal trade

For some species the capture of birds for the internal (domestic) trade is a much greater threat



than capture for export. This is the case with the Yellow-naped Amazon (*auropalliata*) on the Pacific coast of Mexico and Central America. In Honduras trappers demand between US\$25 and US\$60 per bird – a huge sum where the average daily wage is only \$2. In November 2002 this Amazon was placed on Appendix I of CITES because excessive trade has threatened its survival.

In Venezuela, Amazons and other parrots have been traded for centuries. However, since the devaluation of the national currency in 1983, international trade has increased many times in magnitude. A law forbids hunting, trading or transporting non-game birds, but it is usually ignored. When trappers are caught fines are ridiculously low – apparently equivalent to the local cost of one pair of Amazons.

Parrots for the national trade come mainly from the central llanos, the northern coastal regions and the north of Bolivar state. Those for international trade originate from the Orinoco River delta, the north-west, along the Colombian border and some from the Caribbean Islands. Indians from the Orinoco delta sell parrots to wildlife traders from Guyana and Trinidad. It was estimated that in 1988 and 1989 65,000 to 70,000 parrots were exported from the Orinoco delta each year (Desenne and Strahl, 1991). In Caracas, main distributors bring parrots by the hundreds on a bi-monthly basis during the high season (April to July). In some years this season extends until September or October, when the birds sold are usually so young they do not even have feathers.

In the Orinoco delta a lure bird is tethered to a palm tree. As a flock of parrots settles in the tree, the birds are apparently snared individually by someone hiding in the tree, using a noose on a long stick. The Indians are said to capture most birds in a flock using this method. This helps to explain why so many adult parrots are imported into Europe from Guyana. This is the worst and most wasteful kind of trade because many adult parrots will die of stress after



enduring days or weeks or months of intense fear.

In Venezuela the Yellow-fronted Amazon is the most preferred of all parrot species due to its linguistic skills; it is the most expensive Amazon there. The Orange-wing accounts for the majority of sales; it is not such a good “talker” and commands only half the price. Desenne and Strahl thought that the Yellow-fronted Amazon might “reach threatened status within Venezuela due to the huge numbers of this species that are captured for the national and international trade.”

Small-scale roadside sale of birds, mostly by children and adolescents along main highways, can have serious effects on local parrot populations. These include the Yellow-shouldered Amazon in coastal areas and Yellow-fronted Amazons in the plains. Equally seriously, parrots, toucans and other birds are hunted for their feathers to make items to sell to tourist shops.

The Blue-fronted Amazon is not found in Venezuela. In the early 1980s the demand for this species for the international pet trade increased dramatically. CITES reports indicate that the minimum trade (international) increased steadily from 10,644 in 1981 to 58,464 in 1988. In 1989 there was a steep decline to 21,753 birds. According to official figures, approximately 310,000 were exported during the period 1981 to 1989, 280,000 being exported to nations that were members of CITES. Major importers were the USA (46%) and Germany (FDR) (21%). About 97% of the birds originated in Argentina. In 1990 and 1991 Argentina had an annual export quota of 23,000 Blue-fronts. By then, export from all other range countries was prohibited. The large export trade was based on the bird’s supposed status as a pest (Bucher *et al*, 1991). This was unjustified.

Prior to the 1980s, the trade was primarily national. Nestlings were removed mainly from the Chaco forests and trapping (less common) was concentrated in the citrus-growing areas such as



Salta and Tucuman. Throughout the Chaco, local people systematically removed whole broods, precluding recruitment of young birds into the wild population. If they left any young, other people might steal them later, thus families guarded nests night and day as the time approached for the young to be removed. Fear of “robbery” often led to premature removal of the nestlings, thus decreasing their chances of survival in captivity.

Interviews conducted with traders in Joaquin Gonzalez, Salta Province, indicated that about 3,000 young were taken annually from a forested area of 90,000 hectares of public land (Salta Forestal) in 1986. Fewer than 500 were taken from the same area during the 1990-1991 breeding season. This was primarily due to forest cutting. The collectors stated that even 20 years ago Blue-fronted Amazons were easy to find near towns; by 1991 they had to travel 80km (50 miles) north of the town to buy parrots from campesinos.

Nests were detected during the course of a day’s work by employees of local timber companies. The nests were monitored and the chicks were removed when they were old enough. One dealer stated that the average number of young Blue-fronts that passed through his hands in one year was 7,000 and that in 1973 he fed 13,500 chicks. Young were fed twice daily, at about 7am and 4pm, on a thick mixture of boiled rice, high-protein baby cereal and cooked corn meal. As many as 300 chicks could be fed in an hour. An infamous piece of film, shown on television many times, shows chicks of this species being fed and over-fed. Those that were over-fed died, probably almost instantly, and were thrown aside. Many must have died of stress and overcrowding and many more would have died from disease at holding stations. Surely no bird lover could continue to condone the trade in wild-caught parrots after seeing this film...

Argentina banned the export trade in 1993 but faced pressure from several sectors, notably from Europe, to re-open trade. Domestic trade continued. Each province had autonomy in terms of management of its natural resources, thus the scale of trade was difficult to assess. A large



proportion of the pet trade in Argentina went through the underground economy and did not appear in official statistics. According to Professor Enrique Bucher, of the National University of Cordoba, in 1996 the domestic trade probably totalled 3,000 to 4,000 Blue-fronted Amazons annually, a figure that was about 10% of the international export levels of the previous decade (Bucher, pers. comm., 1996).

Illegal trade

Figures quoted cannot take into account the illegal trade, the extent of which can never be documented. It has resulted in the deaths of countless birds, especially cockatoos from Australia, which were stuffed into tubes and packed into suitcases. When smugglers were apprehended in the 1980s they turned to the smuggling of eggs, which were inserted into a belt strapped around the body. This trade was very well organised and highly lucrative. Some of those apprehended served long prison sentences as a result. More recently, rare and endangered species such as the St Vincent Parrot have been illegally exported as young birds to the USA and to Europe; furthermore there are St Lucia Parrots in the Czech Republic (Bruning, 2002). Regrettably, there have always been collectors who will take endangered species of high monetary value from the wild, whether they are rare parrots or rare plants, regardless of the impact on the wild population.

Stopping the export trade

Research has shown that after the US banned the importation of wild-caught parrots in 1993, export of some parrot species from the neotropics did decline. It would decline further if the European Union were to follow suit. However, there are still many countries, especially in the Far East, that import large numbers of wild-caught parrots. It seems probable that in due course most countries will not allow the importation of wild-caught parrots. However, by the time that occurs many parrot species will have declined so much in the wild that the export trade will not be viable. It has already done irreversible damage to many parrot populations.



In the meantime what can be done to try to curtail trade? The United States are no longer consumers of wild-caught birds so little can be done here. Elsewhere, perhaps one of the most effective actions would be to write to airlines that carry birds, pointing out the damaging aspects of trade and asking them not to carry large consignments or known wild-caught birds. Stopping importation into Europe by means of legislation will not be easy and might be a lengthy process, thus we need to consider other actions that could be effective.

I am sure that a few decades from now, or hopefully sooner, people will regard with distaste and anger the fact that parrots and other birds could be trapped and exported as objects of commerce, just as in England we look back eight decades with disgust to the time when live quail, birds trapped in the wild, were imported into the UK to be served up in restaurants. There is one vital difference, however. There is an urgency involved in stopping the trade in wild-caught parrots because some of them, such as Lesser and Philippine Cockatoos, are on the brink of extinction. It is a tragedy that Indonesia has no conception of the value of its wildlife and their habitats and that, inevitably, dozens of bird species from that region will become extinct within a few decades due to loss of habitat and to trade.

Although man's conscience and awareness relating to humane treatment of animals has increased immeasurably during the last two decades, I fear that such awareness cannot spread in time to save some of the world's most valuable habitats and such charismatic creatures as parrots. But we must continue to fight for the rights of these birds and especially for their right to be left where they belong – in the wild. We do not need to take any more from their natural habitat. But we do need to act more responsibly towards those already in captivity. And that is another story...



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