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CONSERVATION

by Robert J. Berry

Curator of Birds, Houston Zoo
Adjunct Professor, Texas A & M

(The following column is comprised of part of the featured speech that Robert J. Berry presented at the 1984 A.F.A. convention banquet. Bob Berry is Curator of Birds at the Houston Zoo, Adjunct Professor at Texas A&M University, and recipient of many awards and honors for his excellent work in aviculture. He is also one of the most respected aviculturists in the conservation community. Many conservationists who look with a jaundiced eye upon most bird breeders listen with attention to what Robert Berry says. The A.F.A. is extremely fortunate to have such a well qualified and highly honored person developing the A.F.A. conservation effort. Please read the following words carefully and ponder them well. Ed.)

As Lee mentioned in my introduction, I am currently serving as Chairman of your conservation committee and before I leave the podium, I would feel somewhat remiss if I didn't comment briefly on avian conservation. As this is intended to be an evening of fun and relaxation, I really have no desire to talk to you about gloom and doom. I would, however, like to leave you with a few thoughts to ponder.

No doubt most of you are already aware that, considering the current global situation, more and more species are becoming threatened or endangered at an accelerating and alarming rate. As wild populations continue to decline, the question of the morality of aviculture will surely become a more controversial and important issue during the 1980s. We desperately need to begin putting our house in order in this regard. The role of aviculture in the area of wildlife conservation represents a double-edged sword. On one edge there is a genuine need for captive populations to be established in our aviaries, on the other there is little justification for removing large volumes of birds from the wild in order simply to fill cages in foreign lands. To see species such as Salvadori's Fig Parrots being offered for sale in pet shops is the type of blight that aviculture can no longer afford. To see macaws imported in such volume that they become the object of price wars is equally irresponsible.

Smuggling is a cancer in our midst. Not only does it represent a constant threat to the health of our captive

flocks, it clouds the future of legal importations and degrades the integrity of the entire avicultural community.

Lack of foresight, long-range planning and a lack of cohesiveness plague many of our avicultural pursuits. Many of us maintain rare or endangered species in our private collections. Often times our avicultural interests and enthusiasm for birds are not shared by other family members. With this in mind, how many of us have made any arrangement for disposing of these birds to responsible parties or agencies should something unexpectedly happen to us? Is it moral for us to have such birds and not address such considerations especially knowing that many of these birds could be critical to the future preservation of their entire species? How many of us have actually set long-range goals for our collections? Do we simply breed birds for pleasure or profit today with no consideration for what happens ten to twenty years from now?

At the Ft. Lauderdale conference in 1979, I presented a paper entitled the "Pitfalls of Aviculture," in which I addressed many of these questions. I would again like to read the closing paragraph of that presentation to you.

"The truly dedicated aviculturists today must have a concern for tomorrow. We find ourselves at a pivotal point in writing our own history. On the one hand, we stand on the brink of the golden age of aviculture with the promise of a future of significant accomplishments in avian preservation. On the other, we stand also on the brink of disaster, where a careless lack of concern by aviculturists may help contribute to the extinction of more species of birds in a shorter period of time than at any other point in history. The choice is clearly ours. To ignore that this choice exists is a pitfall we must all carefully avoid."

Ladies and gentlemen, this consideration is even more true today than it was five years ago. Just imagine what we could hope to accomplish at this point in time if only a few of our forebearers had possessed the wisdom, insight and ability to sustain a small nucleus of breeding stock of Carolina parakeets or passenger pigeons for us to work with today. Don't we owe such a legacy to our posterity?

In the words of the late William Beebe: "When the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more — another heaven — and, another earth — must pass before such a one, can be again."

Robert J. Berry July 1984