

Making Your Money Matter in Marketing the Conservation Message

by Paul Butler
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In the bird world, parrots are unique. Their popularity stems from their striking plumage, the ease with which they can be tamed and their uncanny ability to mimic human voices.

Yet it is not these features that make them unlike any other group of birds. Rather, it is the array of threats which they face.

No other group is threatened by such a multitude and complex inter-relationship of pressures including natural disasters, habitat destruction, hunting for food, feathers and the live bird trade; while at the same time being long-lived, and slow-breeding.

Cracids are hunted for food and under threat from habitat destruction, yet are spared the enormous prices offered for their psittacine cousins.

Raptors, such as the Peregrine Falcon, command huge sums from the Arab world, yet are seldom if ever eaten; and the smaller passerines — trapped in their millions for trade — breed rapidly and few face imminent extinction.

Around the world many psittacine species are in decline, nowhere more so than in the small insular nations of the Caribbean.

In October 1492, Christopher Columbus "discovered" the West Indies. Stretching some 1,500 miles in a broad southeastern arc between Florida and northern South America, they comprise an archipelago rich in

biotic diversity and, at that time, home to 27 species of macaws, parrots and parakeets.

In the intervening half millennium, 14 of the 27 psittacines believed to be in existence at that time have become extinct.

All seven species of macaws have vanished, as have five of eight species of parakeets and three of the twelve species of Amazon parrots.

Those that remain have small or declining populations or are threatened with extinction. Perhaps the most beautiful of these is the Saint Vincent Parrot, *Amazona quildin-qui*.

This species, with its kaleidoscope of plumage colors, has probably never been very abundant and reports from as early as the turn of the century describe it as scarce.

Clark (1905), in his paper "Birds of the Southern Lesser Antilles," wrote, "This bird is now decidedly rare on Saint Vincent where it is confined to the highest wooded slopes in the center of the island behind Barroual-lie. Some idea of its scarcity may be had from the fact that during a walk from Hermitage, in the Upper Cumberland Valley, south along the central ridge of the island, only two were met with, although it is in this region that they are said to be most common."

In the early 1980s, Lambert et al estimated the population of the Saint Vincent Parrot to be 421 ± 52 and

noted that many parrots were being taken for sale to tourists.

Their report states, "One villager . . . claimed to have caught 27 nestlings during a two to three year period although 33% of them died before he was able to sell them."

The report's authors also emphasize the adverse effects of deforestation stating, "agriculture extends to the periphery of all the forested areas, with the exception of the upper Richmond Valley and Morne Garu Mountains and undoubtedly caused much habitat destruction in the past."

If man has been the cause of this species' problems, men are now the reason for its recent change in fortune — men like Senior Forestry Supervisor Brian Johnson, and Forestry Officers Lennox Quammie, Carlton Thomas and Fitzroy Springer.

Through their dedicated efforts, legislation has been enacted, reserves established, successful captive breeding programs initiated, education programs implemented and the birds' decline arrested.

Much of their success stemmed from changing public perceptions about this beautiful bird and its declaration as a national symbol.

In marketing the conservation message, a small U.S. based conservation organization played a catalytic role. Through providing technical and material assistance, RARE Center has helped men like Brian to help their endemic wildlife. Results from a pre-project questionnaire, undertaken in January 1989, indicated that while the vast majority of Vincentians knew the parrot to be their national bird, few knew how rare it was, the reasons for its decline or the levels of legal protection afforded to it and its forest home.

This was soon to change and under Brian's direction and with RARE Center's assistance, parrot fever soon swept the island. Posters, billboards, badges and bumper stickers could be seen everywhere. Vincie's song, a parrot conservation tune, was taught to 18,000 children and visits made to every primary and secondary school.

Churches rallied to the cause giving environmental sermons and musicians lent their support writing catchy calypsos that were aired on the radio and made into music videos.

Vincie became such an important cause on Saint Vincent that local businesses soon got involved, financing



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many key aspects of the campaign. Most important was the long term funding the St. Vincent Brewery awarded to "Vincie's Nature Notes," a monthly environmental newsletter that is distributed free to schools across the nation.

All captive parrots were registered and banded and an aviary complex, funded by Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, Wildlife Preservation Trust International and Los Palmitos, was constructed.

Within months of the nest boxes being erected, Saint Vincent recorded its first successful breeding. Under the watchful eyes of Lennox Quammie, four birds have fledged, an event that augers well for the future and one which complements the Division's efforts to protect the wild stock.

More than 13% of the country has now been set aside as a parrot reserve and strengthened resolve to protect this unique symbol of Vincentian pride has resulted in the rigid enforcement of laws, the ratification of CITES and a halt in the decline of its wild parrots. Saint Vincent continues to make further strides in educating its people about the wider environment and in protecting its rich and unique natural heritage.

RARE Center has gone on to assist Dominica's Forestry Department and their endemic Amazon, the magnificent Sisserou or Imperial Parrot (*Amazona imperialis*). Puppet shows, song, sermons, music videos, bumper stickers, billboards, posters and badges again played their part and 80% of that nation's children rallied to the cause pledging financial and moral support to the securing of 200 acres of forest land deemed critical for the survival of the Sisserou.

This year RARE is providing assistance to the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas and to their three subspecies of *Amazona leucocephala*.

In April 1991, RARE Center's innovative work saw the donation of an environmental bus to the government and people of Saint Lucia. Funded jointly with the UK-based World Parrot Trust, this interpretive center on wheels will travel wherever there is a road. Flamboyantly painted and squawking like a parrot, it will be sure to attract attention. Among the many displays included in the bus will be interactive models depicting the ravages of deforestation, and the plight and conservation needs of that island's national bird,


the Saint Lucia Parrot, *Amazona versicolor*.

Word of RARE Center's work is spreading and governments across the Caribbean are asking it for help. The organization would like to help them all but only readers like you can make this a reality. The AFA has aided RARE Center in the past, financing the badges that played a key role in Saint Vincent and which were used in schools across the island. Hopefully this is but a first example of where concerned aviculturists and conservationists join together to help local

people like Brian protect their unique species of wildlife in the wild.

For more information on RARE Center and its Caribbean Education Campaign write: RARE Center for Tropical Bird Conservation, 1529 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

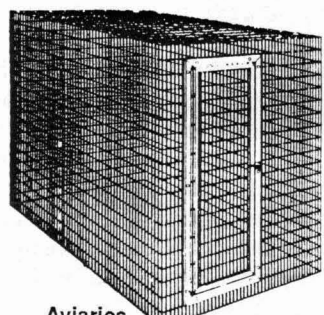
The author, Paul Butler, served ten years as Conservation Advisor to Saint Lucia's Forestry Department. Today, he works for RARE Center for Tropical Bird Conservation, a U.S. non-profit, tax exempt organization, providing conservation assistance to the islands of the Caribbean. ●



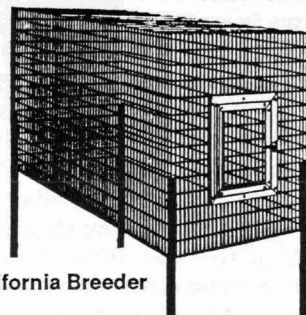
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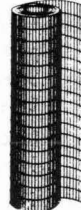


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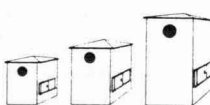


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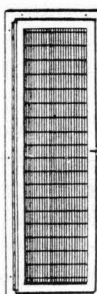
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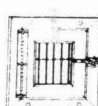
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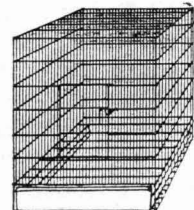
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