

On Singing Gardens

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Professor Larry Swan was a very innovative aviculturist using techniques seldom seen even in this decade. He appreciated birds in their natural habitat and through a system of wire tubing allowed lovebirds and finches to fly throughout his yard. These large tubes allowed the birds to have their own territories and to reproduce. They

could be seen flying overhead as if they were truly free but this was a freedom within an aviary.

Larry Swan was not only unique in his aviaries but also in his thinking (as you'll note when reading this article) regarding the restrictions that government was putting on our captive birds.

A Comment on the Proposed Importation Regulations on Injurious Wildlife

I represent several areas of concern regarding the importation of exotic animals into the United States. I am primarily a Professor of Biology, a zoogeographer and ecologist, and I am well aware of the history and ecology of alien species. As a Director of the San Francisco Zoological Society and involved in educational and research programs at the San Francisco Zoo, I have a deep interest in the functions of zoos. I am also involved in aviculture both as a research zoologist and as a breeder of birds.

I have many aviaries. One of these is a system of wire tubes that carries birds through the trees on my acre in San Mateo County. Finches, weavers



Photo courtesy of Larry Swan

Dr. Lawrence Swan in his imaginative garden where his birds fly through wire tunnels that extend over much of the area. The birds actually become part of the "Singing Garden."



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and other small seed-eating birds fly as if free so that they exhibit territoriality and their natural behavior is not particularly limited. Shafts of color fly around me and it is all a delight and a wonder. My tropical birds mix with the exotic plants in my garden and I cannot help but consider that an aviary is in reality an extension of a garden. It is a garden that sings.

This similarity between a garden and an aviary may not be too apparent at first. Consider, however, that both are composed of exotic species and both are the product of breeders or enthusiasts, both are the result of an import trade and both have commercial, public, and private aspects. There are other close similarities, but for one reason or another, those individuals who resent exotic animals do not extend their animosity to carnations and camellias.

The assumption that every exotic animal is somehow "potentially dangerous" or "injurious," the very basis of this proposed legislation to ban the importation of exotic animals, is misleading and erroneous to the point of being irresponsible. Animals, whether they are native or exotic may develop population surges that may be deleterious to other species or to man. It is not just a quality confined to exotics. Furthermore, the animal is not innately injurious. Its population responds to an environment and usually the environment that produces incongruous population growth, at least in Holarctic Regions, is an environment that has been altered by man, his agriculture and urbanization. It seems to me that if an aviary of exotic birds can be compared to a garden of foreign plants, it may be safe to say that geraniums are as likely to be a pestiferous threat as Red-cheeked Waxbills and fuchsias as dangerous as Cordon Bleu Finches. A law banning the importation of such pleasant animals is as useless and illogical as a restriction upon pansies and petunias.

It would take many pages to discount the fears expressed by the Department of the Interior concerning the dire consequences of importation and I leave the absurdity of the Government's attitude on this to be answered by others. I should remark,

however, that the primary introduction of exotic birds has been attempted, energetically but not always successfully, by Government agencies themselves with the inconsistent premise that exotic game species are somehow beneficial. The criterion for value is equated with their desirability as food for hunters. This, it seems, is evidence for a very meager and shallow philosophy of wildlife protection and zoogeographic purity.

The chief problem, or potential problem that confronts the importation of animals is not the possible threat to American wildlife but rather the possible threat to native animal populations in foreign countries. If a growing program of collecting and exporting animals continues indefinitely, some animal populations may be depleted. This proposed legislation does not aim at this potential problem and it destroys a possibility that we in this country may be able to grasp in order to help reduce the drain on the wildlife abroad.

Consider again the history of garden plants. Fortunately, plants such as fuchsias do not have to be imported any more. Amateur and private gardeners have learned to cultivate and develop these beautiful flowers. If fuchsias had to be obtained as wild plants in Chile, one could see that a huge demand could threaten the native fuchsia populations. In other words, by producing the plants in this country, we reduce the demand for wild specimens. And so it is with animals. It is almost exactly the same with animals.

In the long run, helpful legislation aimed at betterment is far superior to bans and restrictions and biased policies that tend to favor one economic interest over another. It seems to me that the breeding of exotic animals, especially birds, should be a program that is aided and enhanced by legislation in view of the beneficial effects on the wildlife of the world. If the intent of this proposed legislation is to destroy or hinder the demand for exotic animals it is obviously on a futile course. Laws cannot tell people not to love and own beautiful and interesting living things. Is it right or proper to outlaw gardens? Can people be told

that they cannot grow petunias? If this analogy seems too remote I suggest it be debated. I for one consider that there is a logical comparison between plant and animal cultivation and that this similarity is particularly apt in the assessment of this proposed legislation.

I therefore propose that breeders of exotic animals, private and public, be recognized and their programs condoned and aided by the Government as a positive program of wildlife conservation. Furthermore, since the depletion of native animal populations may prove serious before adequate breeding programs are instituted in this country, I suggest that the Government begin programs of wildlife conservation in other countries. This may be in the form of a Biological Peace Corps or an Animal Information Group with education as one of its primary objectives. It should also investigate population levels of native animals, especially those that are popular items of export and be in a position to advise local governments on the status of their animal resources. It could possibly condone some form of economic aid to native wildlife collectors and exporters whose professions may be threatened and even subsidize collectors in an effort to reduce their depredations or possibly buy and release rare captive animals. It seems to me that such a positive program is far more advantageous than an unfair, untenable, misinformed and misdirected ban on imports. The money spent on detectives, border guards, customs agents and the like, as well as money saved by not paying inflated fees for birds such as those which have followed the miserable, illogical and impossible quarantine programs against Newcastle disease, could be spent in a more meaningful and imaginative way.

I recently completed a count of the bird species of the United States less Hawaii. I found 759 species, including (rather arbitrarily) 9 introduced species and 33 casual species that come with some regularity from Europe and Asia. The purpose of my study was to determine the number of bird species that are confined to the continental United States. Surprisingly there are only 26 species of birds that do not extend

their ranges outside of our borders. This 3% of the total leaves 733 species that roam elsewhere. Mexico claims about 238 of these species. Central America has about 93 species and at least 127 species reach South America. The remainder extend to Canada, Asia, Europe and a few even go to Africa and Australia.

The lesson from these data suggests that political boundaries have little to do with animal distribution. The United States Department of the Interior is not recognized by birds. Birds are importing themselves by the millions. We are not the sole owners of American birds. The plethora of recent restrictive legislation that has emanated from our governmental agencies that proposes to restrict birds because of diseases or some spurious concepts of genetic purity or noxiousness fail to account for migration and natural dispersal. What is further overlooked is that most problems associated with introduced animals come from agriculture, forestry and horticulture and effect these economic interests in particular. They usually have little effect upon our continental wildlife. It is ironic that wildlife preservation is equated with these economic interests as if animals that make money are good and those that compete with such animals are bad. This is not a valid foundation to support the ecological theme that the Government sometimes cares to present.

The plethora of restrictive legislation of which this proposed legislation is only a part, should be tempered by a study of the programs that have had a longer history in Europe where, apparently, the government agencies are more benign and seem to understand the esthetic and personal values that citizens may possess for exotic creatures. In Europe, if legislation of this sort were foisted on the public especially without consultation as some of it has appeared here, I think some governments would soon be out of office. It seems that our own Government so recently associated with stone walls now proposes concrete revetments around us. In Europe and elsewhere, Newcastle disease comes and goes without hysteria and the spending of millions of dollars and the killing of

millions of chickens and without blaming caged birds for the inconvenience of the poultry industry. Surely there is something to be learned from the European experience before these harassing and unnecessary laws are passed.

I therefore suggest a complete restudy of the laws concerning animal importation, laws that are piling up on top of each other with contradictions. I suggest we review the whole subject and take a lead from the successes apparent in other countries and aim towards laws that can reflect the concerns of conservation and preservation in a better compromise with economic interests.

I should finally like to remark on the alternatives presented by this proposed legislation for the keeping of animals for research. I qualify in this area and I can see only repression in the proposed legislation. One area of my investigations concerns the design of cages themselves and the Government wishes to tell me how I should build my aviaries. I could not rely on private breeders and so-called amateurs who supply most of the literature, information and experience in breeding birds and I would have to kill my baby birds because I could not give them away. The proposed legislation seems to separate research from enjoyment and the beauty of birds and this is a fatal misunderstanding of the scholar's intent. If any of my birds should contract a "poultry disease" I would have to kill all my birds and so would any zoo have to kill all of its birds. This includes all birds even if they were rare last vestiges of their species. My expletive is deleted on this requirement which I can only consider as an exhibit of heinous insanity by a government agency that I would like to respect and honor. It should be noted that among the effects of this legislation that has been overlooked is the simple fact that research on exotic birds and other animals and the acquisition of knowledge about birds and other animals would be severely crippled in this country. I for one would have to move elsewhere to some other less dictatorial regime in order to savor the freedom I need to continue my work. ➤