

Returning Smuggled INDONESIAN PARROTS to Their Forest Homes

Photo by Stewart Metz

by Bonnie Zimmermann

On March 16, 2006, the first-known “soft-release” of Salmon-crested (Seram) Cockatoos (*Cacatua moluccensis*) was carried out on the island of Seram, in the Maluku archipelago of Eastern Indonesia. Three cockatoos were returned to the very forest where they were trapped in late 2004. The eighteen months it took to get to this day was fraught with challenging obstacles and bureaucratic red tape including securing governmental permits, medical testing of the birds, behavioral analysis, and collaboration with both non-governmental and governmental organizations.

It is well accepted that Indonesia’s avifauna rivals that of any country on earth. Unfortunately, that same richness has provoked intense poaching which, in combination with both legal and illegal logging of requisite forest habitat, has endangered many magnificent birds and brought some close to extinction. Four of the five world’s cockatoos now listed on Appendix 1 of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) are Indonesian. In a country where income often is less than \$2,000 per year, some local villagers participate in the illegal trapping and trading of exotic animals, and parrots in particular, to supplement their livelihood. The result has been a decimation of local wildlife populations, leaving some exotic species such as the Salmon-crested and Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoos endangered and in need of protection.

The decision to release birds confiscated from smugglers, with its attendant risks to the birds and the ecology of the region, receives support from the World Conservation Union (2002) as well as CITES (Conf. 10.7, “Disposal of confiscated live specimens of species included in the Appendices”, 1997) wherein it is stated

that “returning animals to the wild makes a strong political/educational statement concerning the fate of the animals and may serve to promote local conservation values. However, as part of any education or public awareness program, the costs and difficulties associated with return to the wild must be emphasized.”

The First Confiscation

Thursday, September 23, 2004. Just prior to our scheduled eco-tour to Seram, we heard that Forestry Officers from Manusela National Park had confiscated nine Seram Cockatoos, two Eclectus parrots (*Eclectus roratus roratus*) and five Red-cheeked parrots (*Geoffroyus geoffroyi*). The National Park officers were accompanied by the police and military police and arrested a smuggler from the island of Sulawesi. This smuggler had purchased the birds from members of Huaulu village (an indigenous people located on the mountains about 20 km from the town of Opini).

When the team arrived in Seram, we visited Joel Katayane, the officer who led the confiscation and who is currently the director of the northwest section of Manusela National Park. His responsibility is to protect the parks flora and fauna from exploitation and illegal activity. Traveling with us were two of our Indonesian colleagues who are experts in the care of wild Indonesian animals, Dr. Wahyu (“Wita”) Widyayandani and Resit Sozer, who manage Indonesian Wild Animal Rescue Centers in Bali and Java; respectively. We found that the birds now housed at the forestry department were emaci-

ated, in shock, filthy and in terrible condition. Several Seram Cockatoos had already died the day before, and a Red-cheeked Parrot died just as we arrived and its body was lying on top of one of the cages that still held the other live birds. Since these birds were considered police evidence, they were still in the same cages and conditions that the trappers had left them in and we were very worried that the remaining birds would not survive. Decisive action seemed required.

The team broke up into two groups—Wita, Resit and Ceisar Riupassa, (Director of Yayasan Wallacea, our collaborating Indonesian NGO) stayed in Masohi to convince the police department to give us custody of the birds so that we could administer urgently needed care, and the rest of us (including our eco-tour guests) spent the afternoon in the village of Masohi finding wire with which to build a cage, and then visiting the Muslim street market to buy food for the birds.

Then we moved on to Sawai (a town on the shore of north Seram arriving just before nightfall. Construction on temporary caging commenced the next morning and was completed in less than a day by the local men who were our eco-tour guides and former trappers.

Later the same day, Wita and Resit arrived with the birds obtained after some difficult negotiations. The birds were still in some degree of shock and incredibly dirty. We took them to the forest cages immediately. At that precise moment, the Kembali Bebas Avian Rehabilitation Center was born. "Kembali Bebas" in English means "Return to Freedom."

The next morning we lost two more Red-cheeks to shock, but the rest survived and seemed to be comfortable in their forest cages.

Since the arrival of those birds in September, 2004, our facility has grown substantially. Other parrots, lorries and cockatoos confiscated by the National Park and Forestry Department have been brought to Kembali Bebas and are now cared for by our well-trained staff on a 2.5 hectare compound (just a little over 6 acres) which includes a quarantine area, veterinary clinic, socialization area and sanctuary.

Protocol for Confiscated Birds Arriving at Kembali Bebas

The possibility of disease outbreaks is always at the forefront of our minds. Quarantine by itself is insufficient to detect many diseases that are latent. Some diseases of confiscated birds have remained undetected for over a year and then kill the host or spread to other birds. It is possible for birds to develop resistance to clinical disease and become carriers. Upon entering immunologically "naïve" areas where is no resistance, they might cause an epizootic outbreak.

All birds receive a medical examination upon arrival at Kembali Bebas and are periodically de-wormed. However, it is important to screen specifically for the

most relevant contagious avian diseases: Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) circovirus, psittacid herpesvirus, polyoma, chlamydomphila and perhaps aspergillus. Initially, with the help of Dr. Wita, permits were obtained from the Indonesian government to send samples (blood, swabs, and feathers) from 50 Seram Cockatoos and 10 other cockatoos and parrots out of the country, to Research Associates Laboratory (Dallas, TX) and Dr. Shane Raidal, (Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia). Samples were tested for the presence of DNA from these organisms via PCR in Dallas; in addition, a second PCR method was used in Australia to confirm results for PBFD. In addition, PBFD circovirus was assayed by hemagglutination agglutination by Dr. Raidal, who also looked for antibodies to PBFD virus via hemagglutination inhibition. Our initial experience was encouraging; no birds tested clearly positive for PBFD, chlamydomphila, polyoma, or aspergillus. The only preliminary positive was for herpesvirus from a single Medium Sulphur-crested Cockatoo; that bird subsequently died and we were unable to confirm the test.

Subsequently, the Indonesian government has steadfastly refused to grant new permits to export samples; therefore, we have kept our release program in abeyance for new birds. However, we are close to having the ability to run these PCR tests in Indonesia, courtesy of the generosity of Ernie Colaizzi (Research Associates Laboratories), who has provided primers and amplicons, and Dr. Ngural Mahardika (University of Udayana; Bali).

Preparation for Release or Sanctuary

Birds may be very stressed, weak and malnourished following their trapping and smuggling. They need a period of recovery to regain the strength to survive in the wild. Birds are quarantined for a minimum of 60 days (virtually always longer) and then are moved into large socialization flight cages. They are observed to determine whether they are able to fly strongly, recognize and eat natural forest foods and display other behaviors needed for their survival in the wild. Once socialization has been completed, the birds are moved to a habituation cage in the forest for at least a month to prepare for a "soft" release. This assures that the birds are familiarized (to some degree) in advance to the release site and have the choice of leaving the cage on their own. This type of release offers supplemental food and water that is placed on top of and adjacent to the release cage for two weeks prior to the release and for at least two weeks after. Offering supplemental food offers two benefits: 1) to provide the birds with food, if they are unable to feed themselves sufficiently, and 2) if they do come back, they can be observed and evaluated.

The First Release

The sun is just peeking over the horizon and everything is ready. There is electricity in the air and all eyes are on the habituation cage and the three Seram Cockatoos. There are two blinds near the cage, one



Photo by Bonnie Zimmerman



Photo by Kevin Sharp



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Photo by Kevin Sharp



manned by Dr. Stewart Metz and myself and the other manned by a camera crew from Manusela National Park. The birds definitely act as if they know that something is about to happen. Previously, each bird had been fitted with an open stainless-steel leg band, marked with an Avid microchip and had its tail feathers marked with different colors using a safe but indelible ink.

Witnessing this event are many of the people from the nearby village of Masihulan, and the children from several schools. This release is a major event for Indonesian Parrot Project, and a new beginning for many endangered birds to go back to their forest homes. It also offers to the local people an event to life their pride and awareness concerning their spectacular avifauna.

Ir. M (Theo) Latupeirissa, Head of the Department of Forestry for Manusela National Park, has the honors of opening the release door atop the large (30 x 9 x 9 ft) habituation cage. He climbs up the ladder and reaches for the latch holding down the escape hatch ... what will happen? The moment is finally here. The tension is palpable. What will they do?

Suddenly there is movement inside of the cage. One bird climbs near the opening, hangs upside down from the roof of the cage for a moment, and then assesses the situation outside. It takes only a moment. He moves towards the opening, and then his head pops up above the cage. He looks around, emerges, gives his tail a shake and flies off to the nearby trees, strong and sure of himself. Only a few minutes later, the second bird follows suit. His emergence and flight is as natural as if he was flying from tree to tree. The third bird takes a little longer, but he too can't resist the chance to go back into the forest and soon has joined the others in the nearby trees.

In less than fifteen minutes the birds have returned to their wild habitat—an achievement that took eighteen months to complete.

At long last, Kembali Bebas has at least begun to live up to the meaning of its name—"Return to Freedom."

The Future

Reintroduction (release back into the wild) can play a role in species conservation where the existing population is severely threatened, but where there is a long-term conservation potential of the species as a whole (i.e., there is sufficient remaining habitat). Alternatively, even where the number of released birds is insufficient to materially reinforce their population, it can provide a strong political and educational statement concerning the fate of animals and can promote local conservation values. It allows the birds to continue to fulfill their biological and ecological roles and alleviates their suffering with a humane disposition. Although neither IUCN nor CITES, in their documents, cites the humane treatment of birds, or the alleviation of suffering as, primary goals, these are, in our opinion, additional potential reasons for such a program.

Indeed, the fate of the birds would have been ongoing suffering and mistreatment, followed by death, in almost all instances.

It should be underscored, however, that the reintroduction of confiscated wild birds, including parrots, may increase the risks of reintroduction and certainly heightens concerns about disease spread. These risks must be carefully weighed. Indeed, we are aware of only six or seven other such programs involving confiscated, wild-caught psittacines that have been reported on.

IPP is currently investigating additional release sites in West Papua and in other Indonesian provinces for birds that we have received that are not endemic to Seram. Birds that are not candidates for release will be maintained in a designated sanctuary site, living with their own species in the forest in safety. These birds, in turn, have become the emissaries of an education and awareness program in which school children from Seram and nearby Ambon Islands will visit Kembali Bebas, to see (many for the first time) one of their special birds, and learn how to keep them free.

The Outcome

Local villagers observed all three released birds flying strongly together for several weeks, after which one was lost to follow-up. The other two were sighted together at intervals for months thereafter. At the end of 2006, an attempt at nesting was made by at least one of the pair (identified visually by the presence of a leg band); however, the nest was not productive, possibly due to heavy rains. Between February and April of 2007, another nest was built in the same tree, apparently by the same pair, and a single chick fledged. On our August eco-tour, two Seram cockatoos were observed inspecting and going in and out of a nest hole in a separate tree about 100 meters away from Kembali Bebas. At least one cockatoo was observed wearing a leg band. Our team is now on regular lookout for nesting activity there. 🐦



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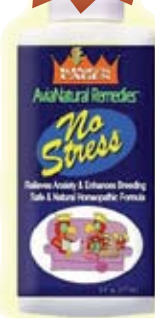
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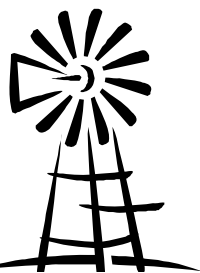
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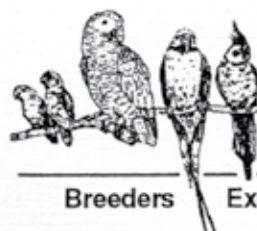
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