

There is Conservation in Guatemala

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A plea came from Guatemala in the spring of 1987 asking for immediate assistance to save a group of 200 baby yellow-nape Amazon parrots. Apparently these babies were part of a smuggled shipment originating from Guatemala that were confiscated and then given to conservationists in Guatemala City. One of the caretakers, the Berger family, wrote to Dr. Art Risser of the San Diego Zoo asking if they could send one of their avian veterinarians immediately to their country. At the time the letter was written only 160 babies remained. The zoo could not spare anyone so Dr. Risser approached Behavioral Study of Birds, Ltd., Aviculture Institute and asked if they could send one of their veterinarians. The answer was yes and in eight days I found myself on a plane headed for Central America. The count of babies surviving by the time I arrived was 60.

My headquarters in Guatemala City was a bedroom in the Berger house. Their son had forfeited his normal abode so that I could set up my pharmacy, examination room, surgery, and client education office. During those eight days I had to prepare, I managed to put together a complete avian pharmacy, a field surgical kit, and a mini-library of avian medicine and aviculture literature. You see, they had needs beyond that of the baby yellow-napes. The inspiration of the avian conservation movement in the Berger family, Mrs. Nini Berger, was at the beginning stages of developing an avian captive propagation center. But her knowledge of aviculture and medicine extended only to what books and magazines she could manage to have sent to Guatemala. So I was to play the role of an avicultural consultant as well as a veterinarian.

Of the 20 yellow-nape babies assigned to Mrs. Berger, only three were alive when I began my study in Guatemala. I found these birds to be severely stunted. Their weights of 100 to 240 grams was only 1/5 to 1/2 of what a 60-day-old chick should weigh. In addition, they had a very copious nasal discharge. Not knowing what disease I was dealing with I treated them for bacterial and fungal overgrowths and for psittacosis. Later I was able to finally obtain culture media and did indeed find that

these birds had a severe microbial imbalance. Apparently these birds had been off and on antibiotics and antifungals most of their lives. Some trappers who remove the babies from the nests are becoming somewhat sophisticated and put these birds on antibiotics until they leave their charge.

The biggest problem that was facing these babies, however, was that of malnutrition. Their handfeeding diet was made up largely of maize, which is known to be inadequate for growing or adult psittacines. It is all well and good to recognize the need for improving the diet, but to find the necessary ingredients in a foreign country is all together another matter. The secret formula was developed from what some of the more "hi-tech" trappers are using, chicken pellets. We made one minor change of cooking the pellets instead of chewing them in our mouths and regurgiting them to the chicks, as the trappers do! This diet was easy to prepare and many chicks have been raised on it since. They tell me that, at the writing of this article, one cannot tell the juvenile yellow-napes of the confiscated lot from other healthy birds. The nasal discharge was difficult to eradicate because it was probably a combination of a sinusitis developing from food in the sinuses from the spoon feeding and also from malnutrition.

The breeding facility in Guatemala City was having finishing touches done to it while I was there. I discussed with Mrs. Berger the advantages and disadvantages to her current design and some changes were made. The collection of future breeding stock was increasing daily while I was there. These birds included babies still being handfed and adults that were not wanted as pets elsewhere. All of these birds were captured from the wild. Most trappers bring their birds to Guatemala City before taking them either to the coast to be put on ships headed for Japan or to Mexico where they make their way to the United States. The number of birds leaving the country was amazing, although, export of any native species is illegal in Guatemala. Scarlet macaws at this point in their journey were worth approximately \$250 and yellow-nape Amazons were worth \$40. I surgically sexed those

that were old enough and that would be set up as breeders for the coming season.

The Bergers also own and operate a safari park near the coast, south of Guatemala City, the Auto Safari Chapin. This park consists of several separated enclosures where people can drive through and observe species from all over the world. There is also a zoo where animals can be studied more closely. Here they have several macaws, conures, and Amazons that will also become part of their future breeding stock. I conducted a variety of tests including cultures and blood work. Most of these birds were healthy but again were suffering from microbial imbalances. The diet for the adults was extremely good, for the choice of natural fresh foods in the market place was tremendous. As many of these adults as possible were surgically sexed.

I also visited their hospital at the park and worked on some other birds while I was there. They do not have a full time veterinarian at the park and have no one who knows anything about avian medicine. I did what I could for the sick birds but there was much that needed to be done that my two weeks there didn't allow time for. Several veterinary students, veterinarians, and technicians came to watch the surgical sexing procedure and anything else I was doing for that matter. The people are starving to learn any and everything that they can. For two afternoons my only assistant was a veterinary student whose English was no better than my Spanish. But it's amazing how easy it is to communicate the need for more anesthetic when a bird is waking up before the procedure is completed.

A very interesting project is being conducted at the park. The giant grebe, the Poc as it is called there, is found on only one lake in the interior and is severely endangered. The Bergers have donated space at their park so that this bird may be saved. The pilot species for this project is the pied-billed grebe. Incubation, hatching, diets, and housing are all studied at the park on this smaller grebe. Artificial ponds have been built and the pied-billed grebes were released there to see if it is a suitable habitat for the Poc. Next year the Poc eggs will

hopefully be brought to the park and become the nucleus of a breeding project.

Before leaving the States I managed to grab some slides so that I could show them how breeding and avian medicine is done in our country. I gave several slide shows to people interested in setting up their own breeding projects, including the two zoos in Guatemala City. As I said earlier, the people are extremely interested in our technology, so all the literature I brought was copied and distributed. They bought everything from me that I could part with. The endoscope was a topic of several bargaining sessions but it was only on loan from Aviculture Institute, therefore, I returned home with it, although it was badly needed in Guatemala.

There are many threats to the survival of the native avian species in Guatemala. One threat is that of the local politics. It is easy to see that the neighboring countries are rather volatile and it is feared that there will be repercussions in Guatemala if things deteriorate much further in the other Central American countries. There is also the continual threat of Land Reform. This is a policy of the government to appropriate unused land from the land owners and turn it over to the poor so that it can be cultivated. Many forests and protected lands would be lost.

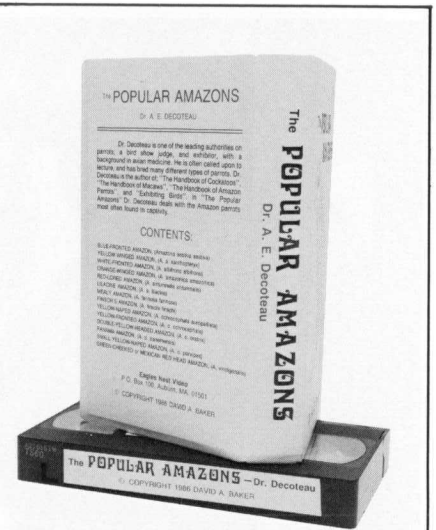
A very large threat is the capture and export of the birds. The potential for financial gain is so great that almost any species can be found in the market place. One day I was told I had a visitor, a famous nature photographer from Guatemala. He had come to give me a box and a bouquet of roses. In the box he said were some sad birds that he had bought in the market place that needed to be saved. He thought some roses would smooth over the rough times I would have with these birds. They were three fledgling woodpeckers that were in shock and looked like they had been traumatically removed from their nests. Some boys were selling them for \$.75 each. My new charges did very well, however, even on a diet of soaked chicken pellets! They were almost weaned by the time I left and were successfully released a few weeks after my departure. Many times while I was in Guatemala City boxes of psittacines would be presented for sale to the Bergers. Some of these birds would travel 24 hours in these boxes from their forest homes. Surprisingly, they often did not look to be in bad shape.

Finally, a very publicized threat in Guatemala is the destruction of the

native habitat. The application of slash and burn is very much alive in this country as in other Latin American countries. It seems that there was always a smoky smell in the air from the burning of the forests, crops, and the trash. Some days in the country it was so bad my eyes would sting. I never once saw the volcanoes from the ground, which were only 15 miles from the city, due to the haze and smoke in the air. I could only view them from the air and then only the peaks reached above the carpet of haze. I was told that the haze is worse at this time of year and the air clears with the rainy season. Virgin stands of forest no longer exist on the coast and can only be found in the north, where the rain forest exists 100 miles from Guatemala City.

The survival of Guatemalan birds is possible because captive breeding projects in native countries have many things in their favor. The availability of species to bring into captivity is greater and the appropriation from the wild can be more selective as to age, sex, and species. Natural foods are very abundant and can be supplied easily for the birds, including temperature, humidity, day length, foliage, and natural nesting materials. Finally, the biggest factor in favor of Guatemala conservation is the people. They understand the native language, they are trusted by the government, they know the location of the birds, and they can buy land to set up as preserves. The Bergers and others are striving to save their natural heritage. Since I left they have doubled the size of the collection and are nearing completion of a breeding facility at their safari park. For the future they hope to appropriate land so that habitat can be preserved and to institute educational programs to teach conservation to their people.

They need help. They have the enthusiasm but need the technical support, and of course, they need financial aid to achieve their goals. They have asked that I pass on their ongoing request for any help the aviculturists in this country can give them. If they are successful, perhaps they can decrease the tremendous smuggling of birds out of their country where so many die on route or end up in the pet trade, provide captive bred birds selectively to breeding projects in other countries, and preserve habitat. They believe, and I agree, that the ultimate conservation of their avian species will come not just from attempts in this country but also from conservational attempts in Guatemala itself.



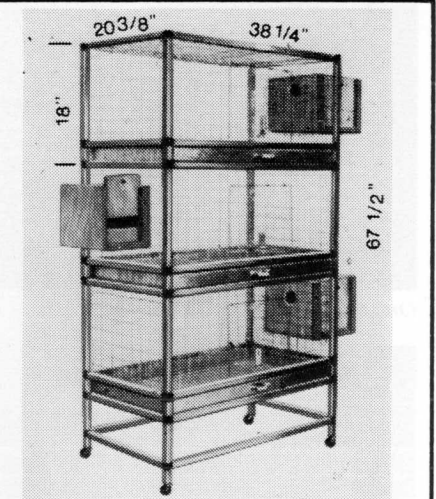
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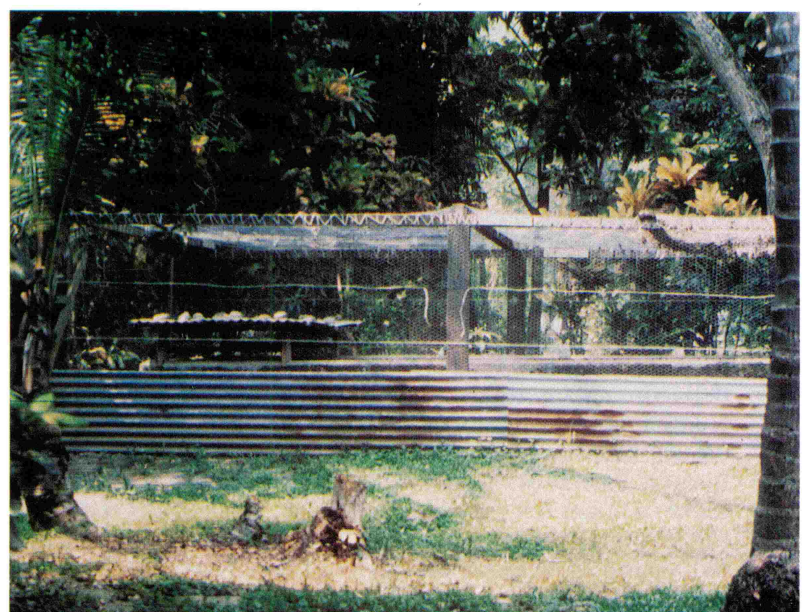
One view of the Berger's Safari Park.



Baby flickers on the black market.

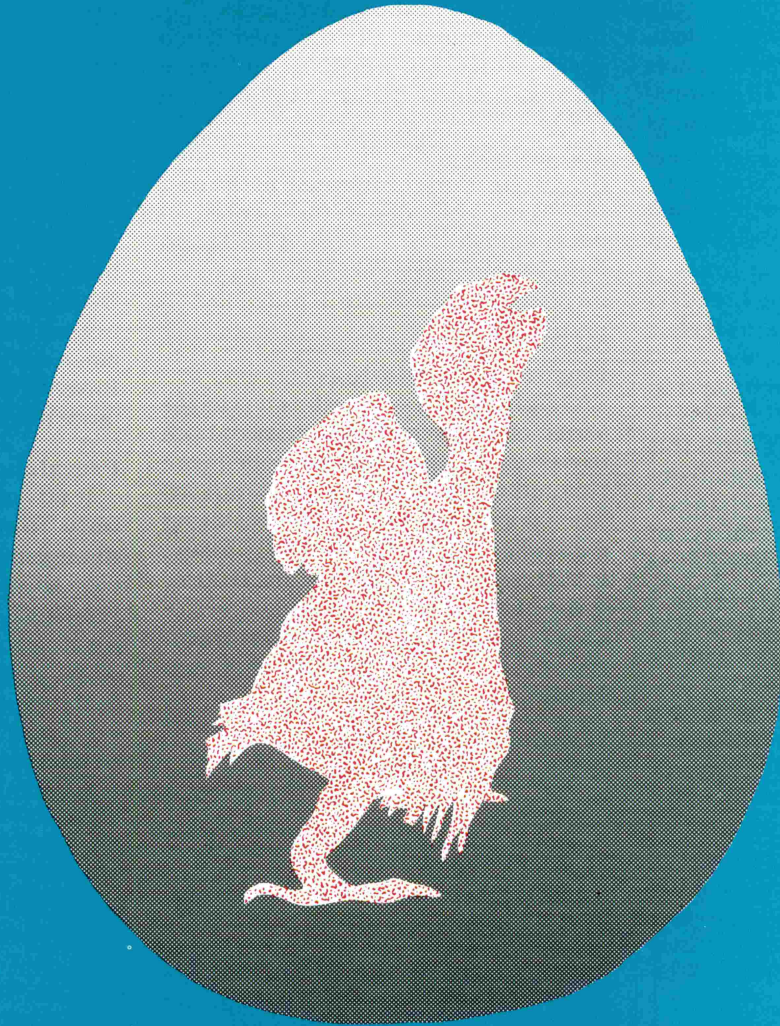


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