

Australian Cockatoos... STOP THE SLAUGHTER, LIFT THE EXPORT BAN

by Ray Ackroyd
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As an Australian deeply concerned for the future welfare of all native wildlife within my own country, I wish to reply to the article written by Denis Carlisle that appeared in your June-July 1988 issue. Apparently, Mr. Carlisle thinks that the Australian government should not implement a controlled management policy and provide for international trade in Australia's widespread and abundant native cockatoos.

In my opinion, Carlisle's arguments against international trade do not represent the best interests of Australian native wildlife, fail to address the real problems, certainly offer no concrete solution to the present senseless slaughtering of wildlife, have no basis in logic, and were written with a plethora of personal application. Therefore, I believe his arguments against overseas export of Australia's abundant species of cockatoos could and should be challenged.

The Background

A total ban on the overseas exportation of Australian native birds was proclaimed by the Australian government in December of 1959. This ban was established as a means of protecting Australia's native avian species and, ironically, is now the cause of their widespread extermination.

Prior to the ban, exportation was permitted for all unprotected species of Australian native birds legally obtained under permits issued by state and territorial wildlife departments. This system not only gave the Commonwealth government full control over avifauna exported overseas, but also provided the state and territorial governments full control over interstate movement and simultaneous monitoring of native birds. In the absence of government control, illegal interstate movement of avifauna is now common practice in Australia.

Total bans invite further illegal trade on an international scale. Certainly, this is the case within Australia where, since a total ban was imposed,

tens of thousands of Australian native birds have died slow and agonising deaths because of the cruel and inhumane practices of highly organised bird smugglers. These practices include injecting the birds with unmeasured amounts of tranquilisers to silence them, which lessens the risk of detection by customs officials. Without adequate food, water and air, the birds are jammed into boxes and suitcases. As a result of these practices, 90 percent succumb before reaching their destination.

Ironically, some 80 percent of the birds smuggled out of Australia are those species of cockatoos that are unprotected in their native country. These are the same species that state governments allow to be slaughtered indiscriminately. In one shipment alone, some 1,300 greater sulphur-crested cockatoos and galahs were discovered. Illegal overseas shipments of as many as 50 or more long-billed corellas are also common practice.

Considering the huge profits that can be made from the birds that survive the smuggling, the paltry penalty imposed by the Australian government does little to discourage this activity. The maximum penalty remained at \$1,000 until 1984; however, under the new Regulations of Imports and Exports Act 1982, Australia may impose a maximum penalty of \$150,000 for proven illegal overseas movement of wildlife by individuals, or \$200,000 in the case of proven organisations. Unfortunately, the maximum penalty is seldom handed down by Australian courts and until it is, the smuggling of our native wildlife will continue to flourish.

In September 1976, an all-party parliamentary standing committee was established to investigate and report on the increasing illegal native fauna trafficking out of Australia. Following a number of feasibility studies, the committee issued its major recommendation which was that the Australian government par-

tially relax its existing total ban on avifauna exports. Provisions for international trade were recommended for abundant avian species that the states condone to be slaughtered and for aviary bred birds that are ringed (banded) and registered with a state fauna authority.

It wasn't until 1980 that the Australian Federal Government finally considered the committee's recommendation and duly turned it down. Thus, the inhumane, illegal, international trafficking in Australian native fauna has continued unabated.

The Ramifications

Australia's total ban on the exportation of its abundant avian species has encouraged cruel, illegal trapping by non-commercial operators; led to the creation of highly organised bird smuggling rings, graft and corruption throughout the industry; and contributed to despicable cruelty and slaughter of native wildlife populations with losses that can only be described as staggering. The existing Australian legislation will ultimately condemn to death thousands of abundant species of psittacines and, at the same time, permit the destruction of many rare and endangered native birds and animals.

It is thus clear that Australia's wildlife "mismanagement" programmes urgently need to be restructured for the future welfare of the birds and the good of the government.

Carlisle argues that claims of huge cockatoo populations and slaughtering by poison are sensational propaganda. Truth is not sensationalism. Four species of Australian native cockatoos exist in such large numbers that they are causing extreme undue hardship for farmers. These species are the greater sulphur-crested cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*), galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*), little corella (*Cacatua sanguinea*), and the long-billed corella (*Cacatua tenuirostris*). These species continually attack and destroy large areas of cereal grain.

With abundant cultivated food supplies and ideal breeding habitats, these species continue to increase and have now attained pest status. Thus, control measures, often lethal, are commonplace to protect cropping. Huge flocks of these birds congregate in riverine or areas of stored water where they are a severe problem to grain producers across rural Australia and have been for the past 25 years. This serious situation is clearly

attributed to total mismanagement by Australia's wildlife agencies.

Government research on this severe agricultural problem has been virtually nonexistent. As Carlisle pointed out, the University of New England in New South Wales conducted extremely limited field research on crop damage mitigation over a three-month period during 1983. What Carlisle failed to mention was that this limited research was for the *preservation* of the species concerned and not for control.

The Slaughter

Present Australian state government legislation provides for unprotected cockatoo species to be slaughtered if they are attacking agriculture. This killing is unmonitored and non-selective. Among the techniques used are shooting, explosives, live trapping and clubbing to death or drowning, and night shooting under spotlight at roosting sites.

The State Minister for Environment in the state of Victoria, Joan Kirner, has approved a sadistic method of eradicating long-billed corellas. Her answer to the problem is to direct wildlife officers of her department to trap these cockatoos alive and gas them to death in modified petrol drums. Three thousand long-billed corellas, a protected species, were sentenced to death to test this method for future widespread use. Licensed trappers were approached by the government to assist, but all refused to take part in trapping for the gas chamber.

Illegal poisoning by highly toxic chemicals is also common practice by those experiencing devastating crop damage. Included in the hundreds of thousands of birds destroyed are many rare, endangered species of native birds and animals. Scientific research documents that poisoning and slaughtering of native wildlife within Australia has been occurring since the turn of the century. This evidence is offered by the states themselves in the following references: Emison, W.B.; Du Guesclin, P.B.; Temby, I.D.; Moncrieff, D. *Victoria 1980-86*. Jarman, P.J. Dr.; Noske, S.; Jones, D.N. *N.S.W. 1979-83*. *South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service 1986*. Gowland, P.N. *West Australia 1977-81*. Further evidence is provided by the noted Australian author, Joseph M. Forshaw (*Australian Parrots*), and by the *Pastoral Review* as far back as 1918.

More recently, Australian television has broadcast documentaries showing horrific scenes of the government's trap and destroy method and of poisoning by Australian farmers desperate to protect their crops and livelihoods. Tired of pleas for help falling on their government's deaf ears, farmers across Australia now intend to photograph the results of poisoning and forward these to the CITES Secretariat in Lausanne, Switzerland.

This clearly documented evidence cannot be refuted and Carlisle has misled *Watchbird* readers with his obvious ignorance of the killing fields of Australia.

Commercial Trapping

Australian commercial trappers have been unfairly described as an unscrupulous group of people who have no respect for native wildlife and who constantly expose their stock to brutal cruelty. Carlisle, in his recent article, makes specific reference to illegal nest robbing and wastage of wildlife by professional trappers. These allegations are completely unfounded and ludicrous.

Australia's licensed trappers must adhere to stringent government regulations which do not allow nest robbing, mist nets or any other inhumane method of harvesting birds. Only ground nets are allowed and each bird must be caged individually at the place of capture to reduce stress. The cage used are designed to the International Air Transport Association's official guidelines with non-spill drinkers, absorbent floor coverings and adequate feed available. The birds are then transported in these cages to specially constructed aviary flights located in the trapping area where they are released to acclimate to captivity. Losses are virtually zero. The entire operation is carried out efficiently and humanely with every consideration being shown for the birds' welfare.

A royalty of \$2 per bird, which must be paid to the State Wildlife Authorities, ensures that the numbers trapped are very closely monitored by the state on a daily basis. No commercial trapper may commence work until he or she has reported to the regional wildlife office in the trapping area. Before trappers may leave the trapping area, wildlife authorities inspect all consignments.

Licensed trappers are permitted by law to harvest and market an un-

limited number of unprotected species anywhere within Australia or its outlying territories, but are forbidden to sell to an exporter for international trade in these species. Because the total ban on overseas exports of native birds has resulted in a saturated market within Australia, trapping by licensed operators is at a virtual standstill. Consequently, the birds are being slaughtered by government wildlife officers and by farmers to protect agriculture.

Clearly, a partial relaxation in the existing export ban would enable licensed trappers to work more efficiently and effectively to protect crops and to ensure the future destiny of the birds concerned. There is already an experienced and humane system in existence which could easily be adapted for the dispatch of pest cockatoos overseas.

Animal Rights Proponents

Australian animal rights groups do not object to the continuing slaughter of Australia's abundant cockatoos. In fact, many feel the birds are better off dead than alive in captivity. These groups oppose aviculture, do not conduct field observations and research, fail to understand the purposes and principles of conservation management and CITES, and are ill-informed on most animal welfare issues. Some have stated that if the birds could choose their fate, they would choose death by gassing in the government's petrol drums over life in a cage overseas. These people firmly believe that our cockatoos would receive inferior care and would be kept in undersized caging in overseas countries. For this reason, they argue fiercely against commercial trapping and international trade in all native bird and animal species.

There is strong evidence that animal rights groups are well-entrenched in Australia and are strongly influencing the government with their propaganda on how the government should conduct itself in the wildlife sphere.

These groups have proven that they will stoop to the lowest tactics to influence the Australian government to support their views. The Australian Federation of Animal Societies (A.F.A.S.), which represents all umbrella animal rights groups across Australia, made a vicious and highly inaccurate attack upon licensed commercial bird trappers at a recent Parliamentary Senate Select Commit-



Harvested long-billed corellas under hand sewn nets.



Caging by law for decoy birds.



Flock of Australian galahs.



Long-billed corella.

Photos by Ray Ackroyd, Sydney, Australia

tee enquiry into animal welfare. Under oath, the A.F.A.S. accused these trappers of employing sadistic methods to harvest birds such as using fine mesh nets strung between trees; nylon loops that catch birds by the legs, leaving them dangling from trees for many days; and sticky substances that glue birds to the ground and result in 80 percent mortalities at the trap site. They further claimed that many birds died from shock and starvation and that methods of caging were grossly inadequate. The use of such methods has been reported in other parts of the world but these methods definitely are not used in Australia by licensed professional trappers.

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Young galahs on sunflower.

Poisoned sulphur crested cockatoos on grain line.

Smuggling by drugs and plastic pipes.



Photos by Ray Ackroyd, Sydney, Australia



Drowning cockatoo slaughtered by shotgun.



Poisoned galabs.



Truckload of poisoned greater sulphur crested cockatoos.

Another example of intentional distortion of facts is attributed to a radical group who call themselves Australians for Animals. This organisation stated in the Montreal (Canada) Gazette on 22 May 1986, that as many as one in four Australian psittacines are infected with Psittacine Feather and Beak Disease. Australians for Animals would never make such a preposterous statement within their own country simply because they would be held up for ridicule by people who know better.

The erroneous statement was made in Canada prior to the CITES meeting there. Could it be that this organisation was deeply concerned that Australia may have been considering the feasibility of partially relaxing its total ban on avian exports, and wanted to mislead and confuse international delegates to the conference? A few individuals in the U.S.A. with no background in avian medicine and little experience with cockatoos have recently begun spreading this same unfounded rumor in their own country as well.

The Bird Protection League, another typical radical group based in Sydney, is committed to obtaining PFBD-stricken psittacines which they use exclusively to promote propaganda through newspaper and television media. These incidents are examples of the blatant lies and distortion spouted by these conservation groups and this deceitful propaganda is being used to mislead the public both in Australia and overseas.

PFBD has been recognised in certain psittacines in Australia and other countries since well before the turn of the century. I have studied all Australian psittacines in the field on a full-time basis for almost 40 years. My research clearly indicates that PFBD is uncommon in all avian species with the exception of the greater sulphur-crested cockatoo, and the incidence of PFBD in that species is a fraction of one percent of the overall population.

I respectfully issue an invitation to any qualified avian veterinarian to join me in an extensive research study and excursion throughout Australia which would put to rest the exaggerated incidence of PFBD in Australian psittacines rumored by irresponsible groups and individuals with no veterinary or field experience whatsoever.

The Australian Community

The Australian community does not oppose management and export

of our abundant birds and animals. What they do object to is the present mismanagement, wastage and slaughter of our wildlife. Frankly, most Australians, myself included, have had a belly full of radical groups. In fact, a recent survey carried out across a wide cross-section of the community clearly indicated 99 percent of Australians support management and export of abundant native species.

A great many Australians are concerned because numerous unprotected wildlife species are being destroyed. A typical example of wildlife wastage exists in southwestern West Australia and most orchardists in that area would like the Australian government to export locally abundant species in preference to having them slaughtered under state law.

Carlisle mentions this specific region in his article, but he fails to point out that the birds being slaughtered in that area are not common cockatoos. There the slaughter extends to include white-tailed black cockatoos, twenty-eight parrots, regent parrots, western rosellas, Port Lincoln parrots, and red-capped parrots. As white-tailed black cockatoos flock with red-tailed black cockatoos, this species, too, is indiscriminately slaughtered.

A New International Export

Overseas countries import, through their government and private quarantine stations, some three million birds annually but none legitimately that are native only to Australia. The world demand for cockatoo species as companion pets and to propagate in captivity is extremely high, yet the Australian government refuses to enter them, one of our most abundant resources, into international trade.

There is clear evidence that overseas trade in four species of Australia's abundant cockatoos would greatly benefit our presently depressed exports. Australia's prime minister recently spent three weeks in the U.S.A. lobbying fiercely for export of Australian products. But native cockatoos, a product that no other country can compete with, a product that has lucrative export potential in all overseas countries, were not included. Why? Because of pressure from vocal and powerful minority groups, Australian officials consider it more appropriate to slaughter these beautiful birds.

Parrots and cockatoos have been kept in captivity throughout the ages and, housed and cared for under good conditions, they make excellent loving pets and enable the garnering of defined data not possible with birds in the wild. Sadly, overseas aviculturists and bird lovers are denied the right to own and appreciate Australian cockatoo species unless they are wealthy enough to buy one of the few available outside of Australia.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

Carlisle errs in his statement that export of wild-taken birds and animals is contrary to the spirit of the CITES agreement. CITES was born out of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (I.U.C.N.) and was specifically designed to regulate trade in wild animals and wild animal products. It was not designed to prevent such trade. Indeed, CITES is the instrument whereby abundant wildlife harvests are repeatable year after year by regulating the international aspects of the wildlife trade. This is in accord with all of the objectives of the I.U.C.N.'s World Conservation Strategy (W.C.S.).

Apparently, Mr. Carlisle is ill-informed on world conservation strategies supported by I.U.C.N and on CITES policy.

Australian Bird Traders

Irrespective of what has been written, Australian bird traders take a dedicated approach to the industry and are governed by stringent regulation and excessive codes of practice. Apart from a license issued by State Wildlife Authorities, a further license is required by The Royal Society to Prevent Cruelty to Animals (R.S.P.C.A.) who regularly inspect the premises for compliance with caging codes and hygiene. Of the hundreds of traders in Australia, only one holds a trapper's license, and it is not utilised to any extent.

Purchases and disposals of avifauna are closely monitored by wildlife officials and any protected species may only be purchased from aviculturists who are current holders of Aviary Registration Certificates. Documentation is explicit with no fewer than seven original and duplicate copies required for one sale of a protected species. Monthly return books are structured in such a way that any

anomalies are easily identified by wildlife authorities.

Transportation practices by Australian traders, whether interstate or overseas, can only be described as excellent and are supported by low mortalities. As an example, for the years 1982-1983, traders exported 15,512 non-native finch species. Overall mortalities in transportation consisted of only 89 birds, clearly indicating that these traders are well-equipped in international movement of avifauna.

Export Regulations

The Australian government continually argues that no Commonwealth department is currently structured to provide physical control over the large scale export of live birds. The circumstances surrounding this opinion are unclear because regulatory procedures already exist and are in use.

All non-native species and certain native species that are household pets are eligible for exportation under the jurisdiction of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (A.N.P.W.S.). A summary of these regulations follows:

- A certified quarantine establishment license for an exporter will be granted by A.N.P.W.S. only if all specifications set out by that designated authority are met. The exporter is totally responsible for the cost of setting up a certified quarantine establishment.

- A.N.P.W.S. will not issue a license to export avian species unless it is satisfied that the overseas importer has a certified quarantine establishment that meets all requirements set out by the importing country's quarantine laws.

- If A.N.P.W.S. is completely satisfied that the importer's quarantine establishment meets all requirements, then the export CITES license is issued to the exporter by A.N.P.W.S. at a present cost of \$40.

- All avian species destined for overseas must be inspected by a qualified government veterinary officer from Animal Quarantine not more than 48 hours prior to despatch. A health certificate is then issued at a cost of \$50 for the first bird, and 25 cents for each bird thereafter. A numbered seal is then attached to the cage opening and is not to be broken prior to despatch.

- The identification of all avian species is not a complex problem for

the Australian government as this is carried out by non-government bodies at no cost and has been available to exporters since 1950 as a free service by ornithologists either from the Australian Museum or an A class zoological garden. A document signed by a qualified ornithologist positively identifying all species must accompany shipments to the importing country. It is significant that with this method not one case of fraud has been identified within Australia over the past 36 years.

- All airport holding facilities for avifauna are the responsibility of airway companies. Before avian species will be accepted by international airlines for transportation, all species must be housed by the code of practice laid down by the International Air Transport Association (I.A.T.A.).

- Prior to despatch, the exporter must sign an I.A.T.A. form at the airport, indicating all packaging meets I.A.T.A. requirements.

- Prior to despatch, the exporter must pay an additional fee of \$20 for an export customs clearance.

- Before departure, Australian customs recheck for any anomalies. The movement of all avian species is universally monitored by countries that are a signatory to CITES and Australia is one of these 95 countries.

- Upon arrival in the importing country, the consignment is met at the airport by animal quarantine officials who inspect the species and examine the seals on the cages. If everything is in order, they transport the birds to either government or private quarantine facilities.

Summarising, it is clear that the *existing* system for exporting avifauna from Australia has proven satisfactory and could easily be adapted for commercial large scale exports of abundant cockatoo species at no additional cost to the Australian government.

Conclusion

It is very clear that Australian native wildlife is being slaughtered by some of the most barbaric and sadistic methods imaginable. This tragedy is caused by inappropriate bureaucratic infringement and excessive regulation dictated by government and non-government bodies who fail to understand the basic fundamentals of wildlife conservation management.

There should be few people who would actively support this wholesale destruction of Australia's

cockatoos when there is a humane alternative which can also assist the environment generally. The availability of Australian cockatoos internationally, especially in view of their near disease-free status, would almost certainly reduce the demand for Indonesian and South American avian species which tend to have a much more limited population and distribution. The Australian government could actually be greatly contributing to international conservation by relaxing its ban on the export of abundant cockatoos.

Yet, in spite of criticism, both within Australia and internationally, the slaughter continues. Rather than permit the overseas export of greater sulphur-crested cockatoos, galahs, long-billed and little corellas, the Australian state governments prefer to permit the slaughter of vast numbers by methods such as gassing, shooting and explosives. Even worse is the unselective use of highly toxic poisons which kill many other birds and animals that may be in the vicinity.

Clearly, this illogical attitude of the Australian government is a national shame and breaches all of Australia's obligations to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Help Stop the Slaughter

If you favor an end to the slaughter and a change in Australia's ban on the exportation of its pest avian species, please contact one of the non-profit organizations listed below. They are conducting a united worldwide campaign for this purpose consisting, in part, of letters of protest and petitions which they provide for your use and mail at their expense to the Australian government in quantities that cannot be ignored. Educational materials, including four documentary videos suitable for club programs or public education, are also available (at cost) along with updates on this issue from:

- **A Safe Alternative**, P.O. Box 3492, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-3492, U.S.A.

- **Protect Australian Cockatoos and Agriculture Foundation (PACAF)**, 3208 41 Street S.E., Calgary, Alberta T2B 1E5, Canada.

- **A Better Alternative**, P.O. Box 44, Bringelly, New South Wales 2171, Australia.

(All contributions to continue the efforts of these non-profit organizations are gratefully accepted.) ●