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# Parrot Conservation and Aviculture (a self-critical exam)<sup>©</sup>

by Delia Berlin  
Bolton, Connecticut

*Opinions given in this article are those of the author, and may not be those of the AFA. Ed.*

Most aviculturists I know are bird-loving people who care about making ethical decisions. However, these decisions are based on the information we have at hand, which may not always be accurate and unbiased. Unfortunately, there is a dangerous tendency in the avicultural literature to suppress or distort information related to parrot conservation. This tendency may be unintentional, and may simply reflect our natural inclination to see what we want to see and to hear what we want to hear. A short summary of the disturbing message that I read between the lines in too many avicultural magazines is this:

*Aviculturists will save endangered species that are on their sure way to extinction due to loss of habitat. Any attempt to save undisturbed wild habitats is a lost battle. Restrictions on importation and trade are dangerous and may result in the loss of our businesses and even our pet birds.*

While aviculturists need to be aware of the status of each captive species in the wild and the possibility to avert extinction through increased captive breeding efforts, they also need to learn from past mistakes to avoid con-

tributing to more ecological tragedies. The Spix's Macaw, for example, has declined in the wild to near-extinction levels due to capture for bird fanciers and not due to loss of habitat. Claims about their nesting sites being lost to Africanized bees have not been supported by field studies. What has been confirmed by these studies is that by paying as much as \$40,000 per bird during the late '80s, aviculturists contributed to a rapid decline in the wild population of these macaws. When avicultural efforts geared to reintroduction of the Spix's Macaw are disseminated by the literature, aviculturists suddenly emerge as heroes in complete denial of responsibility for the role we played in this tragedy.

A similar scenario has emerged with the Hyacinth Macaw. The wild population of these macaws has declined from about 500,000 to fewer than 5,000 in little over a decade, due largely to trapping. We must learn to seek information open-mindedly, pay attention to multiple sources, be aware of conflicting interests among authors of various reports, and then make up our minds, based on scientifically backed facts rather than slogans and exhortations.

The human need for animal companionship dates back to our early ancestors. Even non-human primates are known to adopt animals as pets. Regardless of what we do in this

respect, our actions will have an environmental impact. Because we are part of the ecosystem, it is not realistic to expect that we go through our lives without altering the environment. What we can aim at is minimizing the destructive impact of our actions on the environment and on other life forms.

Captive breeding of parrot species is desirable because it helps meet the demand for avian companions, reducing capture in the wild. I say *reducing*, and not *eliminating*, as we are sometimes led to believe, because we still need to capture most of our breeding stock. We should remember this to be more conscientious and responsible in caring for our parrots. I am deeply aware that my domestic pets had wild-caught parents. It pleases me to know that I decided to pay more to save some parrot suffering, and that I supported a business that will result in the production of many other wonderful companions by the same pairs without further captures. I don't need to deny that my purchases contributed to the capture of the original pairs. This denial would be dangerous, because it would prevent me from making ethical decisions about species selection. If I had thought that my purchase would have no impact whatsoever in the wild, I could have easily selected critically endangered species as pets.

The captive breeding of endangered species should be a last resort to preserve a gene pool once irreparable loss of habitat has taken place. Our strongest efforts should go to preservation of all species *in situ*, which may involve some restrictions for aviculturists. The advocating of a resigned acceptance of loss of habitats is one of the biggest dangers parrot conservation faces today. While it is true that when loss of habitat appears to be unavoidable we should make efforts to preserve those species displaced by this loss, this should never be presented as an equivalent alternative to conservation in the wild. We should be aware about the implications of this much scaled-down goal in order to make a strong commitment to exhaust every available avenue to preserve wild habitats.

The illusion that aviculture can provide a satisfactory vehicle to save species is dangerous because, at best, we can play a very small redeeming role

that would impact on a minuscule number of species. Efforts to sustain species through captive breeding, although commendable as a last resort, will usually fail, even in the best programs. Some of the reasons for failure are:

- *Inbreeding*: When numbers dwindle below a critical minimum (usually at least 500), lethal and sub-lethal recessive genes become shared traits of too many individuals within a couple of generations. The reproductive viability of the species is thus decreased.

- *Genetic shift*: When "founder populations" are small, they don't provide a complete representation of the genetic pool for the species in the wild. Descendants of these smaller subsets usually differ from the wild population as a group. Over a few generations, these differences may lead to genetic divergence, decreasing the chances that captive bred individuals will interbreed successfully with wild ones.


- *Ecological factors*: We are just beginning to grasp the complexity of ecosystems. Each species lives in

close ecological exchange with a great number of other species. Humans, for example, host numerous species of mites, fungi and bacteria. It is believed now that as many as 30 life forms became extinct with the Carolina Parakeet, most of them microscopic parasitic and symbiotic organisms.

With still almost 330 species of parrots living in the wild, aviculturists who want to preserve these species for years to come should make a commitment to preserve the environment and to stay informed about the impact our preferences, behavior and current practices may have in the status of wild parrot populations. We have an obligation to keep informed, to examine our own mistakes, and to treasure every bird we already have, pet or breeder, in recognition of all we take from our beautiful planet.

## References and Recommended Reading

*The Diversity of Life*, Edward O. Wilson, Norton Books, New York, NY, 1993.

*Recommended reading, in addition to avicultural publications:*  
Audubon, Birder's World, Nature Conservancy, Sierra. 

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