

Captive Breeding, Trade and Results Beneficial to Wild Birds

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The expansion of human populations into areas that were once considered primary habitat for wild birds is the major threat to many avian species. Additional pressures include trapping and collection for use as companion birds, zoological subjects, avicultural breeding stock, or as a result of the demand for decorative feathers. In only a few short decades, their commercial desirability has reduced some wild bird populations to dangerously low levels, and has left some of them teetering on the verge of extinction.

Breeding Critically Endangered Birds in Captivity

In recent decades, aviculture and aviculturists have proven their ability to breed some of the world's most critically endangered birds, some of which are the main focus of CITES trade restrictions as well (Appendix I listed species). Captive breeders of avian species have experienced some dramatic successes with F1 production of young, and have demonstrated their ability to produce several generations of domestically produced young for trade with each other.

The benefits of these successes are unmistakable. For example, consider that there are now more captive-bred Blue-throated Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) in United States aviculture than there are estimated to remain in the wild. The encouragement of trade, in captive-bred offspring, is now one of the most promising of all efforts being undertaken to assist in the conservation of critically endangered birds in the wild.

The trade demands for many avian species should not be misconstrued as a demand for wild-caught individuals of a species, especially for species that are no longer being captured and

taken from the wild for the international market.

The successes of aviculture have increased over the past decade, and more and more birds were produced in a captive environment. Because of this success, trade demands for many species shifted from wild-caught birds, to captive-bred birds even before the United States passed its Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992. This shift was a matter of practicality, as most birds are desired for breeding, companion, or display purposes. Birds that have been hatched in captivity, and raised by human caretakers, are more suitable to the end consumer than are wild-caught specimens because they are already adapted to life in a captive situation. In some instances, wild caught birds may take years to adjust to captivity to the point of successfully breeding and rearing young.

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Need to Reduce Trade Restrictions on Captive-bred Birds

Signatory members to the CITES Convention have already taken some very important steps to reduce trade restrictions on captive-bred representatives of Appendix I listed species. These members have resolved that breeders of an Appendix I listed

species, registered with the Secretariat, and certain Appendix I listed species known to be reliably bred to the F2 generation, and included in a list by the Management Authority of that country, can be traded as if they were listed on Appendix II of the Convention. This resolution, if perfected and better defined, could very well become one of the most important conservation moves ever adopted by the CITES Convention. The result

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could be worldwide, non-detrimental trade in captive-bred representatives of species whose wild-caught counterparts are considered threatened or endangered in their natural habitat.

Resolutions of this sort have, thus far, been aimed at large, commercial sized, operations breeding specifically for trade purposes. Requirements established for these larger facilities are often the limiting factors that lead to subsequent disqualification and non-participation in this sustainable trade by hobbyist aviculturists who do not maintain a large number of breeding pairs of any given species.

These smaller breeders, often lauded for their success with species considered captive rarities, must be able to trade their offspring with others who

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breed the same or similar birds. This type of important cooperative participation is prohibited or severely restricted by international trade laws at the present time. The result is increased inbreeding of many existing captive populations. This causes a demand for a new supply of birds necessary for genetic diversity. A lack of availability through *legal* channels is a primary incentive for the illegal trade.

In order for the demand in wild-caught birds to subside, and the trade in captive-bred representatives to increase, economic incentives and benefits to that replacement in trade must not be restricted but, instead, encouraged. The majority of all trade in live animals is driven by economic factors and incentives. It is therefore, critically important, that the members of the CITES Convention recognize and come to resolution that "commercial" transactions in *bona fide* captive-bred wildlife of any Appendix listing should be regulated under a different set of rules than trade in wild-caught representatives of the same species.

Marking and Identifying Captive-bred Birds

The establishment of internationally accepted standards approved by

CITES for marking and identifying captive-bred birds is a critical need. The CITES standards must meet both enforcement *and* husbandry needs. They must establish acceptable, humane, and affordable regulations, on shipping and transportation of birds. But most important of all, the Convention must resolve to encourage trade in captive-bred birds so that this ultimate "sustainable trade" in these individuals can continue to replace trade in wild-caught birds.

Captive Breeding Methods Assist Conservation

Furthermore, through the years of keeping and breeding birds in a captive environment, breeders have learned many valuable methods to increased production and survivability. Many of these methods can now be used by conservation biologists as well.

The birds currently held in captivity will probably never again fly free in the wild, but, these very same birds and the people who keep them, could play a valuable part in the restoration of the flocks that struggle each day to remain in the wild.

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The accumulated knowledge pertaining to this captive breeding biology must not be wasted. Instead, captive breeders must now play an increasingly important role in the conservation and reestablishment of the birds that are in decline in the wild. Fortunately, the worldwide demand for birds is shifting from a demand for wild birds, to a demand for those that are being bred in the captive environment. This is still not enough.

An Alliance of Cooperation

An alliance of cooperation among field biologists, governmental agencies, and the captive breeders themselves will be necessary. Breeders must find a way to "legitimize" the offspring being produced, field biologists must accept captive breeding for what it is, and what it can do, and governmental agencies must recognize and try to work with both groups in the formation of legislation that will allow both groups to accomplish what they have set out to do.

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If commercialization and sustainable use can benefit endangered or threatened species, then all those involved must accept this fact and utilize it to gain a new focus on the greater cause: the reestablishment of viable populations of threatened and endangered species in the wild.

In conclusion, the resources and knowledge available to conservation biologists from the avicultural community can be used to supplement techniques now being used in recovery efforts. Reintroduction programs of the past have demonstrated that birds hatched or maintained in captivity for long periods of time under current husbandry practices may not make good release subjects. Developing methodologies to overcome this obstacle is a quest that can be achieved.

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