

Quetzal or Cash?

(Is There Difference?)

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

When you visit Guatemala, you will exchange your own money to the currency of that country—the quetzal. The quetzal, you say! Why, that's a bird.

It began a long time ago during the days before cash money or European influence in the New World. The Maya Indians controlled parts of what is now Mexico and Central America.

It happens that the rare and beautiful Resplendent Quetzal Bird (*Pharomachrus mocinno*) inhabits much of the same range but is restricted to high elevations, particularly in the north-western highlands of Guatemala.

The pre-conquest Indians of Mexico and Central America had a high level of civilization which included trade and barter. The cacao bean was the chief form of currency. It was, however, the highly prized long tail feathers of the male Quetzal Bird that brought great wealth to the priests and rulers of the temple cities of Petén and Yucatán.

The tail feathers were gathered by the highland tribes who captured the birds, pulled their four long tail feathers then released the birds to be captured again and again—a renewable resource, as it were. The long iridescent blue-green feathers were given as tribute or were traded to the elite of the cities who used them in elaborate capes, headwear, shield decorations and other ornamentation.

The priests and rulers sometimes traded a few of the plumes for gold, jade, or incense. The plumes gained much value every time they changed hands and, indeed, became the “diamonds” or “platinum” of commerce.

Eventually the Mayas were overcome by the Aztecs. The Aztec word for tail feathers is “quetzalli” from which came “quetzal”—which came to signify beautiful or precious.

Is it surprising that Guatemalans still call their currency by the word meaning beautiful or precious? ➔

CITES, What Does it Mean to Aviculture?

by A. B. McNabney, Walnut Creek, CA

[Editor's Note: Al McNabney was sent by the AFA to attend the Animals Committee Meeting in the Czech Republic last year. This committee meeting was held to finalize various proposals to be brought forward to the 10th Conference of the Parties in 1997. SLD]

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a worldwide treaty organization involving some 125 nations, is important to wildlife, people as well as to aviculture.

Commercial Purposes and Captive Breeding

The CITES Animals Committee, Chaired by Dr. Robert Jenkins from Australia, met in Pruhonic, Czech Republic in September 1996. The Chairman announced attendance was “awesome” it being the largest of any such meeting in the history of the Animals Committee. The full agenda included topics of interest to Aviculturists, such as:

- Review of Ranches Specimens
- Traffic in Captive-bred Specimens
- Transport of Live Animals
- Frequent, Cross-Border Movement of Privately Owned Animals
- Review of Trade on Live Exotic Animals and Plants

Forty-seven Non Government Organizations (NGO) were accepted as observers, along with 67 Members of the Committee and the Secretariat. The American Federation of Aviculture (AFA) was the only organization specifically representing aviculture. Individuals representing raptor interests (falconry) were also active participants.

Working Groups

Chairman Jenkins announced the formation of “Working Groups” to give attention to issues involving transport of live animals and to consider a report developed by Dr. Charles Dauphine, Working Group Chair, and a broad based Committee covering matters of “Captive Breeding” and “Commercial

Purposes.”

The Working Group dealing with “Captive Breeding” and “Commercial Purposes” was well attended by CITES members as well as a substantial number of NGOs. A major subject of discussion was how any new rules would be applied to aviculture.

Only two participants appeared to have much, if any, real knowledge of aviculture, those being the NGO from U.S.A., representing the American Federation of Aviculture, the other the people representing the raptor interests.

Discussions were lively. Many points of view indicated the organizations represented were opposed to much if any change in existing CITES policies concerning Captive Breeding and/or Commercial Purposes.

The Dauphine Report proposed the term “Bred in Captivity” should be interpreted to refer only to specimens born or otherwise produced in a controlled environment, and shall apply only if;

“The parents mated or otherwise transferred gametes in a controlled environment, if reproduction is sexual or the parents were in a controlled environment.”

Other requirements involved compliance with domestic laws of the respective countries and that the activity would not be detrimental to the species in the wild.

Commercial Purposes Defined

The Working Group examined the Dauphine proposal and found a proposed definition of “Commercial Purposes” as follows:

“A specimen bred in captivity shall be considered as bred in captivity for commercial purposes if it was bred to obtain economic benefit, whether in cash or in kind with the intention of sale, exchange, provision of a service or another form of economic use of benefits.”

Long Discussion

Working Group participants dis-

cussed these issues for almost one full day. In fact the discussion took so long the Chair of the Group wasn't able to write a final report for presentation to the full Animals Committee Meeting. The Chair's lengthy oral report concluded with the understanding that any comments or proposed changes had to be submitted for consideration by October 18, 1996.

Dr. Dauphine indicated any and all comments submitted to him would be considered. A final report and proposals for disposing of the issues of "Captive Breeding" and "Commercial Purposes" would be prepared and would be presented to the Conference of the Parties (COP10) in Zimbabwe in June, 1997.

CITES and Aviculture

Attendance at CITES Meetings indicates that aviculturists in general have not recognized the importance of CITES to them, to aviculture, and to true conservation of avian species. On the other hand, individuals representing organizations with agendas that seemingly have little to no understanding or interest in the important conservation aspects and efforts of aviculture have a substantial and active presence. This is true at the Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings as well as when there are meetings of the Animals Committee.

Avian Conservation and Aviculture

Today, many individuals are involved in aviculture to ensure avian species are understood, conserved, protected and perpetuated. Good aviculturists accept the need for conservation of avian species in the wild. They also understand the effects of habitat losses. Oft times, human activity plays a major role in species declines. Such activity sometimes produces severe adverse effects on avian species. Good aviculturists believe the role of captive breeding is a major way to ensure perpetuation of threatened/endangered avian species.

The Good Aviculture Has Done

Those who understand "good" avicultural practices generally agree, much has been accomplished in our abilities to conserve avian species in

the wild and in aviaries. Knowledge of important aspects of the life, habits, eating, mating, producing eggs have been vastly enhanced over the past 20 years. Avian veterinarians are often available. These highly trained individuals have specialized in providing knowledgeable medical care for avian species.

Sophisticated medications now "save" many a bird. At the same time, surgical abilities, knowledge, and research make it possible to "save" birds that once would have had no chance for long life. It is clear the many gains in avian veterinary knowledge have been made possible and have come about because aviculture has produced a market for such specialized services.

Despite the good aviculture has brought about, Parties at CITES Conferences usually don't hear much about such things. Usually because there hasn't been anyone present at the conferences to talk about the "good."

Aviculture Must Be Heard

A well known leader of a major U.S. avicultural organization says, "aviculture MUST make a commitment to participate in CITES Meetings." The American Federation of Aviculture presented two major papers at the September Animals Committee Meeting. One paper dealt with the numbers of exotic species in captivity in the U.S.A., as well as the knowledge and ability to reproduce these birds. The other paper, a major presentation, dealt with a foolproof way to "identify" avian species. Full implementation of such a system could ensure identification of avian species.

Aviculturists in America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, indeed, everywhere aviculture exists, should make a commitment to full participation in CITES. By so doing, avian conservation will be enhanced. The dedicated good practices of aviculturists will be better understood by those decision makers in CITES who have such an impact on the laws affecting aviculture. ➤

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P.O. Box 56218, Phoenix, Arizona 85079-6218
Phone (602) 484-0931 Fax (602) 484-0109

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