

# CAMEROON

The African country of Cameroon is 183,547 square miles in area, with 16.5 million people of approximately 200 ethnic groups. It has many development needs, with 50% of the population living on less than US\$2 a day, and with life expectancy at birth still only 45.8 years of age. The people in Cameroon have long exploited the native wild parrots, especially the African Grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*), for diverse reasons including to supply the pet trade. However, there are concerns both within and outside of Cameroon that the levels of exploitation might be pushing the affected species into decline, especially when considered in the context of continuing loss of natural forest habitat due to conversion largely to agriculture. It is estimated that out of 84,943 square miles in this country which are forested (46.3% of the national territory), the current rate of deforestation per year is 385 square miles. All the wildlife protected areas combined occupy 15.2% of the national territory, representing about 27,845 square miles.

Nowadays the utilization of wildlife is usually considered in the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity established in 1992. The CBD has three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity (the variety of life on Earth), the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources. Many forms of life remain unexploited by humans, and of those which are utilized, it is no easy task to ensure that this happens in sustainable ways. Biological signs that wild species are being exploited unsustainably include a decline in the overall population, local extinctions and fragmentation of the geographical distribution, and demographic imbalances. Another clear indicator is a change of exploitation to other species.

Not just in Cameroon, but also in other countries where they naturally occur, many species of parrots (*Psittaciformes*) are exploited, mainly for the pet trade, internal and external. The capture and trade of wild parrots is a source or supplement of livelihood for an unknown but probably substantial number of people. This



*Photos by Simon Tamungang/Loro Parque Fundación: (from top) African Grey Parrot feathers in this village elder's hat are a traditional mark of status. Senegal Parrots awaiting shipment. Parrot populations in Cameroon are also affected by forest logging.*



# Is Sustainable Trade of Wild Parrots Possible for Their Conservation in Cameroon?

by David Waugh  
Loro Parque Fundación

activity is an aspect of present-day life which is completely unknown, or of little concern to millions more people, but for other people it is a complete anathema. Most opposition is on the grounds that the suffering and extent of mortality of wild-caught parrots are unacceptable. For some opposers there is also the conservation issue that the capture and trade of wild parrots can threaten their existence, and that there are serious complications to demonstrate that the exploitation is sustainable.

Cameroon is one of the countries where the capture and trade of wild parrots raises these issues. Therefore, since the beginning of 2006, the Loro Parque Fundación has been supporting a project to assess the current situation of parrot exploitation in that country, in relation to changes in habitat availability and wild population estimates, as well as to external market influences. The project is led by Dr Simon Tamungang of the University of Dschang, Cameroon, in collaboration with Professor Robert Cheke of the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, UK. Given the substantial development needs of the country, the project starts from the

potential sustainable harvest in Cameroon might still be economically exploitable, but only just. Two connected objectives of the project are to initiate a systematic population monitoring system in the country and to determine the level of sustainable harvest, leading to scientifically justified export quotas. The Animals Committee of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora) has called for scientific-based field surveys of wild populations, and the development of National and Regional Management Plans before resuming any trade, in line with its recommendation to prohibit export of *P. Erithacus* from Cameroon for two years from January 2007 (CITES 2006).

The first phase of the project has been to examine the extent of trade throughout the country, by conducting surveys of persons involved at every stage of the chain of trade. The standard methods for data collection and analyses were first designed by a multi-disciplinary team of wildlife biologists, economists, statisticians, rural sociologists, etc., in a workshop convened for this purpose. There are many possible reasons why local com-

ignore the animal welfare issue, and the need for dramatic improvements in the care and conditions for transportation of parrots. More parrots surviving and presenting good health and condition also has an economic incentive. However, substantial training is indicated, and should be mandatory in any technical cooperation; but careful consideration needs to be given as to who will deliver the training and monitor the effects.

Another aspect for future deliberation relates to the increasing desire and necessity in the pet parrot market for captive-bred birds, rather than their more risky wild-caught counterparts. This raises the question of the possibilities for the commercial captive-breeding of parrots in Cameroon. A successful centre will require very good facilities, easy access to good veterinary attention and best practice in all aspects of parrot management. Especially to avoid the possible "laundering" of wild-caught birds as captive-bred, individual identification with closed, steel leg-bands and microchips must be mandatory, as well as the corresponding registers of the breeders, and all must be closely monitored. Again these essential

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premise that the driving force behind the parrot trade in Cameroon is poverty alleviation and unemployment. Furthermore, the project recognises that parrot trade must be sustainable if it is to contribute properly to social and economic improvements, and therefore, sustainability is a key aspect of the evaluation. Given that sustainable export levels may be only around 10% of the current average exports reported annually, as suggested by BirdLife International (2006), the

munities might leave native forest standing instead of cutting it down; and one important aspect of the project is to assess the extent to which the harvesting of parrots provides sufficient value for a community to leave the forest intact. The foremost aim of the project is to appraise the value of consumptive use of native parrots in the form of sustainable trade; but eventually it will also need to compare the value from a non-consumptive use such as Eco-tourism. The project will also not



Photo by Simon Tamungang/  
Loro Parque Fundación:  
Two red-faced Lovebirds being kept as pets.

requirements indicate the need for significant technical cooperation, and the magnitude of the challenge cannot be underestimated.

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there must be a market, and changes in or additions to the regulations governing access to markets will have their effect on patterns of trade in wild-caught parrots. The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 means that the USA has long been closed for wild parrots coming from Cameroon. As a measure to reduce the risk of disease transfer, the European Union ban on the importation of wild-caught birds into all member states became permanent on 1st July 2007. Since the temporary ban (established against avian flu) had been successively renewed since October 2005, this market has been closed to Cameroon for some time. As a result, Dr Tamungang reported a reduction in trading activity in the country, and cases of hardship among trappers. Most recently he reports that the Cameroon government continues to issue permits for wild parrot exploitation within the country and also for export, and the traders have turned to Asia as the main market. This is despite the CITES recommendation of a two-year moratorium on exports.

In addition to the African Grey Parrot, there are seven other parrot species which naturally occur in Cameroon: Jardine's Poicephalus gulielmi, Senegal P. senegalus, Meyer's P. meyeri and Niam-niam P. crassus parrots, Red-faced Agapornis pullarius, Black-collared A. swinertonianus lovebirds, and Ring-necked parakeet Psittacula krameri. All are in Appendix II of CITES except for the unlisted P. krameri. Of these, the project reports that four are frequent in trade: the African Grey, Senegal and Jardine's parrots and the Red-faced lovebird. Although the Jardine's parrot is the second most desired species, the frequency of occurrence of the African Grey parrot in both internal and external trade exceeds all other species, being the most exploited and exported wild bird species in Cameroon. Statistics from 1981 to 2005 show that Cameroon exported 367,166 with a yearly average of 15,299. From 1990 to 1996, it exported 48% of the African Grey parrots of all countries in Africa, thereby positioning itself as leading exporter of the wild African Grey parrots in the world. From 1993 to 2006, the official CITES annual export quota for this species from Cameroon has remained 12,000.

Although the project still has a great deal of information to collect, it has already begun to provide essential information such as the capture techniques, mortality of captured birds, market prices, incentives and disincentives for trappers, etc. (Tamungang 2007). The project team conducting interviews the length and breadth of the country have a difficult and sometimes hazardous task, given that trappers, local people and dealers are very wary of officialdom. Diplomacy is always necessary, and considerable guile is required to extract information about illegal exports. As would be expected, almost all wildlife resources are

found in the rural areas of Cameroon, and the villagers are the primary custodians of this natural patrimony. Each forest belongs first to a village but the government can apply to use it as a protected area or for any other socio-economic activity. In this way, the villagers remain stakeholders of any government project being developed in their community. It is supposed therefore that the rural communities know their resources, including parrots, and identify them using their traditional methods. From the project survey, it is clear that the majority (65%) of villagers know of only one parrot species present in their home area, and the smaller proportion identifying more than one species is partly a reflection of the distribution and habitat preferences of the parrots within the country.

Villagers were also asked whether they knew about the existence of the parrot trade in Cameroon, and 56% answered yes and 44% no. As major stakeholders in the conservation and potential exploitation of parrots, the government is supposed to work with them

incentives from parrot traders. 84% of the communities did not know how many parrots are harvested from their forests, and only 13% had some idea, and there is no clear pattern of knowledge on the increase or decrease in local parrot populations. Thus, there is much to be done to help wildlife managers and policy makers in taking management and policy decisions which avoid unsustainable use of parrots.

The profile of a typical trapper is of a young man, between the ages of 20 and 45, who has undergone some informal training or acquired experience in trapping techniques through going to the field with older trappers. Generally the trapper originates from a village, where most of them live, although some move to urban areas and return to the village to trap parrots. Of the two categories of trappers identified, the part-timers trap the birds seasonally when they are abundant or when there is a special demand from a middleman such as an exporter. The other category

journey (Figure 2). The project survey has revealed that 47% of the trappers are self-employed with some kind of small business, and 40% hunt and practice subsistence agriculture. All trappers could read and write to a certain extent - 68% of them have the First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC), and 6% are even first university degree holders. This is an indication of the high rate of unemployment coupled with low salaries in Cameroon. Of the middlemen, 33% had the FSCL (33%), 50% had high school General Certificate of Education certificates and 17% were university graduates with first degrees.

The Cameroon Forestry and Wildlife Law stipulates that traders in parrots are supposed to obtain a permit from the relevant ministry.

**Trappers usually prepare cages or rooms in their houses to hold the birds, and during months when there are no customers coming to the house they smuggle the birds to urban areas or sell them along major highways.**



**Photo by Simon Tamungang/Loro Parque Fundación:  
A parrot seller, and a cage on offer to buyers.**

by involving them in the gathering of information and as partners in development projects. The villagers are supposed to be informed in relation to parrot capturing activities by knowing the trappers and checking that their activities are not excessive. However, 80% of the rural communities said that the government does not hold meetings with them concerning parrot exploitation activities in their forests. Even when wildlife officials fail to have meetings with villagers, trappers should not enter their forests and to exploit parrots without their knowledge. This is a very serious issue in some parts of the country, and some communities have their own rules and regulations regarding such offences. In addition, communities are supposed to receive royalties, overseen by the government, with the intention to encourage them as stakeholders for conserving parrots in their forests. Unfortunately, 90% of the communities declared that no royalties accrued from exploitation of parrots in their regions were forthcoming from the government, and neither were there

is of professional trappers, who trap all year round, have steady sources (exporters or local sellers) of selling the birds, and have no other major source of income. In urban areas they also sell some directly to individuals. In the villages these trappers usually prepare cages or rooms in their houses to hold the birds, and during months when there are no customers coming to the house they smuggle the birds to urban areas or sell them along major highways.

Evidently the amount of time that a trapper puts into this activity and the net benefits are crucial for it to be considered a sustainable economic activity. A major consideration is the distance from home to point of capture, the longer the distance the more time, energy and money being spent per bird trapped. So far the project has shown that the majority of trappers trek the shortest distance of less than 3 miles (5 km), but that some go further, with a few exceeding 62 miles (100 km) of

According to the project survey, one third did not have such permits, and the majority complain about the conditions to be fulfilled to obtain a permit, citing the high cost (about US\$2,800 equivalent). However, two-thirds of the traders accepted that they usually met their capture quotas given by the ministry, and a further 16% said they sometimes met their capture quota. Generally, all the middlemen have other businesses on which they depend during recess periods of the parrot trade. The project has identified four provinces as principal sources of parrots for local consumption and export: the East (24%), Centre (23%), South (31%), and Southwest (8%). The South Province is less populated and has a greater part of its rainforest still intact.





**Photo by Simon Tamungang/Loro Parque Fundación:**  
**Good forest habitat for parrots in Cameroon.**

Preliminary information on mortality indicates that an average of 16% die between capture and arrival at the traders, and that additional mortality prior to export can explode to as much as 80%. Most deaths result from poor handling and transportation difficulties. More precise figures will be gathered, including numbers of birds seeping through Cameroon's borders, so as to arrive at a realistic annual total of captures for each species. Capturing techniques vary across the country, but frequent techniques use nets and gummed sticks, both at roosting and feeding sites. Some of the techniques are very harmful. All sexes and ages are captured and no breeding season is observed by trappers. Exporters, in obtaining permits and other documents to export birds legally, complain that the cost of preparing parrots for export is relatively higher in Cameroon than other African countries, thereby placing them at a disadvantage in the world parrot market. This can lead to smuggling of birds to neighbouring countries, and one view is that this constitutes an economic loss to Cameroon. Smugglers of parrots are punished using the provisions of the 1994 Forestry and Wildlife Law, and seized parrots are either sent to the Mvog-Betsi zoo in the city of Yaounde, or publicly auctioned either to legal exporters, or to the general public. In the city of Douala (Littoral Province) as an example, the number of parrots apprehended per month has ranged from 3 to 480.

Parrots have been and still are used in many parts of the country for traditional medicines, decorations, symbols of affluence, pets, companions, totems, security and messengers. Prices of parrots vary throughout the country, being principally controlled by the place of purchase of the bird, the buyer's personality, the seller's knowledge of the bird's value and season of selling. The African Grey parrot is sold in most parts of the country, but the other

species are predominantly sold in the cities of Douala and Yaounde. In 2006, the average price for a pair of lovebirds was US\$75 (equivalent), and for a Jardine's parrot was US\$42. The average price of an African Grey parrot within Cameroon ranged from US\$4.50 to US\$77, the lowest prices occurring in the rural areas, the highest in the cities. Given that 50% of the country's population lives on less than US\$2 a day, a definite incentive for trapping and selling of parrots exists. In the same year in the European Union, it is reported that parrots from Cameroon were sold for about 4,584% more than the average price in Cameroon!

The current wildlife law in Cameroon is generalized and does not deal with the particular conservation needs of parrots. Thus, the project is also reviewing the law to develop a supplementary document for the conservation and exploitation (form as yet undefined) of parrots in Cameroon, so as to include stakeholders at all levels of society. Irrespective of their status in life, all Cameroonians, directly or indirectly, require a continuous supply of wildlife resources, but to ensure continuity of present and future benefits, indigenous knowledge and skills must be applied in combination with modern wildlife management techniques. In other words, many aspects of habitat utilisation and sustainable wildlife management may be found embedded in Cameroon's indigenous cultures. The project will incorporate the best elements of these into a Cameroon Parrots Conservation Strategy, aiming to instil respect for these birds so that they do not suffer, and stay with healthy populations. 🐦

## References

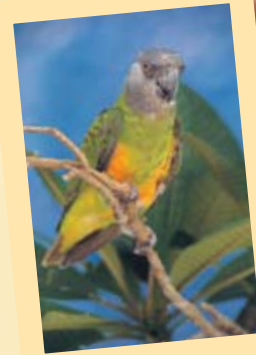
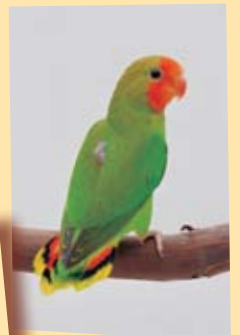
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[Another version of this article appeared in Australian Birdkeeper magazine].

**Loro Parque Fundación: (from top)**  
**Male Red-faced Lovebird (*Agapornis pullarius*), Senegal Parrot (*Poicephalus senegalus*), Jardine's Parrot (*Poicephalus gulielmi*)**



**Photos by Simon Tamungang**  
**Loro Parque Fundación:**  
**(from top) African Grey Parrots crowded into the premises of a trader. African Grey Parrots in better facilities.**





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