

Pros and Cons of Exporting Australian Avifauna

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Abstract

In the following paper I will explain the associated problems involved in the capture and exporting of pest species of birds. My presentation will be in five parts:

- a brief outline of Australia;
- the benefits of exporting birds, including revenue derived;
- crop damage and trapping;
- smuggling of Australian birds; and
- the role of dealers and trappers.

Introduction

Many of the world's 8500 species of birds are now kept in captivity, and the ancestry of a number of the more spectacularly coloured species of these birds can be traced back to Australia.

Most people have heard of this island continent of ours. Quite a number of you may have even visited Australia. For those not familiar with this "land-down-under" I have included the following.

Australia

- is the world's largest island and smallest continent;
- is approximately three million square miles compared to America's 3.5 million;
- has a population of 15 million people, three quarters of whom live within one hour's drive from the coastal strip 30 miles wide by 2,700 miles long from Cairns to Adelaide. Incidentally we also have the highest skin cancer rate in the world — all that sunshine on a white population.

The remainder of this big and beautiful country is relatively empty of people, but full of nature's wonders, such as the world's largest rock — Ayers Rock — and the largest living organism — the Great Barrier Reef, one of the

natural wonders of the world. It is a land inhabited by strange mammals and colourful birds.

The recorded bird population is in excess of 750 species, of which 350 are endemic. We have one sixth of the world's parrot population — from large black palm cockatoos to small budgerigars and over one third of the world's honeyeaters. We share with Papua New Guinea the privilege of having all the bower birds of the world. Some of our unique animals include the world's largest grasshopper (most people call them kangaroos), a mammal that lays eggs but suckles her young; the platypus; and the world's deadliest snake — the taipan.

One of the best known Australian species is the budgerigar which is probably the most commonly kept captive species in the world due to its size, temperament and ease with which it can be bred. In Europe it is called the love bird. Many of the cage varieties that now exist bear only superficial resemblance to their wild ancestors. The demand for wild caught budgerigars is now small, due to the ease with which the budgie is bred in captivity. In the large expanses of arid Australia where the budgerigar evolved it still exists in large numbers, and flocks in good seasons can number in the thousands or tens of thousands. Unfortunately this is not the case of many other Australian birds for which there is a large demand in the avicultural trade.

At present Australian law allows certain species to be exported legally under certain conditions. These are very limiting and it is with regard to these restrictions that many people both in Australia and in other countries are opposed.

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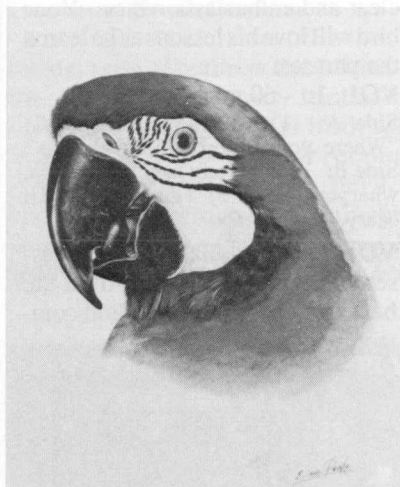
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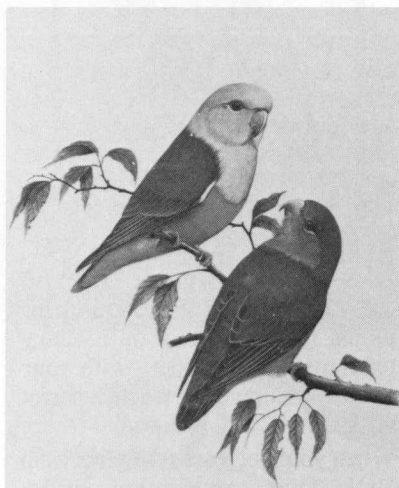
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When Can Birds be Exported From Australia?

Approval for the export of birds is for scientific studies, zoo transactions and household pets. Species allowed for export as household pets are as follows:

1. sulphur crested cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*)
2. galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)
3. little corella (*Cacatua sanguinea*)
4. long-billed corella (*Cacatua tenuirostris*)
5. cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*)
6. budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)

Conditions of Export

A total of two (2) birds of each species may be exported as household pets.

The exporter must have owned and kept each animal as a household pet for not less than three years immediately preceding the export.

The exporter must have been originally a resident in Australia or an external territory for not less than four years immediately preceding the export AND the exporter is leaving Australia or an external territory with the intention of taking up permanent residence in another country.

Mass Extermination of Australian Wild Birds

You are no doubt familiar with the type of news tabloid reading: "Australian farmers poison thousands of sulphur-crested cockatoos;" "Crops devastated by parrots — farmers and graziers throughout Australia have been fighting drought, floods and now plagues of native parrots. Flocks of pink galahs, cockatoos, and corellas are roaming farming and grazing areas of Australia devastating grain crops, cereal crops, oil seed crops, nut plantations, orchards and grazing pastures" and so on.

Sensationalism still sells newspapers and brings to the attention of the world at large that we have a surplus of some species of birds which a large number of American aviculturists would like to obtain.

It would seem then, that the obvious solution is to trap these offending birds and export them to American aviculturists. In fact the Associated Bird Keepers and Traders (ABKT) and many other organizations argue that permitting the trapping and exporting of pest species from Australia will provide many material benefits. Let's examine these one at a time.

1) It is claimed that other people of the world will have the benefit of some

of our beautiful native birds, at the same time creating awareness of Australia and supporting the large State and the Federal expenditure on stimulating the tourist industry.

That people of the world would have the benefit of some of our beautiful native birds is undisputable, but often by the time the end user obtains the bird, many would have only a vague impression that it came from the Southeast Asian area. **However**, the Australian government does allow export of Australian birds as long as they go to a zoo for public display. Very few aviculturists have the facilities to display their birds to large numbers of the general public.

2) It is claimed that there could be a favourable public reaction to pest species not being killed and that this reprieve could lift Australia's profile amongst animal lovers throughout the world.

I have to point out the export of wild taken animals is contrary to the spirit of resolutions passed by CITES at its 1976 meeting in Berne, Switzerland (Resolution Conf. 1.6). The initiation of such export may result in criticism of Australia's conservation role at an international level. The ever-present public outcry over the culling of kangaroos, combined with the mass export of our avifauna, would probably start a civil war, or at least ruffle the feathers of a large number of Australians.

3) It is claimed that revenue would be created from export, by way of an excise, to fund further research on this pest problem and provide funding for control and supervision of the harvesting of pest birds and the expansion of useful conservation programs.

No economic analysis is available and any costing may be based on the U.S.A. average retail prices of US\$1,500-\$3,000 for sulphur-crested cockatoos. Commercial import of wild taken sulphur-crested cockatoos is restricted in the U.S.A. which presumably restricts supply of these birds and raises the price.

The FOB price paid by American importers for blue and gold macaws from South America, which retail for a similar price as sulphur-crested cockatoos, is \$60-\$90.

The cost of a properly regulated large scale trapping operation would be considerable, both to the exporter and the government. Transport costs in Australia are some of the highest in the world. Transporting the live birds from, for example, the western areas of N.S.W. to the airports on the coast would require stops to feed and water the birds.

Humane care of captured birds is labour intensive and the cost of labour in Australia is high. The birds would then need to be held for a period to recover from the journey and to allow thorough veterinary inspection to remove sick or injured animals and to test for infections and diseases. The present charge for air freight of live cargo to the West Coast of the U.S.A. from Australia is \$560.00 per 100 kg including the weight of the container.

Upon arrival in the U.S.A., birds would be held in quarantine. U.S.A. quarantine fees for the commercial importation of birds range from \$0.32 to \$9.77 per bird per day with a minimum fee of \$40. There is also a minimum quarantine period of 30 days in a facility approved by the United States Department of Agriculture at the port of entry.

It would appear that the major cost associated with the export of Australian native birds would be that incurred by the government bodies responsible for regulating the industry.

If an export program was undertaken as a government program, trapping and handling costs would be high due to the need to comply with union awards and the fact that trapping is an intermittent operation. No wildlife authority currently has the personnel available for this work. No Commonwealth department is currently structured so as to be able to provide physical control over the large scale export of live birds.

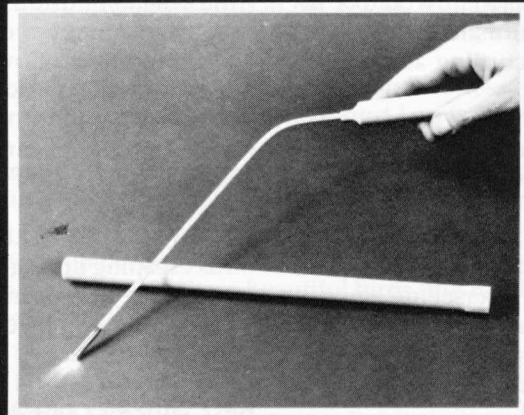
Setting up such a structure would involve employment of substantial additional staff and capital outlay on premises suitable to hold large numbers of live birds at all ports from which export is to be permitted. The Australian government is currently in the process of restructuring all government departments, with a reduction of staff, costs and facilities where possible. The creation of a new government department to handle the export of native birds would be contrary to present government policy.

The cost of employing trained officers would (presumably) have to be recouped from the industry in the form of licensing or permit fees. However, it is doubtful if the initial capital outlay would be recouped by this method.

As a government activity there would be requirements for:

- (a) Trained officers to supervise every phase of the operation from trapping, caging, transporting, holding, treating, quarantining and consigning to final packing for export.
- (b) Ongoing research to establish

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population dynamics and age structures and to monitor the effects of cropping.

- (c) Capital expenditure for land and buildings to accommodate staff and birds.
- (d) And, of course, there would be increased administrative back-up involving recording accounting systems.

As a private commercial activity, trapping could be more economical than departmental trapping. However, government supervision costs would be much higher. The Australian Customs Service has indicated that increased costs in effectively overseeing any private export program would be extremely high and costs passed on to the industry would make any such operation uneconomical.

If private trappers were utilized and private enterprise used to export the birds it would be necessary to:

- (a) Ensure that illegally taken birds were not included with those legally cropped. (At the present time no suitable banding system is available to simplify enforcement problems).
- (b) Control and record all stocks held by trappers, aviculturalists, dealers and exporters.
- (c) Inspect all birds before export and have positive means of identification.
- (d) Ensure that there was no substitution of or addition to export consignments after inspection.
- (e) Distinguish accurately between aviary-bred and wild-trapped birds.
- (f) Police all normal export points as well as the more unusual ones.
- (g) Meet quarantine and health requirements.
- (h) And it would be necessary to contend with a predictable public reaction to commercial exploitation.

Although a private operation could probably trap and export pest birds for much less than a government operation, the cost of effectively overseeing all phases of a private operation would almost certainly offset any saving. This method would be likely to lapse as an economically viable operation due to supervision costs. Although problems of supervision would be less with a local market, the return would be lower especially when the market reacted to over supply.

Previous experience has indicated that legal trapping would be unlikely to be an economic operation, with local or

overseas destinations. Internationally accepted methods for transporting birds may restrict the volume of birds which could be exported at any one time and transport limitations could curtail volume of export.

Australian birds do not have any immunity to a number of diseases prevalent in a number of overseas countries. A high mortality rate could therefore be expected in quarantine. When the general public became aware of this high mortality rate a public outcry would ensue.

There would be the possibility of birds escaping during or after transportation and becoming acclimatized. There could be objections from other countries because of the entry of Australian horticultural and agricultural pest species. The United States of America, for example, has laws to prohibit the import of pest species because of the risk of establishment in the wild.

4) Another of the principal arguments advanced in favour of relaxing export controls on live native birds, is that it will remove the incentive for and thus largely eliminate smuggling of both rare or endangered species and the more common species.

This would be the case if sufficient birds of the sought after species were available at a price overseas that would provide a greater profit margin than could be obtained from smuggling.

Alas, on a world wide basis, the legal international trade under CITES controls has *not* eliminated smuggling. It is estimated by the United States Office of Traffic that 100,000 parrots annually enter international trade illegally. This amounts to approximately a quarter of the number entering this trade legally (Jackson, 1985).

You are probably familiar with the recent United States experience that has shown that lifting a prohibition on sale or export of captive bred birds, even under the close supervision of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), does not necessarily offer security to wild specimens of rare and endangered species. A three year investigation by the service recently resulted in 39 arrests on charges relating to illegal dealing in wild specimens of rare and endangered peregrine and gyrfalcons. It appears that government permits and leg bands, used to identify captive bred birds, were fraudulently used on many of the 400-500 birds illegally taken from the wild (Animal Welfare Institute Quarterly, 1984).

The species of birds that are most frequently smuggled out of Australia are

not those species which have been indicated as major destroyers of crops. Records of birds seized by the Australian Customs Service show that white cockatoos, galahs and long-billed corellas are rarely involved in such seizures. Smuggling of rare or endangered species is unlikely to decrease due to legalization of the export of pest species and may create a greater demand for those species not allowed to be exported.

Conservation groups argue that rather than eliminating smuggling, proposals to relax export controls will simply expand the options available to bird smugglers. At present, the only avenue for smuggling birds is by entirely clandestine means.

If legal export were permitted smuggling could also occur by:

- (a) falsification and forgery of permits;
- (b) inclusion of rare or uncommon birds in shipments of common species;
- (c) passing off wild trapped birds as captive bred.

These practices are not uncommon in countries currently permitting export of parrots. Many recent United States prosecutions relating to imported parrots have involved such malpractices. They are often difficult to detect and difficult to prove in court.

5) Another claim is that trapping of pest birds has a dispersal effect and breaks up large flocks that destroy farmers crops thereby reducing the degree of injury to those crops. Export would eliminate poisoning and shooting as a method of control, it is claimed, and would defuse the argument that a resource is being wasted.

Before it is practical to consider the specific question of trapping a pest species of animal it is necessary to examine the broader issue of overall management of those species. To formulate a management plan for a species which causes serious economic damage it is necessary to obtain not only detailed information about its biology but also its interaction with the community. A plan needs to consider many elements, including migration, breeding pattern, feeding habits, etc. (There is for example good evidence that some cockatoos will not feed if they cannot see out of a crop and lower damage to crops has been demonstrated where the main crop has been surrounded by a higher border crop.)

Where a native species is causing damage it is important to determine the overall abundance of that species, and whether it is increasing or decreasing.

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Until recently many considered Lories difficult to keep because of their specialized diet of nectar only, which most people believed was necessary to keep and maintain these beautiful birds, the resulting messy liquid droppings, because of their nectar diet, plus the fact that the nectar had to be changed daily have made Lories and Lorikeets unpopular.

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Studies have shown that in the wild a Lories natural diet consists of pollen, leaf buds, fruit and flowers. A Lories diet is 80% to 90% dry and ***IS NOT MADE UP OF NECTAR ONLY***. Collecting pollen is what their specialized tongues were designed to do. Note this paragraph on Lories in Joseph M. Forshaw's "Parrots of the World" the aviculturists bible; "Authors have nearly always referred to the brush-tipped tongue as adaptation for extracting nectar. However, from their work with the Purple — crowned Lorikeets (*Glossopsitta Porphyrocephala*) Churchill and Christensen (1970) point out that the tongue in Lories is an organ for harvesting pollen and pressing it into a form suitable for swallowing, and is not primarily for gathering nectar. Nectar is collected when it flows, but it is not a substitute for pollen, which birds continue to harvest as their source of nitrogen. At the time the birds ingest nectar they accumulate subcutaneous fat. Nectar does not reach the stomach but is held in the crop, which enlarges to accommodate it,... Joseph M. Forshaw, "Parrots of the World" (T.F.H. Publications Inc. 1977) page 43.

Since the early 1980's a few aviculturists who specialize in breeding and raising Lories and Lorikeets have been working on and developing a dry formula diet, since this is closer to Lories natural diet. The benefits of a dry formula diet are two—fold.

1. By using a dry formula diet the keeping of Lories is simplified. You can free feed them in the same way as you would give seed to a parrot. You can leave the dry formula out for several days without fear of it spoiling, as you would worry with a nectar only diet. Also, by using a dry formula diet the droppings of the bird become more firm and cause considerably less mess than a bird on a nectar only diet.

2. The second benefit is to the Lorie breeder. This dry formula diet is closer to a Lories natural diet, and contains the nutrients they need and look for, and it is in a powder form, similar to what they would get in nature. Because of this Lories will breed more readily. Breeders who use this dry formula diet have doubled their production of babies, from the same birds who were originally on a nectar only diet.

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ing. The fecundity rate needs to be established.

Some species such as the galah are increasing in range and, it is thought, numbers. They are less vulnerable than other species which are declining in range and numbers. A joint survey of long-billed corellas in three Australian states, Victoria, N.S.W. and S.A., approximately five years ago, has set a base line for this species. Regular monitoring would be needed to establish the status of wild populations so that safe harvesting levels, based on sound conservation principles, could be determined and maintained. This would be costly.

A question that must be answered is this. *Would trapping in most instances significantly reduce agriculture pest problems?*

A survey of the sunflower districts throughout eastern Australia (conducted by the Department of Ecosystem Management at the University of New England, Armidale NSW., in 1983) indicated that 55 districts producing sunflower seeds all reported some bird damage. The districts are predominantly areas where sunflowers are grown extensively on a broad acre basis. Most of these districts were originally covered by a variety of open woodland and grassland habitats, the traditional habitat of a number of seed-eating birds.

Only two species were consistently reported as the major pests, the sulphur-crested cockatoo and the galah. The only other species to be mentioned repeatedly was the cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*).

The trapping and removal of sufficient numbers of birds to significantly reduce the damage to crops would be a large scale exercise due to the logistics involved in caring for the captured birds. At the 1984 conference of the Western Australian Fruitgrowers Association, a motion was passed recommending the W.A. government export a minimum of one million parrots before the 1st June 1985. (One million!!! Imagine what this would do to the price of Australian birds in the US.)

The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service will not issue an export permit for any native species until, among other things, a management plan had been prepared for that species. This is a requirement of the Wildlife Protection Act (1982) which was introduced to implement Australia's obligations under the international treaty CITES. Such a plan would need to establish the status of the population and demonstrate that numbers for export were within safe harvesting levels,

based on sound conservation principles. This would of course also be necessary for any private operation and would form a major cost in any trapping and trading program for an overseas market. Although not a legal requirement of CITES, it is likely that State Governments will also require similar safeguards for any market within Australia.

What is the Role of Dealers and Trappers?

Fauna dealers have a legitimate place in the bird fancier's world. However, evidence shows it is the network of dealers which provides the outlet for those who are illegally trapping and smuggling birds. There is a demand to be satisfied and the profit is such that some dealers do not question the source of their supplies. Many dealers are also trappers and have permanent working arrangements with other trappers.

Dealers in Australia are not required to have qualifications and they are not bound by any standard. They pay a prescribed fee for a license and are free to obtain and sell birds whether or not they have any ornithological knowledge. The activities of professional trappers are wide-spread and entail the use of sophisticated equipment. They are experienced and knowledgeable on the habitats of those species in greatest demand and use specially equipped vehicles and light aircraft to get their catches to the metropolitan markets rapidly. Their movements are such that detection is almost impossible given the resources of the State fauna authorities. If we look at the Australian coast line and try to envisage how a Navy of 15 ships could adequately patrol this area, you will see how relatively easy it is to smuggle birds out of this huge island.

The Australian parrots which are in greatest demand are easy prey for trappers. Unlike finches and other birds, human interference will not cause the parent bird to abandon the nest. Nests can be kept under surveillance and chicks imprisoned inside. The parent birds will tend their young, enabling the trapper to return at a later date to collect the young bird.

Good evidence on the effects of trapping birds is either inconclusive or nonexistent but there is extensive indication of the volume of the trade and the wastage rates involved.

A report prepared for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds on birds imported into Britain through Heathrow Airport, conservatively estimates the world trade in birdlife at five million birds per year. It poses the question of

how many more millions of birds are maimed or destroyed in the process of providing the five million which are ultimately sold? This figure is said to be conservative, and may range to as high as 25 million. Little is known about the true extent of the trade being conducted. Records held at Heathrow Airport indicate that in certain groups the percentage death rates were as high as 40% to 70%. Whole consignments of several hundred birds were all found to be dead or almost dead. These mortality figures apply only to a day or two out of the birds' captive lives. Many more die during their first few captive weeks before export. The study dealt with legal imports into Britain only and therefore reveals the tip of the international iceberg.

In Australia our Bureau of Customs has estimated that at least 80% of birds smuggled out of Australia die before reaching their final destinations. This estimate was supported in evidence by aviculturists and others experienced in the transport and acclimatization of both wild and aviary-bred birds. The effects of the drugs to silence and enclose them, of heat and lack of air, are all factors which produce and contribute to a high death rate in the first stage of the operation. It is probable that a higher rate of survival is achieved with the birds which are shipped out by light aircraft to neighboring countries or by boat to ships standing off the coast. But a significant death rate is still a feature of the enterprise. The vast distances within Australia compound the problem of transport and containment in this illegal industry. I am sure that no one will dispute that the slaughter that occurs in transporting smuggled birds is intolerable.

In reviewing the current scene in Australia I can arrive at only one conclusion: that an expansion of the legal export of our endemic species that are so admired by the rest of the world is, at best, only a distant possibility. Disregarding any economic aspect, I have to report that conservationists in Australia, as elsewhere, are a powerful lobby, and are totally opposed to the export of Australian avifauna.

In conclusion, I can only say I am not anti-aviary. Aviaries enable so many to appreciate the physical beauty of the individual birds, and the endearing mannerisms or characteristics displayed by them. However, it is beyond all doubt that to experience the true nature and beauty of a bird and gain insight into its normal behavior it must be viewed in its natural habitat. ●

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