

Extinction or Domestication?

by Tom Marshall
Leesburg, Virginia

I am fairly confident from listening to the rhetoric of animal rights extremist groups that if they were given the choice of a wild animal going extinct or becoming domesticated, they would choose the former. "Better dead than bred (in captivity)" could serve as their motto, since after all, they believe animals need to be free. According, to these self-proclaimed animal advocates, animals in captivity are not fulfilling their natural destiny, and must for all intents and purposes be considered "environmentally" dead!

It is equally certain that as aviculturists, we would always opt for domestication over extinction of the birds we love. We are pragmatic. We would argue that

extinction is unacceptable especially when it may be in our power to preserve certain birds in perpetuity – even if only in our aviaries.

Why do people who purport to love animals find such revulsion in domestication? Does domestication conjure up thoughts of barnyard animals being fattened for food? Do they think only about the dogs and cats which are neglected, and ignore the wonderful bonds that exist between house pets and their owners?

Is domestication of wildlife a question of ethics? Aesthetics? Perhaps we should ask the question differently. Is domestication a natural occurrence that is simply *a strategy for survival* for cer-

tain animals with specific pre-adaptive traits that make them viable candidates for "man-made evolution", i.e., *domestication*?

Animal rights groups label domestication "unnatural" and, therefore, bad. However, if domestication is merely a strategy for an animal to meet its biological imperative of survival and reproduction, it would have to be, by definition, a *natural* phenomenon, neither bad nor good.

So can we define domestication as natural? Webster defines domestication as the "adaptation to life in intimate association with, and to the advantage of man... by modifying growth and traits through provision of food, protection from enemies, and selective breeding during generations of living in association..."

It is the first part of this definition that may confuse us and those individuals who consider themselves animal advocates. If domestication serves man then we assume that man has subjugated animals to the animals' detriment. However, all animals, including man, are programmed to try to adapt to their environment so they may survive and reproduce. In order to do this animals may alter their behavior, their traits, their size, and choice of food.

Animals may even be consciously willing to come into closer association with man, if they could gain special advantage by the food or protection they receive. This new association may allow them to survive, reach reproductive age and pass that new adaptive trait of *tameness* on to their offspring. Evolution lacks a theology: it's simply the accumulation of temporary solutions to problems posed by circumstances.

Confusion also reigns when it comes to the concept of freedom. Animal rights groups equate freedom for animals with living in the wild. "Wild is good; captivity is bad": fails to do justice to the benefits domestication can provide for animals. Why should animals believe that freedom – that is life in the wild – is the ultimate good? We certainly don't. Civilization is the history of our attempts to lose ourselves from the brutish conditions of life in the wild, with the continued pressures to find food and escape predators. Instead of the freedom of hunting, gathering, and defending our patch of woods, we settled for a nine-to-five job, subways, enclosed malls, McDonald's and tract housing. We, too,



Dr. José Courrau, a Costa Rican national parks official, and a free-flying Yellow-naped Amazon appear to be pondering the concept of parrots choosing domestication as a way to avoid extinction.

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New Finch Society Formed

The Waxbill and Parrot Finch Society was formed in July 1995 to establish in captivity the estrildids commonly referred to as waxbills, parrot finches and, although not mentioned in the name, the non-Australian mannikins, genus *Lonchura*. In view of countries shutting off export, airlines refusing to carry wild caught birds, and legislation prohibiting the importation of such birds, it is becoming clear that these finches are rapidly vanishing from aviculture. This is particularly true for the CITES III finches, a good example of which is the Green Twinspot, a bird which until a few years ago was commonly found in pet shops but now has practically vanished from aviculture. The purpose of the Society is to disseminate the most up-to-date information on breeding, including the aspects of behavior, diet, compatibility and environment.

We have formed a board of advisors which includes Mike Fidler, co-author of *Parrot Finches, the Aviculturist's Guide*; Stash Buckley and Carol Anne Calvin, contributing writers for the *AFA Watchbird*, authors of the column "Estrildid Finches in Aviculture", and contributing editors for *The Estrildian*; Jayne Yantz, *Bird Talk* magazine's finch expert and columnist; and Dr. Luis Baptista, of the Department of Ornithology at the California Academy of Sciences. Our zoo liaison and organizer of the Species Interest Committee for Estrildid Finches, part of the Taxon Advisory Group for Passerine Birds is Josef Lindholm III, a keeper in the Bird Department at the Fort Worth Zoo.

Members are invited to ask as many questions as they wish. These will be answered in the Society's bi-monthly publication, *Finch Breeder*. Members who have experienced consistent breeding success are invited to submit articles detailing their techniques.

Membership in the Society is \$10.00 per year to cover publishing costs. Payment should be made in the form of a check or money order payable to Levin H. Tilghman III, 6419 N. 15th St., Philadelphia PA 19126-3503. ➤

are living in artificial environments.

First we domesticated *ourselves*, moved on to horses, dogs, cats and other animals, and we will inevitably domesticate more animals, including parrots. Biologically, the process of domestication is a success story without precedent in the history of evolution. If we want to really save the parrots we love from extinction, then let's have them declared as "eligible for domestication" and we will save them.

Parrots are ideal for domestication. They mesh well with our pet-loving society. They have certain recognizable *pre-adaptive* traits that make domestication a natural possibility. They live in flocks with a "pecking order" and a strong bonding potential that is easily transferable to man. Their big eyes and rounded facial features, reminiscent of infantile human characteristics, make them irresistible to most people. Their playful antics, their bright colors and their ability to hold things in their "hands" brings pleasure to anyone who sees them. Their penchant to mimic human speech and eat cultivated crops (fruits, vegetables and seeds), creates a natural affinity with humans which has completely seduced us.

With all the human-like and appealing characteristics parrots demonstrate, it is easy to understand why animal rights activists, as well as devoted pet owners, frequently anthropomorphize when attempting to gauge what is in the best interest of parrots. While parrots may experience a range of emotions, there is no evidence that parrots, or any animal, has the ability to think on a conceptual level, e.g., parrots cannot imagine being free.

Regardless, there is one freedom I would like to see restored to us and our parrots: the freedom from regulations that make it difficult for aviculturists to practice their craft. Declaring parrots "domesticated animals" would free us from the myriad laws, rules and regulations associated with "wild and exotic" animals. And that is a freedom that may halt the inexorable slide towards extinction for many parrot species.

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