

## **CITES AND THE INTERNATIONAL BIRD TRADE**

By P. Dollinger

1997 EEP Conference, Alphen, (Netherlands) Thursday, October 9, 1997

### **Introduction**

Birds have been kept for their beauty, song and companionship since the earliest times, and in many countries bird keeping is firmly entrenched in local culture and tradition. Birds are among the most sought-after animals in live animal trade, and it has been estimated that from 1970 to 1990 over 2600 of the 9600 described bird species have been recorded in trade.

Keeping in captivity is by far not the only interest mankind has in birds. A number of species are exploited for their meat, eggs, skins, feathers, nests, or guano, some species are considered agricultural pests and, consequently, efforts are made to control their numbers, bird hunting is a popular sport in many cultures, and bird watching has become a major leisure activity in almost all industrialised countries.

Bird watchers perceive themselves as conservationists and, as they generally prefer to see birds in the wild instead of having them killed for sport or captured for the benefits of the bird trade. They are a strong lobby of people critical towards consumptive uses of birds, and may reinforce extremist NGOs opposing bird or any other hunting as a matter of principle and calling for a general ban of trade in wild caught birds. As a result, bird trade issues tend to be among the most controversial debates taking place at CITES Conferences.

### **Arguments against the bird trade**

One argument used by the trade opponents is the volume of the international trade which is estimated to involve about five million birds per year. This take-off is often presented as a danger to the avifauna in general, and one has to admit that, at a first glance, five million birds seem to be pretty much. However, the picture changes if we compare this figure with some other data:

In Denmark, a fairly small country covering only 0.03 % of the earth's land mass, hunters killed during the 1988/89 season a total of 2'325'700 birds. This corresponds to about half the estimated world trade in live birds. On the other hand, Senegal, the most important supplier of wild birds, exported in 1990 with 784'500 birds only one third of the number shot in Denmark.

There are about 4500 breeding pairs of Eleonora's falcon in the Mediterranean area, which kill, together with their youngsters, every autumn between five and

ten million migratory birds, i.e. as many or twice as many as are traded world wide .

On the basis of data contained in the Atlas of breeding birds of the Canton of Zurich, assuming that the bird density in this canton is representative for all of Switzerland, that a breeding pair produces an average of four offspring, and that the overall bird population remains stable, it was calculated that in Switzerland alone, a tiny country covering just 0,028 % of the terrestrial surface of our planet, 56 million birds die every year, i.e. more than ten times as many as are traded world wide.

During 1985, 120 million red-billed queleas were poisoned in Zimbabwe to protect agricultural crops. This list of examples could be extended *ad libitum*.

It is obvious, that species for which a major demand exists, are or may become threatened as a result of capture for the international trade, if they are naturally rare, have a small range, are affected by other adverse factors, or are slowly reproducing. Well-known examples include a series of psittacines, such as the Spix's macaw, the hyacinthine macaw, or the golden conure, and island species, such as the Bali starling, In these and similar cases, it is absolutely mandatory that specific protection measures are decided at the appropriate levels - local, national or international - and that they are effectively implemented. There is, however, no objective reason to believe that the current volume of the international bird trade poses a threat to the avifauna in general, and that, consequently, an undifferentiated trade ban would be required as a conservation measure.

Another argument used to support calls for a trade ban is based on animal welfare deliberations and addresses the increased mortality resulting from capture and transportation. When it became clear from statistics on the import of birds into the United States published in 1992, that the bird mortality on the transport proper amounted to a not so impressive 4.49 % on a ten years average, and was steadily decreasing since 1982, one added also the losses during import quarantine and the birds whose entry was refused by the veterinary authorities, to reach a more dramatic 19.4 % mortality for the period 1980 to 1989.

Subsequent investigations by European Veterinary Services generally demonstrated a transport mortality, which is clearly lower than in the United States. According the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for the years 1988 to 1991, transport and quarantine mortality in the United Kingdom was about 6 % lower than in the United States. The Veterinary Services of Belgium recorded for the year 1994 1.12 % of 741'623 imported birds as „dead on arrival, and for 1995 1.53 % of 670944. In Switzerland, a transport mortality of only 0.87 % was recorded from 1976 to 1991. It has to be noted that Swiss bird imports are relatively low, on an average about 42'000 birds per year, that individual shipments are relatively small, and that direct imports from overseas are less important than e.g. in Belgium. In the case of parrots, an additional

8.64 % died during the quarantine period of eight weeks, which is again significantly lower than in the USA, and may be a consequence of the fact, that no more than 30 large parrots or 150 specimens of small species may be quarantined in one single unit.

While it is understood that there is still room for improving pre-export, transport and quarantine conditions and further reducing the mortality, a refined analysis of recent data and trends definitely does not suggest that a total trade ban is warranted for animal welfare reasons.

### **The bird trade issue within CITES**

When the first Conference of the Parties took place in Berne in 1976, the delegates were confronted with Appendices I and II that had been compiled three years earlier without using any criteria. The first move of the Conference was, therefore, to establish listing criteria, which became known as the „**Berne Criteria**“. Simultaneously, a series of changes to the Appendices was made, changes which were believed to be necessary, because of the biological status of the species concerned, or for look-alike reasons. One of these amendments was the listing of the entire species *Falco peregrinus* in Appendix I instead of some of its subspecies. This proposal was made by Switzerland, partly on the grounds of look-alike problems, and was, most interestingly opposed by the International Council for Bird Preservation, arguing that a species with a world wide distribution such as the peregrine falcon would not meet the criteria for Appendix I listing.

At COP2, the so-called **Ten Year Review** of the Appendices was initiated with the aim to rationalise species listings. However, as COP 2 to 6 were characterised by an increasing influence of protectionist or animal rightist NGOs, and consequently by many Parties opposing any down or delisting, this goal could not be reached. To the contrary, many species, which did not meet the Berne Criteria, were added to the Appendices. During this period, the international bird trade became the focus of increasing attention. Some mass listings of birds took place, in particular the listing in Appendix II of all previously non-listed owls and birds of prey (with the exception of some New World vultures) at COP 2 (San José, 1979), psittacines, with the exception of the budgerigar, cockatiel and ring-necked parakeet at COP 3 (New Delhi 1981), cranes at COP 5 (Buenos Aires, 1985), or bustards and hummingbirds at COP 6 (Ottawa, 1987). In 1981, also the idea of a reverse-listing concept, meaning that a list of species, which could be freely traded, would be established, and that all other species would be subject to trade restrictions, was developed, but this was not accepted by the Parties, because it appeared to present many practical difficulties, and to require a series of amendments to the text of the Convention. In 1990, the CITES Animal Committee formed a „Working Group on Bird Trade“ to examine the international trade in wild-caught birds more closely.

In parallel, concerns that trapping wild birds to support foreign pet markets may be depleting certain wild avian populations were expressed also at national levels and in other international fora. For instance, the World Conservation Union adopted, in 1990, a resolution calling for additional review of trade in wild-caught birds by CITES Parties. Objections to what are perceived to be inhumane aspects of the trade were also raised by some animal and bird protection organisations. As a result, restrictive legislation was adopted by some countries such as the United States, and also the European Parliament adopted a decision requesting an import ban for the European Union. Furthermore, a group of NGOs also succeeded in convincing many airlines to announce that they will no longer transport wild birds. Over 40 carriers made such announcements as of December 1991, including e.g. Lufthansa, Swissair and so on.

The much debated inclusion of the African elephant at COP 7, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, initiated a new phase within CITES. Parties realised that the outcome of the meeting was becoming more and more determined by the **influence of NGOs**, and initiated, at COP 8 in Kyoto, an inverse trend, which was facilitated by the fact that trade lobbyists had become more apparent than before, and the differing views within the NGO community neutralised each other mutually. Proposals submitted by several countries and recommending or urging the Parties to reduce or completely ban the trade in wild-caught birds (Doc. 8.23, (.23.1, 8.23.2) were defeated with 54 No to 20 Yes votes. Other proposals recommending that all Parties suspend trade for commercial purposes in shipments of species that experience significant mortalities in transport (Doc. 8.24, 8.24.1) were also rejected with large majorities. One of these proposals contained a preliminary list of species in which no trade should be allowed on animal welfare grounds, including species such as peach-faced lovebird, monks parakeet, or Meyer's parrot. For other species, such as Fischer's lovebird, crimson rosella, or senegal parrot, a limitation of shipment sizes to 50 birds per shipment was requested.

Instead, the Conference of the Parties adopted Resolution Conf. 8.12 recommending

- a. that all Parties maintain records of the number of live specimens per shipment and mortalities, and that they publish these data annually;
- b. that Parties take appropriate measures, including temporary suspension of trade for commercial purposes regarding species that have significant high mortality rates in transport; and
- c. that the Transport Working Group make recommendations to the Parties designed to minimise mortality.

In the same year as the Kyoto Conference, the Rio Earth Summit took place. Consequently, the **sustainable use idea** got momentum also within CITES, culminating, so far, in the massive adoption of the proposals to downlist the

elephant populations of Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe at the 10<sup>th</sup> meeting held in June 1997 in Harare. As more weight was given to issues such as trade in ivory, tropical timber and marine fish, bird trade in general became a non-issue at COPs 9 and 10. Proposals to include individual bird species were submitted in particular by Germany and the Netherlands, whereby the supporting statements of the Dutch proposals were rather poor, and both Parties had failed to discuss their submissions with the range states or to comply with arrangements foreseen by the Animals Committee. As a result, several proposals were rejected. There is, however, no guarantee that the general mood of the COP remains sustainable use oriented in the long term. The situation could easily change again. One has also to note that, while traders in the range states can make a reasonable living from dealing in birds, and bird capture provides some revenues to rural people, the distribution of revenues from the bird trade is extremely unequitable in that the importers and retailers in developed countries get a much larger portion of the profit than the people involved in the exporting countries, that the financial returns to the Nature Conservation Authorities of the range states are normally negligible, and accordingly the interest in maintaining or developing wild birds as resource is lower than in the case of large mammals or crocodiles. Finally, one has to recognise that, while under CITES certain criteria are applicable for including species in either Appendix I or II, national legislation may not necessarily be based on scientific criteria, but on ethical values of the society concerned. This is absolutely legitimate. There is e.g. no scientific background for the prohibition to trade in most native birds, as it is stipulated by the Swiss Hunting Law. With 81'000 chaffinch, 69'000 blackbird or 50'000 black tit breeding pairs in the Canton Zurich alone, sustainable quotas could easily be set. However, this is not done, because songbird protection is deeply entrenched in Swiss minds and, therefore, the Swiss reject the idea of consumptive use of their native passerines. Switzerland is just one example of a series of countries having decided trade bans in native species on ethical rather than conservation grounds, and similar developments may take place in more countries. Zoos should, therefore, be prepared for a scenario where wild-caught birds will no longer be available through the pet trade.

## **Recommendations**

In the event of a total ban of the international bird trade, EEPs can obviously not be the answer, as too many, and mostly non-threatened species will be affected. The International Zoo Yearbook records for 1994 about 1300 species or subspecies of birds bred in captivity. The human and financial resources that would be needed to breed all these species under EEPs would be enormous, and would distract the zoo community from more important tasks.

This does not mean that nothing should be done. If the zoo community wishes to ensure the maintenance of representative collections of up to 800 or so species in specialised bird parks it is necessary that certain measures are taken. These may include the following:

In my view, the following measures would be required:

- Reasonable collection planning, including the keeping of additional breeding pairs off-exhibit.
- Co-operation between individual zoos in purchasing and maintaining given species.
- Co-operation with private breeders and breeders organisations, who represent an enormous potential for the breeding of certain taxa.
- Co-operation with zoos outside Europe, which may serve as suppliers for either captive bred birds, or birds legally taken from the wild in their country.
- Establishment of direct contacts to nature conservation authorities of range states and ornithologists in these countries, which would facilitate direct imports for non-commercial purposes by a zoo or a group of zoos, in case the commercial trade will get out of business.
- Preparation by EAZA of positions on CITES issues in a consistent manner, based on EAZA's commitment to science and conservation, and its understanding of the needs of human societies.
- Lobbying of national CITES Authorities by EAZA and national Zoo Associations during the preparatory stage of a CITES Conference.
- Active participation of EAZA and major national Zoo Associations in the CITES COP. There is a still increasing number of NGOs participating in the meetings of the Conference of the Parties, covering a wide range from the „Komitee gegen Vogelmord“ (Committee against bird murder) to „Harpunens Venner“ (Friends of the harpoon). Unfortunately, groupings defending extreme views at both ends of the spectrum overweigh numerically the science-based NGOs of the centre, and are much more vociferous than these. At the Harare Meeting, the zoo community was represented only by the American Zoo and Aquaria Association with a delegation of four persons.

Representing myself a Government, which, as a CITES Party, is always striving for rational decisions, taking into account scientific evidence, the criteria adopted by the Conference of the Parties, and aspects of feasibility, and having personally become the victim of a media campaign launched by Greenpeace. I would very much like to see at future Meetings of the COP a strong zoo representation, including The World Zoo Organisation IUDGZ, the continental zoo organisations such as AMAZOO, ARAZPA, AZA, EAZA and PAAZAB, and some of the major national zoo organisations such as various European or the Japanese. Together with IUCN and some other non-extremist conservation or wildlife user organisations, the zoo community could become an important element in keeping CITES on the right track.