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## “CAPTIVE CONSERVATION - OR IS IT EXPLOITATION”

Captive keeping and the subsequent breeding of those colorful, long-lived, intelligent creatures classified in the family Psittacideae and known as parrots is certainly a challenging yet captivating endeavor. Mankind’s fascination with these birds is recorded way back to the times of ancient Egypt, the Greek and Roman civilizations, and beyond. Yet only within the last 150 years or so of a contact lasting several millennia has the human race become a serious threat to the well-being of the very birds he deems so desirable.

Ruination of habitat through loss of food, shelter, stable secure reproductive opportunities, and spreading pollution has directly contributed to the declining populations of many forms of life. One could say that the more noticeable decline among members of the parrot family seen in their native haunts is alerting mankind worldwide to the plight of all organisms large and small as they fall victim to the ever-growing, ever-encroaching, all consuming hordes of the human race.

People must acquire food and shelter to survive too and are also driven through millions of years of successful evolution to defend, nurture, and procreate their own kind but through the gifts of language, speech, cooperation, insight, adaptability, theology, and artistic expression Homo Sapiens has become the master of his environment. Man’s civilization and new found technologies have allowed him to become the most dominant species on earth and by his own misused influence, the most destructive.

It is indeed imperative that we learn to look upon Mother Earth in a new way; not only as a provider of our seemingly insatiable ever-increasing appetite for riches,

bounty, and resources but also as a uniquely beautiful interconnected whole; entrusted to Mankind to care for in deepest respect for the Laws of Nature of which he is indeed a part. We must be careful of prideful ignorance. Our technologies, wondrous as they are, must not shield us from an appreciation and healthy respect for that from which we and all life on Earth have come. We are not separate in our own little synthetic environments but, rather, part of one indivisible, unchanging, everlasting whole.

I am not one to throw away modern technologies. We must only search for a balance between what we truly need and what we don't need. I am writing this on a computer that makes composition so much easier, it has become a liberating tool. But at the same time, people must learn not to hoard, take everything for themselves, and amass such riches as to take away opportunity, choice, liberty, and happiness from fellow human beings --- or the other living creatures of the Earth.

This rule of thumb applies to all our possessions including the pets we keep and breed for amusement. When an animal such as a dog, cat, or bird is altered to suit some short-term human standard of excellence but is replete with domestic bred mutations of form and color; is this animal a fit and healthy representative of its species where it can survive and thrive? Or, has it become a gross misrepresentation of itself and the multimillion year natural selection of well-honed evolutionary genetic diversity it represents?

The above question is an important one for all breeders of livestock to carefully consider. I am not advocating keeping all domestic animals in a "wild" form, I have enjoyed breeding mutation cockatiels for years. But it bothers me to see dogs with misshapen faces suffering from sinus problems, barnyard geese incapable of breeding with their own kind, canaries or budgies barely able to see and suffering tumor, along with feather problems, due to oversized structure. How much are we polluting the gene pool of the species? How much are we deforming their physiology for the show bench?

I have no answers. These are not easy questions. But I firmly believe the time has come to ask and at least think about them, for the genetic diversity of life on earth

is in our hands as never before. Mankind has the power to directly change genetic sequencing to his will. May it be that his will be tempered with wisdom and wisdom enlighten his spirit.

I want to list some of the extinct or near extinct parrots directly due to over-hunting and/or habitat loss. Remember; each time a species disappears a little more of the incredible diversity and resiliency of life on our planet is gone. We are slowly eating away at our own biological heritage. We are slowly consuming that from which we were made.

Carolina Parakeets were the only parrot native to the South Eastern United States. These colorful green birds with yellow heads and red faces were commonly seen in flocks of 200 to 300 as late as the 1830's. Farmers could kill twenty with one shotgun blast as they were destroying haystacks. By 1900 Carolina Parakeets had all but vanished from the wild. The last known pair died in the Cincinnati Zoo where they had been captive for over thirty years in 1917 and 1918.

Cuban Red Macaws were plentiful as late as 1850. This bird looked sort of like a small dusky version of a Scarlet Macaw with it's mostly red body, brownish red with green feathers on the back, and contrasting blue primaries on the wings. Natives destroyed nesting sites while hunting the birds for pets and food. By the 1870's numbers had severely declined. Attempts of captive breeding were unsuccessful. As of now the Cuban Red Macaw is extinct.

Cuban Conures can still be found on the island of Cuba for they are not extinct - yet. However; none have been found on the Isle Of Pines since the early 1900's. The pet trade took a heavy toll on the birds but deforestation in Cuba, to make way for modern development, is a major crises.

The Puerto Rican Amazon is yet another case of severe decimation at the hands of man due to the same repeating problems of overkill, capture and deforestation. Even as recently as 1903 children were allowed to stay home from school to scare parrots away from the family farm's produce. Just nine years later the birds had vanished from Western Puerto Rica and were scarce in the East. These highly endangered parrots are now confined to the Luquillo National Forest and are stringently protected.

Lears and Glacous Macaws are two South American species perilously close to extinction. Again it is the same story of major habitat loss and capture for the pet trade. As with all other species of endangered animals it is not known if the population is large enough to guarantee a reproductive rate that will be greater than the death rate.

As of this writing all the macaws except the Blue & Gold and Greenwing are considered Endangered. Most all of the island species of Macaws, Amazons, Conures and the like are considered very rare and, most likely, on the way to extinction. Even if protective measures are successful and the birds that are left survive and reproduce their numbers are so small that long-term breeding will be threatened by a very small gene pool. This will lead to inbreeding resulting in weaker birds with less genetic diversity between individuals which, in turn, opens the door for a single disease to wipe out the whole population.

On a more positive side of things is the report of twenty nine rare Thick Billed Parrots brought back from Mexico and released into the Chiracahua Mountains in Arizona where they had not been seen for several years. Although some birds disappeared or died this 1987 release is generally considered a success. Also their are other species such as the Quaker and Shell Parakeets that are doing quite well as exotic feral populations in North America.

This may be a mixed blessing for overpopulation of any exotic import, due to a lack of predators or diseases, can have serious consequences to the native flora and fauna. The exotics could become pests and literally eat and drive away the original inhabitants out of house and home. Human agriculture with its exposed one-crop fields could become prime food sources for hungry legions of animals with few natural controls limiting their overproduction.

This is something to think about as people release unwanted pets to fend for themselves in an alien environment. Most likely the hapless creature will die of exposure and starvation or, perhaps, find a more merciful end by predation unless, of course, it is simply played with as a terrified toy by some well-fed domestic house cat who doesn't need to hunt but still has the instinct to do so.

But some of these released animals; against all odds; survive, find a mate, and reproduce. This is what we must very carefully think about. To often in the past birds from foreign lands have been released where they fared only to well (Witness Starlings & English Sparrows). Humans must resist the temptation to repopulate an extinct bird with one of another species to fill the vacant niche; it probably won't work.

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