



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

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Are birds really under threat or is it hype by radical greenies?

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By Ray Ackroyd

We are constantly being told that many Australian parrot and cockatoo species are under threat, need to be protected, will soon be extinct, etc.

This alternative viewpoint was written by Ray Ackroyd, a licensed trapper for 50 years, a former Sydney bird dealer and now an operator of wildlife bird tours for overseas visitors to Australia.

How often do we pick up a newspaper or a magazine and read where large numbers of the world's birds are becoming threatened, rare and endangered and that their habitats are continually being depleted?

The problem with endangered species is that many people have a vested interest in them.

For example:

1. Environmentalists use them to drum up support for conservation causes.
2. Bureaucrats use them to shuffle paperwork from department to department.
3. Scientists use them continually to obtain research funds for programs that seldom conclude.
4. Politicians holding so-called endangered animals do that to get free publicity.

The reality of it all is that nobody ever indicates that many species are in fact increasing to the point where they are not only abundant, but super abundant.

Here in Australia we have some 57 species of native psittiforms and of those 57 some 22 species can be destroyed by land holders or their employees if those species are damaging agricultural crops or private property.

Following field studies, licences to destroy troublesome birds are issued by the relevant state wildlife authorities and needless to say, licences are not granted unless the species involved are in very large numbers.

Over the years I have found Australian farmers to be extremely environmentally responsible, but of course no farmer is going to allow his or her cropping, to be subjected to devastation by thousands of native parrots and cockatoos.

No doubt some readers would be surprised to hear that very large numbers of Red-tailed Black Cockatoos *calyptorhynchus macrorhynchus* are destroyed while in conflict with rice and peanut production in northern Australia.

Another example is south-west Western Australia, where White-tailed Black Cockatoos *calyptorhynchus baudini* are destroyed. Damage licences are issued to primary producers if it can be demonstrated that damage is being caused by these birds.

Over the past 40 years and right up to the present time thousands of Western Australia's White-tailed Black Cockatoos have been slaughtered by growers protecting cropping. At the same time I would be quick to point out that it's a serious offence to take one of these birds from the wild for captive breeding purposes and the penalty for such an offence is \$4,000.

For the past 30 years farmers in south western Victoria have been plagued by very large numbers of Long-billed Corellas *cacatua tenuirostris* and last year the Victorian state wildlife authorities had four teams trapping and gassing to death 17,000 of these troublesome birds.

Damage to soft stone fruit production can also be very substantial in Australia, where the Musk Lorikeet continues to inflict heavy losses on orchardists.

Another big pest to apple producers are Red-capped Parrots *purpureicephalus spurius*, which are shot under state wildlife licences, with the number of birds killed each year varying depending on the severity of damage to fruit. In some years more than 10,000 parrots and lorikeets are shot in various fruit growing districts.

Greater Sulphur Crested Cockatoos and Galahs are noted as serious pests and are constantly a threat to grain production. However Australia's most current widespread and serious pest bird is undoubtedly the Little Corella and numbers continue to increase.

Damage to trees and agriculture can be tremendous and numbers can build up into tens of thousands - it is also a problem to many other native wildlife species.

In some areas it has become so super abundant that it drives all other species out of their habitat and nest stealing is commonplace. I have seen Little Corellas enter the nests of much larger species such as Red-tailed Black Cockatoos and aggressively kill half-grown chicks before taking over the nesting hollow and driving the parent birds away from the area.

The question is why are some of these Australian native species becoming so abundant? Firstly, there has been no approved management strategy put into place at all.

Secondly, it is reasonable to assume that since European settlement in Australia some 200 years ago agricultural land has become increasingly widespread, resulting in ideal grain food sources and additional constant watering points.

This has allowed many species to extend their range and find excellent breeding habitats.

Needless to say, with the wide variety of food and reliable annual herbage on the ground most species regularly raise full clutches and that has resulted in a dramatic increase in populations.

Again I would be quick to point out that this added food supply and extension of habitat has also been of benefit to a lot of Australia's more threatened species, particularly our waterfowl and waders.

Having said all that, international aviculturists may well ask why doesn't the Australian Government put into place a mechanism for an approved management program - particularly for their abundant cockatoos and parrots - and export them to international aviculture on a sustained yield harvest with limited strict quota systems to uphold market forces.

Then a least some of the birds wouldn't have to be slaughtered?

That's a reasonable question and quite frankly a question that has been raised for half a century.

Australia imposed a total ban on overseas trade for Australian native birds in December 1959 and we have to ask if that ban has been in the best interests of those native birds.

The simple answer is no, it hasn't. Time has shown that total bans don't work and it's common knowledge many of Australia's native birds have suffered because of that ban.

Despite a number of favourable Commonwealth Government inquiries and recommendations into sustainable utilisation and overseas trade in Australia's native birds, both wild and captive raised, arguments put forward by Government and non Government bodies have thwarted any attempt to relax the existing laws.

We have to ask who are these non Government bodies that constantly and continually oppose any logical and commonsense legislation?

Ultimately we find that the non Government bodies are the more radical elements within the conservation movement - radical animal rights groups that totally lack any form of field knowledge.

They fail miserably to understand the basic principles of wildlife management and avicultural captive breeding programs. They tell deceitful lies and use blatant propaganda to project their own personal interests upon an uninformed general public to gain funds. Their objectives are based solely on emotion and they do not deal with ecological fact at all.

Perhaps somebody should tell these radical groups that captive breeding by dedicated aviculturists is not a criminal activity.

Basically it is a very important gene pool of many species and the professionalism of modern day aviculture ensures the destiny of those species.

In fact one can go further than that by declaring that captive breeding is an insurance policy against future species extinctions.

Generally I have found aviculturists to be a very responsible group of people and the time has come when bird breeders around the world should hit back at these radical do-gooders and put them in their place once and for all.

Meanwhile Australia's super abundant psittacines continue to increase in numbers and sadly there is a need at times to drastically reduce those numbers.

Field scientists support humane culling by saying that the only way to have healthy populations of abundant species is to have population reduction programs.

My 50 years in the Australian bush as a Government licensed trapper supports that philosophy.

However it will be a long time before Australia's major abundant psittacines can be classified as being vulnerable, rare, threatened or endangered.

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