

The Voice of the Macaw

Roxanne Olsson, Century High School

Demand for natural resources and new markets are causing many to be preoccupied with obtaining profits at any cost. Whether it is logging, mining, or agriculture, the ecosystems of Central and South America are being depleted at alarming rates. So focused on the goal, we forget to listen to the clatter among the trees. With malice and greed, ignorance and disrespect, the wild macaw of Central and South America is on the borderline of extinction. Habitat destruction and the elusive bird trade are the primary causes. Only after exploring the plights of the macaw can we then delve into the optimism of permanent solutions.

Deforestation has become a great threat to the complicated and diverse ecosystems of Central and South America; the home of the macaw. As of 1997 there was already a 90% loss of rainforest in Costa Rica, and as for Brazil, a 60% loss of rainforest¹. Even though these statistics show the overall severity of this current crisis, numbers do not share the personal grievances that deforestation has imposed on the macaw. It is a time of “extraordinary ecological impoverishment”. Unfortunately, deforestation is at such a magnitude that “we’re, in fact, in the middle of the sixth great extinction, the Pleistocene Holocene event”². This can be seen in the dismal state of the macaw, for the majority of macaws are endangered and a few even extinct in the wild, such as the spix macaw, the glaucus macaw, and the Cuban red macaw. It is more than evident that “the leading cause of extinction is habitat destruction through agriculture,

¹ Jensen, Derrick, and Draffan, George. Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2003.

² Opposing Viewpoints® Series. Conserving the Environment: Opposing Viewpoints. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2006.

overgrazing, development, mining, logging, and other fragmentation of the landscape”³ all ultimately related to deforestation. Looking closer at how deforestation directly impairs the macaw, it is revealed that the migration of the macaw for food, clay licks and breeding grounds are at stake. The great green macaw (also endangered), “moves seasonally to higher elevations within the ecoregion”⁴ of the Isthmian-Pacific rainforests. These migratory spots hold vital sustenance for this macaw, yet with the inward moving destruction the felling of these specific areas could very well mean the fall of this macaw. The hyacinth macaw (endangered) faces a similar fate. Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia, where the species used to flourish are now areas in which this macaw is practically extinct. According to the Pantanal Conservation Complex, “the species’ population is limited by the fact that 95% of nests, in the Pantanal, are located in a single type of tree”⁵. The macaw breeds in traditional areas, once deforested, the macaw will more than likely meet its demise. Other areas of immense importance are the clay licks, cited for the phenomenal macaw gatherings. Minerals found in the clay are needed to detoxify the food they eat. Piece by solemn piece the strands that make life possible for the macaw are slashed and burned.

Although habitat destruction is an imposing predator, the bird trade is even more destructive with its direct attack on the macaw population. Though illegal, the bird trade subversively slips under the radar. U.S. Fish and Wildlife service reports that “the illegal wildlife trade is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year global "business" that threatens the future

³ Ibid, p. 194

⁴ McGinley, Mark. “Isthmian-Pacific Moist Forests.” *Encyclopedia of Earth*. 31 August 2007. The Encyclopedia of Earth. 8 February 2009 <www.eoearth.org/article/Isthmian-Pacific_moist_forests>

⁵ McGinley, Mark. “Pantanal Conservation Complex, Brazil.” *Encyclopedia of Earth*. 30 December 2007. The Encyclopedia of Earth. 8 February 2009 <www.eoearth.org/article/Pantanal_Conservation_Complex%2C_Brazil>

viability of the world's wildlife. Wild-caught birds, including parrots and macaws, are a prime target for this black market”⁶. Barbra Kingsolver and husband Steven Hopp of Audubon Society discover that “for a young scarlet macaw captured by a poacher, who can sell it into the pet trade for as much as \$400. (The fine for being caught is about \$325.)”⁷. The fine is minute for the price a *cazaderos*, or hunter can get in the U.S. for a macaw. In Nicaragua “a Great Green Macaw and Scarlet Macaw can be sold in a buffer zone for an average of \$200-\$400 [USD], being sold in the US for up to \$2,000 [USD]”⁸. Even though it may be illegal in some places the cazaderos will tactfully “bird launder” in which macaws “are smuggled out of countries where they are protected and into countries where fewer restrictions exist. Export documents are secured in the second country so that the "laundered" birds can then be "legally" transported to other nations”⁹. High demand and high profits for people in destitution create high numbers of illegal exports, leaving devastating results on the macaw population. Once a macaw finds a mate their fidelity will generally last a lifetime. The female will lay one to two eggs and will then lovingly care for the clutch for at least 6 months. This slow reproduction cycle can never replenish the population if the bird trade continues. Not only does the bird trade devastate the population, but it inhumanely transports the poor creatures so that “only a fraction of the birds survive capture and transport and many more die once they

⁶ Cleva, Sandra, and Fisher Patricia. “Federal Agents Target Illegal Bird Trade”. 29 May 1998. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 16 February 2009 <www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/pressrel/98-20.htm>

⁷ Kingsolver, Barbra, and Hopp Steven. “Seeing Scarlet”. 2000. Audubon Society. 16 February 2009 <<http://www.audubonmagazine.org/features0009/scarlet.html>>

⁸ “Concern Raised Over Illegal Wild Bird Trade in Nicaragua”. 24 April 2007. BirdLife International. 16 February 2009 <www.birdlife.org/news/news/2007/04/nicaragua_parrot_trade.html>

⁹ Cleva, Sandra, and Fisher Patricia. “Federal Agents Target Illegal Bird Trade”. 29 May 1998. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 16 February 2009 <www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/pressrel/98-20.htm>

reach their destination”¹⁰. Then once the wild macaws are placed with an owner, “the frustration of captivity can cause birds to become emotionally distressed and physically aggressive. Captive birds are known to mutilate themselves, plucking out their own feathers and even biting off their toes”¹¹. By drawing the macaw away from its flock and space in a natural habitat it falls into shock and anxiety. Macaw: A Complete Pet Owner’s Manual lists the several behavioral problems a Macaw may acquire. It includes feather plucking out of boredom, screeching, and self-mutilation, in which a macaw will chew its feathers or an area of skin until it bleeds¹². A caged life is not where the macaw is intended to be. Yet, some like Bryan Shao-Chang Wee proffers “behavioral enrichment” to “assist in reducing the possibilities of abnormal behavior”¹³. Isn’t it obvious that the macaws are acting abnormally because they are in abnormal conditions? Radio transmitters have recorded macaws to fly 25km in a single day¹⁴. Can a cage five feet by five feet really serve all the needs of a macaw? Capturing the macaw from its environment to teach it a couple of amusing sounds isn’t the only reason for owning a macaw. In fact it gets much worse, for another fate of the captured macaw is “Factory-Farming”. Everyone has heard of the puppy and kitty mills, but they aren’t the only victims. Captive born macaws are found to have trouble breeding due to lack of parental models, thus wild macaws are sought after for a life of breeding. As previously

¹⁰ Hammer, Daniel. “Behind the Bird Trade.” Actionline. 2006. Friends of Animals. 10 February 2009 <www.friendsofanimals.org/actionline/summer-2006/behind-the-bird-trade.php>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Sweeney, Roger G. Macaws: A Complete Pet Owner’s Manual. Hauppauge, NY: Barron’s Educational Series, Inc, 2002.

¹³ Wee, Bryan Shao-Chang. “Behavioral Enrichment for Birds in Captivity”. 13 April 2004. South East Asian Zoo Association. 8 February 2009 <www.seaza.org/scientific_papers/behavioral_enrichment_for_birds_.htm>

¹⁴ McGinley, Mark. “Pantanal Conservation Complex, Brazil.” *Encyclopedia of Earth*. 30 December 2007. The Encyclopedia of Earth. 8 February 2009 <www.eoearth.org/article/Pantanal_Conservation_Complex%2C_Brazil>

mentioned, macaws have a slow reproduction cycle, so to speed things up breeders will take away the young so as to start producing another clutch. At the time of separation the distress and mourning is so great that the parent macaw will scream and try to search for its lost offspring, even resorting to assail the breeder weeks thereafter¹⁵. This extent of torment expounds upon the fate of all macaws if the elusive bird trade continues. The only hope of ending the monstrosities of the bird trade is through prevention not obstruction.

Fortunately, there are effective and enduring solutions to rescue the macaw. Rather than creating barriers for the logging companies and bird traders to swim under, mistreatment of the macaw can be prevented in constructive ways. In other words, promote Fritjof Capra's "Ecoliteracy" which is to understand the network of nature¹⁶. Scientific explorations to discover rich resources and "phenomenal biological diversity" will bring unique value to the land and new knowledge to educate both locally and internationally. Also important to promote is Capra's "Ecodesign", or the "process by which our human purposes are carefully meshed with the larger patterns and flows of the natural world"¹⁷. This mindset calls for restoration forestry (minimal waste and maximum recycling), and new technologies that "all incorporate the basic principles of ecology, and thus tend to be small-scale that are diverse, energy efficient, non-polluting, community-oriented, and labor intensive"¹⁸. Another key solution is to establish community forestry

¹⁵ Tweti, Mira. " 'Factory Farming' Approach Takes Toll". Feathered Feature. 18 December 2005. Midwest Avian Adoption & Rescue Services. 16 February 2009
<www.maars.org/news/chronicles/06-02/feature.php>

¹⁶ *Opposing Viewpoints® Series. Conserving the Environment: Opposing Viewpoints.* Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2006.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 201

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 202

or “local control of land and markets”, free from outside pressure and exploitation¹⁹. Rather than policing the locals with big corporations or a government that doesn’t represent the voices of the natives, establish profitable alternatives natural to the environment, working with the environment. One example is in the naturally grown coffee called “shade coffee”, not grown on deforested land, but in the already existing forest²⁰. Ecotourism is another great profitable and constructive way to promote the environment. The Blanquillo macaw clay lick, one of the most celebrated, is visited by people from all over the world and treasured by the Manu Wildlife center. Solutions to macaw mistreatment are there, they just have to be done.

Terrible misconduct to the macaw through forest destruction and the inhumane bird trade can be reversed through constructive means locally. The macaw shouldn’t have to be included among the extinct. It is more than possible to reverse the cycle, if only the initiative is taken. With heads inclined to listen and respond, the macaw will take flight.

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¹⁹ Jensen, Derrick, and Draffan, George. Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2003.

²⁰ Discovery Travel Adventures. Rain Forests. New York: Langenscheidt Publishers, Inc, 2001.

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