

“If man can save the parrots, he may yet save himself.” World Parrot Trust founder Mike Reynolds spoke these wise words as a testament to the ethical restriction of humanity’s power over planet Earth’s fauna, and more specifically, its birds. Despite their position as the fourth most popular species of companion animal, birds cannot actually be considered domesticated (Engebretson 263). A truly domestic species “has been bred in captivity for purposes of economic profit to a human community, with complete human control over its breeding, organization of territory and food supply” (Clutton-Brock, qtd in Cheeke 3), but most birds available for purchase in the United States are only one or two generations removed from the wild (Engebretson 263). Wild parrot capture greatly decreases general parrot welfare in a number of ways; the processes of capture, importation, quarantine, and breeding themselves are unjust and often lethal. Furthermore, because continuing importation has prevented parrots from becoming domesticated, their needs and natural behaviors are often incompatible with the human lifestyle. Far too many frustrated owners cope with this by attempting to rid their birds of undesirable qualities through blatant mistreatment. The unethical practices of parrot trade and ownership are in dire need of reform. With enough support and initiative, a logical series of steps can be taken to improve parrot welfare both in captivity and in the wild.

American consumers generally fail to realize that captive parrots are either purely wild, or simply tamed, meaning that they are genetically wild despite their familiarity with humans. Most would agree that wild animals do not make suitable pets; even if it has been “trained,” a lion has no place living in an apartment or a suburban home, and wild-caught parrots should be regarded no differently. In order to improve their welfare, parrot species must be adapted to life with humans through domestication by continued breeding in captivity. To ensure that the genes

of captive birds are not continually refreshed through the importation of wild parents, the capture and importation of wild birds must be completely banned, without exceptions. Conditional regulations such as CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) do not provide enough protection for wild birds, and they are very difficult to enforce because it is hard to determine whether a given parrot peddler is trading legally (Engebretson 271). Once all wild capture and trade has become illegal, it will be extremely easy to identify violation of the law. In addition to aiding the domestication of captive birds, the end of wild parrot capture will significantly replenish wild parrot populations and repair their ecosystems. Monica Engebretson of the Animal Protection Institute in Sacramento, California, notes that captive breeding is not enough to save wild birds from capture; despite the high availability of captive-bred yellow-headed Amazons, the wild population of this species has experienced a 68% decline throughout the Americas in the last ten years (Engebretson 271-2). If the wild populations are actively preserved, however, people will be forced to buy birds bred in captivity. Perhaps the single most significant breach of ethics caused by wild parrot importation is the fact that four of every five birds die during transport, along with an unknown number of wild parrot parents that are slaughtered during the seizure of their nestlings (bornfreeusa.org). This statistic alone makes legislation against wild capture well worth the trouble.

Until parrot domestication is achieved, owners must allow their birds' to act upon natural instinct as much as possible. In a study on Orange-winged Amazon parrots, it was found that feeding the birds oversized pellets helped to satisfy their psychological need to forage for food, preventing the development of unnatural behaviors such as feather picking, called "stereotypies," which indicate poor welfare (Rozek, et al.). The inclination to forage is a relatively harmless parrot behavior; other psittacine instincts are not so easily dealt with. For instance, parrots are

extremely social creatures, emotionally dependent on keeping in touch with “the flock” at all times by screaming. Due to its wild genes, a captive parrot will often scream to communicate with its human “flock,” and this exhibition of natural behavior can cause unknowing owners to abuse and neglect their birds. The innate possessiveness of parrots also raises problems in captive environments, because separation from or a perceived threat to a bird’s possessions—its cage, favorite toy, or “mate” (whether human or avian)—could initiate extreme aggression, particularly in a sexually mature bird. Parrots are physically capable of inflicting great harm upon people and household pets. Another pet peeve of many parrot owners is that parrots are very messy. In the wilderness, throwing food to the ground fertilizes new vegetation, and regurgitation is a sign of affection among birds, but in captivity these behaviors are wasteful and unsightly. These are the cited causes for the plight of countless parrots that are set free in unsuitable environments, neglected, abused, displaced to home after home, placed in shelters, deprived of love and care, afflicted with psychological and physical trauma, or euthanized. None of these ethical crimes at the hands of humans could ever be justified, especially because they are so easily preventable! Through the basic education of potential and current bird owners in the needs and natural instincts of these high-maintenance pets, parrot welfare will skyrocket throughout the nation.

The education initiative should be attacked from all angles, beginning with an increase in general public awareness of the obligations that bird ownership entails. In other words, the large commitment that pet parrots require will ideally become common knowledge. Potential owners will begin to think twice before acquiring birds, asking themselves whether or not they are able and willing to provide for the animals. Public education should also include the principles of ethical parrot ownership; if people are knowledgeable enough to avoid buying “mass-produced”

and wild-caught birds, these industries will decline, replaced by the purchase of hand-raised, weaned chicks and the adoption of rescued birds. Television specials, news stories, newspaper and magazine articles, programs in schools and other institutions, flyers in mailboxes, and even Facebook groups can be used to enlighten a broad, general audience on this subject. The people who still decide that they would prefer an avian companion to a dog or cat must be taught how to properly maintain a parrot's physical and mental health: a highly varied, nutritious diet, appropriate toys and perches, sufficient mental and social stimulation, and adequate veterinary care (which can be costly) are essential. Future owners also must learn to prevent the development of aggressive behavior in maturing birds or to cope with aggression in older birds. Longevity is another issue; a parrot is a lifelong pet that should be put into the owner's will to avoid unfortunate displacement in the event of the owner's death. Mandatory certification courses can be instituted to teach employees in pet stores and animal shelters this fundamental information, and to make them aware of their responsibility to impart it to their clients and visitors.

In a world that revolves around money, the measures described earlier may be considered unreasonable, particularly by those whose careers depend on today's pet industry. It is possible to engineer welfare efforts in such a way that they economically benefit everyone involved, providing the incentive for lawmakers to pass more ethical regulations. The elimination of wild capture will remove the necessity of USDA parrot quarantine stations, saving the federal government money. Expanding ecotourism in places with wild parrot populations will encourage natives to preserve the birds and their environment, rather than poaching wildlife. Another idea is to establish and enforce humane regulations in existing breeding facilities, and to have local veterinarians and pet supply shops recommend these facilities as newly reformed and humane in

order to promote business. The new policies will likely reduce the number of birds bred and sold and raise the expenses required to raise each bird, but the breeders will be able to charge more for their birds because clients will know they are contributing to a good cause and paying for animals destined to live longer, happier lives.

When human beings interfere with nature and bring parrots into captivity, we are taking responsibility for innumerable avian lives, wild species, and natural ecosystems. Out of respect for the feathered friends who have served us so well over the years, and in memory of those whom we have disrespected in the past, we must begin to change our ways. We must put an end to cruel wild capture, trade, and breeding practices. During the long transition into psittacine domestication, we must embrace our animals' wild genes. By taking the initiative to modify our current relationship with the world's avian species, we can build a future in which wild birds, captive birds, and people share the planet in peace.

Citations:

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