

Three Days in the Death of a Cockatoo: A True Story

By Stewart Metz

It was a gloomy dusk on November 2 when the huge plane banked towards CKS Airport in Taipei. It had originated at Ngurah Rai Airport at Denpasar, Bali in Indonesia. Inside, amidst the hustle and bustle of travelers visiting or returning to Taiwan, or those stopping over on the way to more distant destinations, and hidden from view in the recesses of the baggage compartment containing luggage, electronics bought in Bali markets, crated cargo and other man-made merchandise, there was concealed Indonesian treasure. There were twenty-eight treasures in fact, priceless beyond words, because they were the originals. There were no others in the world that could replace them. They were more beautiful than any artwork ever made by Man. And as the first wheel of the mighty plane hit the tarmac with a jolt, one of the twenty-eight Treasures stirred, raising a large coral, salmon and white crest in fear, and wondering for the fourth time in as many weeks, what horrors awaited him at the hands of the Tall Predators. He had been in this cargo hold flying, but without wings, for long hours. You see, he and the others were known as cockatoos, among the most glorious of Nature's creations. And they had less than three days left to live.

A month ago, these cockatoos-- Harta Karun Indonesia-- Hidden Treasures of Indonesia—had been fortunate and had rarely even seen the Tall Predators, or his Flying Machines overhead. The pink and white-colored ones, called “Salmon-crested cockatoos”, were from a single remote island in Indonesia named Seram. The black cockatoos, with their distinctive spiky “punk” crests, were called Palm cockatoos but in the native language were called “King cockatoos.” These came from equally remote areas of Indonesia, but further east, and also into New Guinea and Australia. And so beautiful, intelligent, and magical were they both, that the Tall Predators came to trap them for the rich to have as pets.

Indeed, only one month ago, these twenty-eight had been trapped— although that was to prove to be only the first of their tribulations. It had been a magnificent day on Seram. The Cockatoo, along with his hen cockatoo and not-so-recently fledged youngster, had soared just beneath the cover of the canopy, mostly shyly and cautiously—but occasionally overcome by the limitless expanse, they had briefly exited the cover of the trees into the blue. There they performed a few somersaults and squawked loudly with joy before returning into the forest. But a Tall Predator, who had previously surveyed the location, had catapulted a snare up into the Cockatoos' sleeping perch using a sling-shot. At dusk, when the Cockatoo returned and perched in that tree, he became ensnared, and was grabbed roughly by the Tall Predator and stuffed

into a bag. “What is happening?” he thought, panic-stricken. “Who will look after my family?” Only the realization that a cockatoo with intact, beautiful feathers draws a higher price prevented the use of even crueller trapping methods. While the Tall Predator went to ensnare other cockatoos, the Cockatoo pondered his condition. After a long while, as the Cockatoo lay still in the dark bag, he mistakenly thought for just a moment that it was again a typical dark night in the Seram forest, so dark that even the trees were invisible, until he realized that the “sky” was not filled with usual millions of fireflies.

Later, he and the other cockatoos had been herded into tiny cages and concealed at the place of another Tall Predator. Gone were the tree limbs for perching, or the sun's rays to wake to. Sleep was in fact impossible. Filth was everywhere, and what little food or water he received was either spilt or contaminated. Not that it would matter much, since he would not recognize much of the produce from the marketplace as ‘food’. In the heat and humidity, what fight and spunk he had in him in the jungle was now gone. “Why is this happening?” He was no match physically for the Tall Predator. But his pride never left him—he was a Cockatoo, noble and handsome.

It was no better when he was loaded into crates to take to market. To be certain that the Treasures were hidden from official eyes, they were stuffed into a hidden compartment, surrounded on the exterior of the crate by other birds which would pass the gaze of the inspectors. Eating and drinking were impossible; breathing was labored. Prior to being placed in the airplane bound for Taipei, the cockatoos were removed and stuffed, one by one, into plastic pipes. “Why are They doing this to us?” The plastic pipes were then concealed in the baggage of the smuggler, an Indonesian named Sugiharto. The Cockatoo, along with the others, now gasping for air, matted with filth, and close to death from starvation and dehydration, could no longer even remember the forests of Seram. Nor could Sugiharto: he had never personally seen them.

As he passed through Customs, Sugiharto was detained, suspected of violating the Statute for the Prevention and Control of Infectious Animal Disease (for which a jail sentence of up to three years was possible). In fact, importation of Indonesian bird-related products had been banned, due to outbreaks of “bird flu” (avian influenza) in that country. The magnificent cockatoos, now stripped of their nobility in the wild, were placed in quarantine and samples were taken for testing. According to the Director of the Animals and Plants Inspection and Quarantine Bureau, the results would be available the same week.

“What do you think will happen,” asked the youngest Tall Man. Apparently, the Cockatoo reasoned, he was from the “Bureau” that was to decide his fate. The Head of that Bureau had seniority: “To protect the health and safety of our people and animals, according to the law, the smuggled animals should be

euthanized due to the unknown diseases they may carry. We have to take such immediate action. We have to take very cautious steps to prevent introduction of highly pathogenic avian influenza.” But after he strode out of the room, his co-worker, full of bravado from his up-to-date scientific knowledge both from schooling and searches on the Internet, was quite confident about the fate of the birds. “There’s no risk to the birds while they are in quarantine. The strain of bird flu in Indonesia has not caused any disease in people. Anyway, the tests will be back in a day or two. If the birds are healthy, International Law says that they belong to Indonesia. Then the question is whether there is someone there who has the knowledge (and money) to accept them back. I know just who to call.” They knew the birds had already been through a nightmare; they looked forward to a more humane resolution.

In the United States, the innocent and wrongly-accused have a chance of being released from jail based on laboratory (DNA) testing. Fortunately, the Cockatoo could not understand the words of the Tall People saying that there was a possibility of a last minute reprieve, because the next day all 28 cockatoos were put to death. In less than a day, the laboratory tests returned showing the absence of Avian Influenza in all 28 cockatoos.

It is said that, on that night, twenty-eight new fireflies shone in the forests of Indonesia.

Note: All of the central facts in this story involving the smuggler and the events in Taipei are true and documented. Only the conversation at Taipei Airport is fictional, but the words therein attributed to the senior Bureau official are, in fact, directly quoted from a letter to me from the Bureau of Animal and Plant Health Inspection and Quarantine, Taipei (in response to my letter questioning the outcome). Events in Indonesia are drawn from the known sequence of events involved in bird smuggling on Seram Island.