

Filling the void between the forest and the home

From the welcome cascade of letters and messages which we're receiving about our campaign on unwanted parrots, one issue is emerging very clearly – the need for education about the needs of these lovely creatures. **Stewart Metz** explains.

Having parrots in our homes presents a quandary – their wild, undomesticated qualities enthrall us; however, these traits also make it difficult to provide for their needs in the home. Filling the void between the forest and the home requires caring, patience, ingenuity – and knowledge. The first three are beyond the purview of Parrots magazine; however, recognizing the critical role of education, the Editorial Board has decided to launch a new series to bring the newest and most useful areas of knowledge to its readers. Launching a new series of articles to promote education is a large and ambitious task, and also one with some risk, because it might not appeal to every one of the readership. But being on the vanguard is usually accompanied by some risk.

Why approach the problem in print – after all, we have the Internet now. Unfortunately, the Internet is chock full of opinion and unsubstantiated facts. An example can be found in widely-disseminated lists concerning foods toxic to parrots. Often such misstatements are preceded by the warnings "Never..." or "Always..." – two dangerously broad words. Or we read that this compound or that compound will "flush" diseases from organs, or that this entire species of parrot has this trait or that trait as a pet. Many of these statements are overgeneralizations, not substantiated by any fact and are, well, *parroted* from one review article to the next until they assume the status of fact. However, when one goes back to the source of the statement, they are, as often as not, based on guesswork, assumption, misinterpretation of a single anecdote, or extrapolating one situation to all situations ...and all species. It is important to clear up some of these "Urban Myths"...and replace them with "Forest Facts".

How can that goal be achieved? I hope that articles in the new series will be systematic in their approach, well-documented, and avoid the anecdotal or hearsay approach. I would personally like

to see parrot owners or veterinarians become more pro-active in *creating* facts, and then writing about them – in other words, to take their experience, and attempt to determine whether it is consonant with the broader experience of others.

One approach to such questions is called "meta-analysis" Meta-analysis is the pooling of the findings from several comparable studies of a problem; reanalyzing the data from all these combined studies; and thereby generating larger numbers and more reliable conclusions than can be achieved by any single incident or small study. Thus, either a reader or an expert might tabulate the experiences of others (using the Internet as a tool), add those experiences to one's own personal experiences, and thereby reach a "take-home" conclusion.

This approach could be applied to many areas of uncertainty – for example, to better understand factors associated with feather-plucking and the Self-Mutilation Syndrome and the purported treatments for Feather Destructive Behaviors. We know little about the causes of these all-too-common behaviors, and treatment is often unsatisfactory.

The same scientific approaches could be applied to better understand the effectiveness of various treatments for other thorny problems – for example, cockatoo aggression syndrome and chronic egg laying, including the efficacy of Lupron in various behavioral problems having a possible physiologic basis, or the efficacy of Celebrex and meloxicam in Proventricular Dilatation Syndrome. Another question susceptible to meta-analysis might be the number of recent cases, of which I am aware, of cancer developing in cockatoos, especially Moluccan cockatoos. Curiously, many seem to be unusual tumors of structural tissues called "sarcomas", including hemangiosarcoma and osteosarcoma. Is this a real trend? If so, it merits both concern and study. Or are such reports only rare "anecdotal" instances which we hear about because they are so painful and tragic? An appealing aspect of this approach might be the fostering of *collaborative* input: perhaps a "case report" from a parrot owner can be written



A Seram cockatoo with a healing wound caused by chronic Self-Mutilation; extensive testing has failed to reveal a physical cause.

in conjunction with an expert veterinarian, behaviorist, nutritionist, or holistic practitioner (depending on the topic). This would serve both to advance knowledge *and* to encourage collegiality and collaboration between people and disciplines.

We have a lot to learn about parrots. We have entered a new Millennium when I believe that both Education and Ethics will dominate writings in the field – in fact, they are inextricably inter-related. I salute the Editor and Staff of *Parrots* for recognizing the need and stepping forward to make efforts to fill it. ■



This Seram cockatoo, who was rescued from a situation of severe animal cruelty, extensively mutilated himself. Tragically, a sarcoma was later diagnosed, from which he succumbed. (Photo courtesy of Sunny Schwetz)