

INDISCRIMINATE SLAUGHTER OF RARE PARROTS AND COCKATOOS:

The 'Collateral Damage' of the War on "Bird Flu"

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The deadly H5N1 strain of avian influenza (AI) is chiefly propagated by commercial fowl living in close quarters; the role of migratory birds is less clear and still evolving. There is a documented species-selectivity in the sensitivity to the H5N1 virus; however, in the panic over a possible pandemic of AI, the indiscriminate culling of wild and pet birds is being increasingly practiced. These include some spectacular and endangered species of parrots rarely or never affected by the virus, providing an unnecessary further pressure for their decline towards extinction.

Not a single, well-documented case has been reported of H5N1 influenza occurring in a large parrot or cockatoo. The single case in the UK claimed to be that, turned out to be, in all likelihood, merely a misinterpretation of shoddy laboratory data, as reported in [The Independent \(UK\) - Online Edition](#), on November 15 of last year. Despite this scientific fact, both Indonesia and the Philippines have recently taken to culling large numbers of these beloved but vanishing birds, even in the absence of any solid medical justification. In the Philippines (as reported in a Philippines Information Agency Press Release; March 1, 2006), 339 smuggled parrots were killed following confiscation, merely out of an imagined fear that they might carry AI. Although quarantine with testing for the virus could have excluded this possibility, these simple steps apparently were not carried out. Last year, a similar fate befell 500 parrots in the same country. (In 2004, more than 300 lovebirds were culled there merely because they had *passed through* Thailand in transit). Since these first 839 or so birds had all been smuggled from Indonesia, the shipments probably contained many parrots and especially cockatoos now endangered in

the wild. Indeed, four of the world's five cockatoos which have been given the highest level of protection by CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) are native only to Indonesia.

In Taiwan, 28 magnificent Palm and Moluccan cockatoos were slain at CKS Airport merely out of a similar fear that they *might* harbor the H5N1 variant of AI. However, test results returning only 24 h. later revealed that none of the 24 was infected (Taipei Times; November 4, 2004). These birds, which are protected by both Indonesian and international law, can sell for between \$1500 and \$15000 each in pet stores. Recently, Taiwan has hinted that it might cull imported birds only if they are infected (Korea Times; November 18, 2005); if enforced, this policy would be an important step in the right direction.

In Indonesia itself, Agriculture officials recently announced in The Jakarta Post that all birds--including pet birds--within a given radius of chickens found to be infected with AI--would also be culled. This policy is inconsistent with the Department's own approach which it recently employed when the highly pathogenic strain of AI was discovered in the largest zoo. When avian influenza struck Ragunan Zoo in Jakarta, parrots and cockatoos were spared *unless* they were *proven* to have the disease. An additional advantage of testing prior to culling is that one thereby gains valuable new knowledge about the epizootiology (the factors determining the spread among animals) of this disease. The people suffer from this approach as well as the birds. The compensation paid to the bird owners for the loss of their property is paltry--for example, Rp 10,000 (slightly more than \$US 1) has been paid for the seizure of a Palm cockatoo.

Worse still, these spectacular, sentient creatures--with an intelligence likened by some psychologists to that of 2 to 4 year human children--are being burned alive. This is a profoundly inhumane approach, inconsistent both with veterinary principles in most of the world as well as with Indonesia's own strict limitations on the use of euthanasia in general. It is also inconsistent with any

policy of the current government claiming to support the conservation of Indonesia's vanishing species, since it sends a message to Indonesia's people that these birds are disposable and not worthy of efforts to save them. The unnecessary culling of such birds also makes a mockery out of anti-smuggling efforts.

Ironically, there are organizations and committees which should be able to work together to solve this problem--but it is not apparent (judging by outcomes, at least) that the "right hand" knows what the "left hand" is doing on this issue. For example, within the critical ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), there is the Experts Working Group on CITES, the ASEAN Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Taskforce, and the ASEAN Center for Biodiversity . Logically, these groups would work together to fight the bird flu epidemic while simultaneously protecting endangered avifauna, but one sees no evidence that these groups are working in concert. Likewise, a Cooperative Initiative between the Philippines and Indonesia to reduce the illegal trade in parrots and cockatoos was established in June of 2004 and includes a plan for repatriation of confiscated specimens back to Indonesia from the Philippines (TRAFFIC Bulletin 20; February, 2005). Obviously, repatriation did not occur in the cases cited and it would seem to be an exercise in futility to interdict smuggling if examples of endangered species are seized by agents who then kill them.

Preventing a pandemic of avian influenza inevitably will require *some* draconian measures. However, a rational approach would seem to be a war on Bird Flu, not a War on all Birds. (That statement, of course, extends well beyond parrots). Tony Juniper pointed out in The Guardian that "there are many bird species at the brink of extinction, and flu could push them over the edge"--but it seems that it may be man, and not the flu, which is the graver risk to endangered parrots. Stewart Metz, M.D., and Director of the Indonesian Parrot Project stated that "some of the world's most precious creatures-- which are already vanishing in the wild due to man's greed--should not be further

threatened due to man's refusal to apply reason backed by scientific principles. The effects of such a tragedy would persist well after this calamitous disease outbreak ceases." [1,039 words]