

# Reducing the Trapping of Endangered Parrots

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## The Synergistic Roles of Sustainable Alternative Incomes and Non-Monetary Incentives

The Indonesian Parrot Project

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The root causes of parrot trapping are multifactorial. Despite this, there is a tendency, probably ill-placed, to focus overly on legal measures designed to reduce poaching. However, by the time parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets can be recovered from the authorities, their fate is practically sealed and is usually characterized either by death, or a lifetime of neglect, poor treatment and imprisonment in tiny cages.

This, in turn, is due to poor training and facilities given to government officials to care for wild animals. And since penalties are usually non-existent or pitifully weak, it is clear that interdiction of smuggling – while a band-aid in the war against the illegal trade in birds – comes too late in the chain of events to help the parrots much, in and of itself.

We shall focus on Indonesian parrots, but many – if not most – of our conclusions apply to parrot trapping elsewhere.

### **Provision of Sustainable, Legal Economic Alternatives**

One of the critical driving forces leading to parrot trapping is certainly

poverty – in Indonesia, all but a few parrot species are found in the eastern half of the archipelago, whereas the western half is far more affluent.

In addition, given that owning a rare and illegally obtained parrot or cockatoo is a sign of power and prestige in the western cities, there exists an unavoidable flow from the forest to the cages of the elite – a phenomenon which holds for illegal logging and therefore destruction of parrot habitat as well.

To keep Indonesian parrots in their forest homes, this ‘playing field’ must be leveled to some degree. The provision of sustainable, legal economic alternatives is one approach. Incredibly, a trapper on Seram will receive only \$15-30 for a Salmon-crested cockatoo; on the Masalembu Archipelago – and specifically Masakambing Island, where only 8 to 10 individual Lesser Sulphur-crested cockatoos of the abbotti race still exist in the wild – the price is only about \$15.

Lories, lorikeets and some other parrots draw less money. So the “good news” is that not much of an income need be provided to induce trappers away from poaching – provided that the income is sustained and clearly linked to conservation. Providing them with only a sporadic income might only lead trappers to hunt on those occasions when they need extra money.

What kinds of economic alternatives are there? The simplest in some ways may be to involve villagers, including ex-trappers, to engage in income-producing work not directly involving wildlife. For IPP, this involved the trappers collecting and processing the nuts from the “kenari” trees which are abundant on Seram and many areas in the Pacific, albeit under a variety of names.

The processed and vacuum-packed nuts were then shipped to us in the US, where we sold them as speciality parrot food, and returned all profits to the villagers for the next round of harvesting. Although we tried to make it clear that this work was linked to the cessation of bird trapping, this cannot be easily monitored, nor does it directly increase pride and awareness about their endemic avian species. Similar mini-agricultural projects can be brought into play, including the provision of seeds and the expertise to plant and cultivate other crops.

Usually when we think of conservation, we think of eco-tourism first, with local villagers sometimes working in an eco-lodge. However, this model will only provide jobs for a relatively few villagers, and the message – to preserve the birds who attract the tourists – might not permeate a very large area of the country. And while it may increase the income of the workers, it might do little to directly stimulate pride in preserving locally endemic species.

The Indonesian Parrot Project -IPP ([www.indonesian-parrot-project.org](http://www.indonesian-parrot-project.org)) – feels that fancy lodges are not needed for the majority of our guests – at least in the areas where we work in Indonesia. Rather we focus on providing former trappers with work which relates to the birding experience.

These include helping to guide eco-guests (while pointing out flora and fauna which they know so well); assisting in getting guests up to our bird-viewing and overnight sleeping platforms in the canopy (85-150 ft. high); and additionally, helping as porters for camera equipment and other supplies. They also show the culture of their villages to visitors. These ex-trappers might earn about \$15/day plus gratuities. And so, if there are eight visitors and the tour comprises six days of active bird-watching, in theory a substantial number of cockatoos might be saved by each eco-tour.

The problem, of course, is that the number of eco-tours per year is limited and therefore the money (and pride) stemming from this work is not yet sustained, and does not permeate beyond the north-central Sawai district on Seram, where IPP mostly focuses its attention. The model DOES, however, succeed within those limitations: after IPP had worked on Seram for about six years, an undercover investigation carried out by ProFauna Indonesia and IPP revealed the virtual absence of cockatoo trapping in the Sawai district, whereas smuggling elsewhere was rampant.

Other variants of this model which get closer to activating the “pride factor” include hiring ex-trappers to be “Forest Wardens” whose job is to guard nests from poachers and, in doing so, possibly accrue important information about the ecology of the parrots in question. They may also construct artificial nest boxes, where a paucity of good nest trees is “rate-limiting” for adequate breeding success.

The activity most fulfilling the criteria for conservation is the hiring of former trappers to help run the Avian Rehabilitation Center – named “Kembali Bebas”= “Return to Freedom” – which we constructed, with the paid help of local villagers, of course, on the edge of the forest of Manusela National Park.

Birds confiscated from trappers or smugglers by the Indonesian authorities on Seram Island, Ambon Island and especially Ambon port, are turned over to IPP for care. Birds of those species endemic to Seram, and meeting rigorous pre-release criteria, are eventually released back to their forest homes.

Thus far, approximately 150 parrots have been thusly released, with the first 41 being released under the close supervision of IPP. The ex-trappers participate in all steps in this process. But it is not the numbers which are important, since even 150 birds comprise merely a drop in the proverbial bucket. Rather, the major goal is to increase the pride of the villagers in their birds, to teach them the principles of conservation, and even to greatly increase their esteem in the villages – since these are considered honored positions. Their salaries, while tiny by our standards, are not only much greater than they could earn by trapping, but they are both legal and sustained.

Furthermore, schoolchildren come to witness the big event of each “pelepasan”, or “release to freedom”, and begin to develop pride in their birds which they now want to protect. This model works very well; however it is time-and labor intensive; geographically circumscribed, logistically very complex; and very costly. So this approach – while worthy of establishment in other parrot-rich areas of Indonesia – has major limitations as well. (In this overview, we will not broach the controversy about releasing rehabilitated parrots back into the forest...)

### **Non-economic Approaches to Parrot Conservation in Indonesia**

As alluded to above, it is difficult to encourage local peoples to conserve wildlife if they do not have an Awareness of the problem, eg the non-sustainability of trapping, and a Pride in what they are preserving. The latter can be inculcated, since the parrots in question are endemic to a very circumscribed area, or are greatly endangered. Then, Pride grows as they see that both conservationists and their guests will come from other countries to the farthest reaches of the globe just to see, study, photograph, and conserve their birds.

If there is a Rehabilitation & Release Center, this ‘paradigm shift’ is easier to carry out, especially if supplemented by direct discussions between conservationists and guests, and the ex-trappers. In Indonesia, the local people are generally astonished by the excitement – indeed awe – exhibited by visitors, and by the effort and funds expended by conservationists.

However, to make this way of thinking long-lasting, the next generations must be involved. We approach this through our CAP (Conservation-Awareness-Pride) program. We developed a series of teaching tools through which these principles can be taught via the use of enjoyable “fun” approaches. These include, for example: the production of T-shirts for children and adults T-shirts, the production of posters, stickers for school notebooks and staging a play, “Parrot Village”, in which the main characters are played by village students.

We also introduced a smaller number of students in the field to similar principles, both through taking them on bird-watching trips and to Kembali Bebas, to watch a “pelepasan.” Thus far, about 2,983 students in Jakarta, and an additional 1,500 in Maluku, have participated in the C-A-P Program.

As a means of objective, quantifiable evaluation, Pre- and Post-Program questionnaires have been designed and completed by a large number of these students. The results clearly demonstrated that the students are interested in, and responsive to, the issues taught; that their attitudes towards parrots as intelligent, sentient creatures are amenable to change; and that they are eager to express their interest through active participation.

This program, run by our Indonesian colleagues Dudi Nandika, Dwi Agustina, Leonardo Sahuburua and Hendrik Maruanaya, is now operative in three locations: the Central

Moluccas (Seram and Ambon), Java, in the districts in and around Jakarta and in the Masalembu Archipelago in the Java Sea. Sulawesi is being added this year.

Trust: The Sine Qua Non

Other non-cash initiatives are also helpful, providing that funding can be obtained for them. Since most parrot-containing areas in Indonesia are economically deprived, they often lack the basic amenities. Therefore IPP built two medical clinics for them, along with provision of solar-powered water purification systems (funded by Seacology), in return for which the villages set aside a 350-acre Heritage Site in the forest, to be protected from human intervention.

We have aided schools in Seram and West Papua with much-needed school desks, chairs, uniforms and books. In Papua these donations were linked to a promise to cease parrot trapping and habitat destruction, a promise which has held up in one island (Gam), but only questionably on Batanta Island. However, both are now among our eco-tour sites. These are just a few of the “in-kind” donations which can be given to improve the quality of life.

So what is the value of these expenses if they are not directly linked to the conservation of parrots? The value is that they are indirectly linked to what are probably the most critical factors in our conservation program: trust and acceptance. In Indonesia, villagers are rightly distrustful of NGOs which appear for a year or so, carry out projects which they (but not necessarily the villagers) want to see effected, and then disappear, often leaving the projects to languish.

To us it is critical to demonstrate that not just the birds, but also the villagers, will benefit from the efforts, and that we will stay as long as is possible (we have worked on Seram for over ten years), or better still, until the project can be turned over to them, as stakeholders, to continue. The quality-of-life improvements also help to convince them that they can trust us, not only as colleagues, but as friends and, at times, virtual family. These rewards are treasured by us, but also are the sine qua non for a successful project.

## **Conclusion**

Just as it is clear that the roots of the illegal wild bird trade are multi-factorial, so must efforts to combat it be multi-disciplinary – at least in our experience in eastern Indonesia. We have only touched on a few of the projects which can be used, due to space limitations. When one mentions cockatoos, one brilliant program which comes to mind is the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program.

The eradication of parrot trapping will not be easy, and in fact is not supported on an economic basis by some esteemed conservationists. However, as suggested above, that economic basis might well be supplanted by other economic incentives which, in addition, may help to preserve these magnificent birds for future generations.

To quote Nigel Collar (referring in the original to endangered macaws) already 14 years ago:

*” To have lost the great spirits of the ...forests and savannas ...will be a negation of one of the first meanings of [conservation]. Nothing short of the preservation of the great tracts of habitat, the control of human disturbance and persecution within them, is going to prevent that loss, and now is the time to start. The [parrots] are still with us, but they are someway off in the distance, and traveling away from us, towards an empty horizon.”*

(from J Abramson et al, *The Large Macaws* - Raintree Publications, 1995)

**The Indonesian Parrot Project** is an all-volunteer, 501©3 not-for-profit charity registered as a corporation in California and Washington states.

The primary mission of the Indonesian Parrot Project is to conserve and protect the endangered wild cockatoos and parrots of Indonesia. Ultimately, our goal is to change attitudes of the people of Indonesia and elsewhere, to regard these creatures as priceless treasures for all generations, and as intelligent sentient beings.

**What we do:**

Virtually all parrots confiscated by government from smugglers in Maluku (the “Moluccas”) are turned over to us for care. These birds are rehabilitated in the Kembali Bebas Rehabilitation Center on North Seram Island and (in selected cases) released back into the Seram forest

We work with, and train, local government officials in the care of wild psittacines, such that they, as stakeholders, can take over the long-term management of Kembali Bebas. This transfer is nearly complete, after 4 ½ yrs. of preparation.

We co-founded Konservasi Kakatua Indonesia (KKI; “Conservation of Indonesian Cockatoo”), our ‘sister’ NGO in Indonesia. One advantage of having a non-profit organization based in Indonesia is that it gives us the right to advocate with the government for changes in the treatment of animals. Co-leaders of KKI are the Jakarta-based conservationists, Dudi Nandika & Dwi Agustina. They run our ‘in situ’ C-A-P” Program (Conservation, Awareness & Pride ) to improve local pride of the schoolchildren and villagers in “their” rare and beautiful avifauna. This program is operative not only in urban Jakarta , but in rural Maluku (Moluccas; under the management to two Indonesians born in Maluku) and the newest site, the remote island of Masakambing (the sole remaining site in the wild for the abbotti race of Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo). That branch of the C-A-P Program is also carried out by Dwi & Dudi.

Schoolchildren are exposed (almost always for the first time) to birds and bird-watching in the wild, while developing pride in their birds and learning how they can be conserved.

We provide alternate means of sustainable income to villagers in parrot-rich areas of Indonesia; the villagers, in turn, will protect the birds from trapping. Such alternatives include collecting nuts of the kenari tree for sale in the US, and organizing eco-tours to our major sites of work (Seram Island and the Raja Ampat Islands off West Papua), which in turn will bring income to ex-trappers who act as bird guides and porters.

Direct provision of needed improvements to selected villages – such as improvements in schools, medical care (IPP built two clinics on Seram), sanitation and capital improvements, in return for protection of a “No-Take” protected area on Seram.

Our website is [www.indonesian-parrot-project.org](http://www.indonesian-parrot-project.org).

There are several short videos on-line including <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoFjn59v798>

*Stewart Metz* was born in New York City and went to Yale (undergraduate and then Med School). After finishing his medical and specialty [Fellowship] training in Endocrinology and Metabolism at the University of Washington in Seattle, he was appointed Tenured Professor of Medicine at both the University of Colorado (Denver) and University of Wisconsin (Madison), where he was Head of the Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism, and the Diabetes Program.

However, in 1992, he became fascinated by parrots – especially cockatoos and, in particular, the Seram (“Salmon-crested”) cockatoo. After six months of intensive study about the responsibilities in caring for captive parrots, he acquired his first parrot in 1993, followed by four more.

In 1997, struck by paucity of knowledge about Seram cockatoos, he began to research what little was known about these birds. In 2001, he quit medicine to work full-time as a volunteer towards the welfare of parrots. In 2002, he was appointed as Director and CEO of the Indonesian Parrot Project (then called “Project Bird Watch”). He has authored over 40 articles related to parrots and another in bio-medical research.

***Bonnie Zimmermann** has been involved in the avian world for 20 years. In 1987 she inherited a slightly overweight Amazon parrot, and the evolution began. In the early years her passion and quest for knowledge about parrots led her to work at the California Exotics Clinic in Simi Valley, California, as a veterinary technician, specializing in avian pediatrics.*

*For several years she bred African Grey and Amazon parrots; she consulted for the LA Zoo California Condor team; and worked as a veterinary technician for the Wildlife Waystation. She has also volunteered and worked on avian-related field projects in South and Central America and Southeast Asia. She lectures at bird clubs, conservation organizations, schools and universities, and has written articles for Bird Talk, Companion Bird Quarterly, AFA Watchbird and the American Society of Aviculture.*

*In 2002 she founded The Wild Connection, a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote education, conservation, rescue, rehabilitation and awareness of parrots in the wild, and to take the lessons learned in the forest to find ways to enhance the lives of companion birds.*

*As the Vice-President of the Indonesian Parrot Project and Kakatua Konservasi Indonesia (the Indonesian sister NGO) she is responsible for media, education, research and the eco tourism program. She also works several times a year at Kembali Bebas.*

*In her “real life” Bonnie is a video, documentary and event producer who works for Kerner Music & Media, (KMM) a spin-off company of LucasFilms/Industrial Light and Magic. Her primary focus at KMM is the environment, science, nature and sustainability projects.*

*She is committed to educating the public about conservation, protection of wild parrots, and to enhance the lives companion parrots through all forms of media by encouraging the collaboration of knowledge between scientists, zoos, conservationists and aviculture. She lives in Pope Valley, California, with a flock of fourteen.*

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