

The case for tightening controls on avian importation and exportation

RA Perry
Western Suburbs Animal Hospital
195 Parramatta Road
Homebush NSW 2140

Introduction

Australia has a unique fauna and flora spread through unique and diverse habitats, many of which have been destroyed, plundered, devalued and threatened to an unsustainable degree during the past 200 years. Our ecology is very fragile and highly susceptible to human activities. The rate and extent of change to which we are subjecting our country is unsustainable as measured by loss of diversity of species and fragmentation of populations. It seems that the importation of birds, their associated pathogens and other genetic material within their microflora, appears to be of little relevance or importance to our natural heritage. In terms of a time scale slightly longer than our life expectancy I contend that our losses from importation of birds will far, far outweigh any short-term benefits we may perceive.

We as Australians have done little to address the underlying beliefs, values and narrow vision that creates the demand for imported birds. Our currently adopted and favoured policy of "risk management" (substitute "risk taking") quarantine has been developed, albeit with the best of intentions, in the absence of real hope or vision that there are practical alternative solutions to the problems created by this demand for imported birds.

The quarantine system, in allowing bird importation, is unable with current technology to protect our unique "web of life". We need to:

- * stop the importation of birds into Australia;
- * develop our technology in terms of counteracting diseases already introduced and identify species already established in the wild;
- * identify and address the beliefs and values which create the demand for imported birds; and
- * communicate widely.

The reasons for wanting to import birds into Australia either legally or illegally do not justify the risks to our ecology and our established captive and free flying bird populations, which are already threatened in so many ways. Put another way the "what's in it for me, the what's in it for you, the what's in it for us" does not justify the risks of disease to captive and wild birds and flow-on effects to various ecologic systems which constitute our heritage and our children's heritage.

As a generalisation, **and certainly in the longer term**, the importation of birds into Australia is ecologically unsound.

The main reason given for the relaxation of the ban on importing birds into Australia is to reduce smuggling of birds into Australia. Legal importation of birds will do little to stop or reduce smuggling and in fact will make it much easier to launder smuggled birds without detection. The reason we want to stop smuggling is precisely because it poses a threat to our commercial poultry flocks, our wildlife and our avicultural collections, especially through the introduction of exotic diseases.

Unfortunately, the best we can offer in practical terms via our legal importation schedule with the existing quarantine parameters and practices is incapable, with few exceptions, of detecting and excluding potential pathogens. We are importing birds in a fool's paradise of risk-taking under the misleading pseudonym of risk management.

We simply do not yet have uniformly reliable, accurate, inexpensive or currently affordable tests to detect and identify each potential pathogen in each carrier. We arbitrarily set the parameters and criteria. We give a false sense of security to those who think that because their birds have been through official quarantine procedures they have done the "right thing".

The post-quarantine monitoring of officially quarantined birds is inadequate. By way of example, a "leading" avicultural syndicate imported budgerigars which were bred as soon as possible after release from quarantine. Many of the nestlings and fledglings were seen by many at an "open day" to be affected by feather loss and dystrophy suggestive of acute Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease but possibly due to other causes. (What is your differential diagnosis?).

To my knowledge none of those birds was offered for proper veterinary examination or was tested to determine the diagnosis. The fact that most reportedly recovered normal plumage and were in contact with many other birds before being sold and distributed around Australia was of no concern to the syndicate or to our quarantine authorities. How blinkered is our vision? Ignorant, unaware but well-meaning people have paid high prices for those birds. They and others and eventually the owners of pet birds will be asked to share the hidden price.

Particularly in the case of imported budgerigars, racing and fancy pigeons and other species where we already have viable populations, the importation of birds caters for the benefit of a few, giving tacit approval for those most involved (and most irresponsible?) to exploit financially

and psychologically the next group down the pyramid until eventually the exploitation process reaches the general public, you and me.

Official figures relating to international legal trade in birds show an alarming and appalling mortality rate both during transit and during quarantine indicating that current levels of technology, care and husbandry are inadequate on humane grounds. The mortality rate with smuggled birds is much worse - hence we need to find other ways of stopping smuggling. Some figures for Great Britain from **Traffic** show that in 1990, 176,000 live exotic birds were legally imported, covering more than 400 species and 35,000 psittacine birds, with the lowest ever dead on arrival percentage of 2%, and those dying in quarantine representing 12.3%. This means that before the birds even reached their buyers, 4,305 had died. I believe this to be unacceptable. Certainly the gains do not justify this loss by my values. I do not have any figures on post-purchase mortality rates, or information on the reasons for the deaths. It is very apparent to me that the risk of a multitude of agents of diseases in birds coming from Great Britain is unacceptable if we really value our heritage.

Smuggling will be stopped when the level of awareness of our society is raised just a little bit more (people are starting to take notice of the greenhouse effect, the ozone layer, the loss of our topsoils, the destruction of rain forests, the wood chipping industry, the practice of monoculture of crops, pollution, gill netting for fish etc etc) such that we must realise that it is in our best interests, and in the best interests of our heritage and our children, to stop smuggling.

Smuggling will never be stopped by legislation and law officers alone. It will be stopped only with cooperation between Government, other authorities, the community at large, and aviculturists, in working positively to spread awareness of more ecologically and environmentally sound ways of enjoying birds, making money and contributing to the quality of life of birds and ourselves. The major practical role will be played by avicultural organisations around the world, and of course, especially here in Australia, for it is within their ranks that much of the demand for both smuggled birds and legally imported birds originates and is fostered.

Here in Australia, when more of us, and especially aviculturists, appreciate and value our natural heritage and the real risks we are actively and passively condoning, and when we then officially through organisations and associations actively decide that we want to stop it, we will find many ways of putting both negative and positive pressure on those importing birds and those receiving and/or trading imported birds to change their ways. Peer pressure can be stronger than the law, at least in a democracy!?

Perhaps people in our communications industry will also find that they can play a significant role. This will involve responsibly stimulating others through television, videos, teletext, radio, newspapers and magazines to re-examine their attitudes, perspectives and beliefs about international bird trade, the importance of our environment and all the ecological systems associated with it.

We could also establish a "Dob in a Smuggler Hotline" similar to that publicised in the Journal of the Association of Avian Veterinarians.

I contend that we do not have to live with smuggling, and that we can stop it. It won't happen overnight, but we are in an excellent position as members of the Association of Avian Veterinarians to light the way.

We have members in more than one state fighting their consciences because of what I presume are very real fears (eg. violence against person, relatives, property, loss of "essential" income and business, loss of "friends") in terms of clients or agents for clients presenting for treatment or examination (eg surgical sexing) birds which by all accounts must have been recently smuggled into Australia.

I want to see our Association come together in strength on this matter and help but never force those among us deal with smugglers and the receivers of smuggled birds in such a way that their activities are impaired just as much as is humanly possible. What do you think?

Hopefully we will soon realise that the quality of life we experience is greater when we cooperate with care, concern and love not only for those close to us but for strangers and all animate and inanimate components of our environment than if we continue to irresponsibly, ignorantly, selfishly and greedily exploit, rape, destroy, discard and pollute our heritage.

Perhaps we will also soon realise that there are many among us who have secret aspirations for a better world, just like us, but who so far have seen little point in speaking out, fearing ridicule and/or censoring themselves with the thoughts that their aspirations are no more than day dreams, they're not real, the world is not like that, they're being idealistic but not practical. Perhaps we might learn that a little mutual support, shared communications, encouragement and enthusiasm can, when mixed with a little persistence, go a long way towards converting daydreams to reality.

Please write now to your local and Federal Minister of Parliament and also to Dr Kevin A. Doyle, Senior Assistant Director, Animal Quarantine and Exports Branch, Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, Canberra. Please call for a moratorium, at the very least, on the legal importation of birds and birds' eggs, pending a review of ideas to stop bird smuggling, with public appeals for some lateral thinking and input on the matter. (I'm sure it can be stopped!).