

The Case for Easing the Restrictions on Bird Importation and Exportation

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The major aims of exportation and importation of birds should be directed towards enhancing the conservation of our native birds either directly or indirectly.

At the present time the question of importation and exportation of birds is a political rather than a scientific one, because there has been very little research into the consequences of these enterprises on the conservation of Australia's avifauna. The long term preservation of our native birds requires that we understand the biology of these species. Wildlife management programs cannot be developed without this basic knowledge and without research into population dynamics. It must be remembered that the future of our native birds requires the preservation of habitat and gene pool rather than the preservation of the phenotype. Therefore outside National Parks wildlife must not be a burden to landholders and indeed be given a tangible value. Only in this way will the habitat and species be preserved,

The future of Australia's native bird population depends ultimately on the knowledge of the biology of the species, however the funding for research is directed towards politically favourable projects (threatened species) such as the Gouldian Finch, Golden Shouldered Parrot or Orange bellied Parrot. Research efforts are better directed towards long term strategies rather than the short term heroics of reintroducing captive birds to the wild in order to increase genetic diversity. Such an approach may in fact be harmful rather than beneficial because of the risk of introducing disease into the wild population.

The funding of research projects must come from the wildbird population but this requires that the birds be given a tangible value outside National Parks. The sustainable and wise use of wildlife by landholders is in the best interests of the long term preservation of the species and its habitat, because the landholder has a vested interest in the species financially and for conservation. The exportation of these species to lucrative overseas markets will provide the funding for the continuing research into the biology, population dynamics and long term management strategies. Wildlife with no tangible value will eventually exist only in National

Parks, and in the future National Parks themselves will need to be self funding to survive. The landholders must be given an incentive to preserve the nesting sites of our native birds.

Recently the importation of budgerigars and pigeons into Australia became possible after three decades of complete restriction. The complete ban on the importation of birds was introduced primarily to protect our poultry industry from Newcastle Disease. Since this time the illegal entry of birds has increased dramatically and now jeopardises the health of both the poultry industry and our avifauna. Smuggled birds represent a far greater disease risk factor than quarantined birds and for this reason all species which have no feral potential should be permitted to enter Australia.

The main perceived problems associated with the easing of importation restrictions are:

1. The entry of exotic diseases
2. The feral potential of escapees

The importation of poultry is required to improve the genetic pool in this highly competitive industry. Zoo and private collections have similar needs to improve the gene pool of certain species. The quarantine protocol adopted by the poultry industry is successful in preventing the entry of disease into the commercial flocks and a similar protocol has proved viable in both budgerigars and pigeons. There are a lot of purists who ask "what if" but the risks involved are negligible compared to the real risks of disease entry via the illegal entry of birds from countries which may harbour Newcastle disease etc. (notably third world countries). The black market exists only because of the economic forces of supply and demand. Destroy the demand by satisfying the market forces of supply of exotic birds and the black market is destroyed.

There is the potential for birds to go feral and those which are recognised to have feral potential, based on overseas experiences, should not be allowed entry.

Exportation of native birds is not permitted unless they have been kept as a pet for at least 4 years and the owner has been resident in Australia for at least 3 years. It is, however, legal to export any non-native bird. The reason for restricting the exportation of native bird species which are abundant and plentiful remains unclear. In fact, some species which are considered pest species in certain areas can be killed but these birds can not be utilised commercially. It seems obvious that the exportation of both superabundant and aviary bred native birds can only benefit the long term conservation of our avifauna. In future years conservation strategies will include the wise and sustainable utilisation of our wild birds.

The exportation of our native birds is a positive step towards the long term preservation of our birdlife. The first step should be the regulated exportation of the pest species of cockatoos. In this way we can experience and understand the dynamics of the biology of these species, rather than waste this valuable natural resource.

The main perceived problems associated with the exportation of native birds are:

1. Welfare considerations. The main concerns of non government organisations (NGO's) such as the Melbourne based "Freedom for Birds" are based on the grounds of difficulty of supervision, high mortality among birds shipped legally, suspicions that the move would set a precedent allowing for the export of other non-pest species native birds and that exportation increases the pressures on the endangered bird species.
2. Animal Right's Groups view the exportation issue as urban dwellers and do not experience the hardships that pest species native wildlife cause to the livelihoods of the farmers. The Animal Rights Groups are concerned only with the short term welfare of the individual native bird and have little understanding of modern day conservation philosophies. The emphasis of modern day conservation is on the preservation of habitat rather than the preservation of individual phenotypes. Wildlife conservation policies should embrace a common philosophy regardless of the type of wildlife involved. All native and non native wildlife species, be they the charismatic species such as the kangaroo and cockatoo or the despised Dingo or Rabbit should be managed as a potentially valuable natural resource. Just as a managed kangaroo industry would help to relieve pressure on Australia's overgrazed pastures it would also discourage the illegal and often inhumane killing of these animals. Similarly, if farmers considered cockatoos and other native birds as part of their farming enterprise rather than in competition with it, then they would help to protect the habitat of these and other species.

An Animal Rights Group (International Wildlife Coalition) criticises the current cull quota of kangaroos saying that wildlife officials should support a reduction in sheep and cattle numbers and promote ecologically sound farming practices instead of seeking to raise the cull. This group has no understanding of the economic realities of the modern day farmer. Similarly, most of these NGO's take a purely philosophical but unrealistic standpoint on most conservation issues.

The answers to the conservation dilemma will not come from the emotive experiences of these NGO's but from the field research of wildlife biologists. The exportation of our pest species cockatoos could provide a valuable blue print for the future utilisation of other species. The exportation of aviary bred native birds will increase our knowledge of the biology of these birds and decrease the smuggling pressure on their native counterparts, however will not further the major objective of conserving these species in the wild.

The concerns for the welfare of the birds in transit are justified, however strict regulations are already in place for the legal exportation of non native birds. The high mortality figures quoted by these NGO's relate to finch species rather than the parrot species and I would agree that

finches should not be exported until we know more about the causes of such deaths.

The infrastructure for exporting and importing birds is already established and there is no evidence that the easing of the restrictions in a regulated manner will endanger the long term survival of our avifauna. In fact, the easing of restrictions will benefit the long term conservation goals of Australia's wildbird populations.