Letters

The international wild bird trade: a response to Cooney & Jepson

The Forum article by Cooney & Jepson (*Oryx*, 40, 18–23), arguing the case against trade bans ignores one particularly important issue in its rush to justify the wild bird trade as a form of sustainable development. That is the problem of disease, which was an important part of the World Parrot Trust Declaration (WPT, 2004) and was also highlighted by Roe (*Oryx*, 40, 27–28) in her response to Cooney & Jepson. The probability of wild birds being involved in disease transmission has been demonstrated by the recent outbreaks of avian flu but this is a much wider issue, with serious implications that should never be ignored when considering the effects of the widespread and large volume trade in wild caught animals for the pet trade.

On the more philosophical level it is also important to consider the overall concepts involved. The UK and many other European countries have largely banned the collection of wild native birds and their keeping in captivity. Consequently, it would be paradoxical to allow the continued trade in such species from other countries. Of course these bans may not be entirely for conservation purposes, but nonetheless such bans have important conservation ramifications. I grew up in an era when egg-collecting was widespread and many wild birds, including foreign birds in their tens of thousands, were still sold in pets shops. This hardly engendered a culture that respected wildlife, or even conserved it. The 1954 UK Protection of Birds Act, which outlawed most egg collecting, also brought about a major shift in attitudes to birds.

How can a ban on the trade in wild caught birds in the EU do anything but good? The examples cited often bear no relation to the issue. Trade in tiger bone and ivory, for instance, is not analogous to a live animal trade, and the fact that rare birds are illegally kept in Indonesia, as status symbols, is hardly relevant to Europe. Lots of things happen in Indonesia that would not be tolerated in Europe. The authors also claim that trade bans are often inflicted on countries without their consultation but the 200 signatories to the declaration include a large proportion of conservation groups from those countries.

Cooney & Jepson stated 'We are unclear why the international bird conservation establishment is so conservative when it comes to the bird trade, investing much in pursuing trade bans, including CITES Appendix I listings, but little in promoting sustainable offtake and substitution.' The authors are surely being politically naïve; if bird conservationists were to promote such a position there would be enormous pressure from the avicultural fraternity to start collecting wild caught native species in Europe once more. After all, there can be little doubt using the concepts of Cooney & Jepson that robins, blue tits, great tits, blackbirds, chaffinches and many other species could sustain an annual offtake. Imagine the outcry from the members of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Conservationists should always remember that the bulk of their support comes from what are often described as protectionists.

Dilys Roe argues that the imposition of bans can be a form of imperialism preventing the exporting nations realizing an asset and thereby impinging on their sovereignty. This to me is a specious argument as, by not allowing an importing nation to control the import of wild birds, in conformity with its own laws, it conversely infringes its sovereignty. Gilardi (*Oryx*, 40, 24–26) makes a number of valid points, in particular drawing attention to the fact that those who profit most of all from the continued trade are not the poor of a developing country but the dealers in the northern hemisphere.

Before leaping into print, conservationists would do well to remember that conservation is not only about sustainability and resource management. It is also about ethics and politics. In fact, in my experience the latter are often of far greater importance, and deserve a much higher priority than they are generally given by scientists. Finally, it should be mentioned that Australia has had an almost total ban on the import and export of wild birds for many years and this to a large extent demonstrates the efficacy of such bans, which is perhaps why Cooney & Jepson do not discuss the impact of the Australian ban in their review.

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International conservation needs flexibility in wildlife trade policy: a reply to Burton

We thank John Burton for his response to our Forum article. He raises two major points: firstly, that we inadequately address the dangers of avian flu and, secondly, that in focusing on sustainability we overlook broader philosophical, ethical and political issues, including the impact of bans on public attitudes and the necessity of retaining public support for conservation. We view both points as extremely important. We begin, however, by noting that Burton inaccurately characterizes us as 'justify[ing] the wild bird trade as a form of sustainable development'. Sustainable development is a complex and multifaceted aspiration; wild bird trade can either undermine or support it. While we support targeted use of trade regulations, including bans, to counter unsustainable trade, we have called for a carefully reasoned debate on the indiscriminate use of blanket bans. We believe they are unlikely to further conservation objectives, they raise equity and livelihood problems, and well managed and sustainable wild bird trade can contribute to both conservation and local livelihoods.

On avian flu, determining effective measures against the spread of diseases through trade has provisionally been the province of quarantine specialists. We do not claim to have expertise in this area, but conservation biologists working in the emerging field of conservation medicine (http://www.conservationmedicine.org) are looking at this issue. With respect to the emphasis placed on avian flu in the World Parrot Trust Declaration (WPT, 2004), suffice to say that: firstly, a key area of debate currently centres on the dangers posed by migrating wild birds, not traded birds (MacKenzie, 2006) and, secondly, the World Parrot Trust also campaigns in favour of aviculture and against tighter regulation of the captive-bred bird trade (http://www.worldparrottrust.org/publications/aviculture.htm), an enterprise that presents its own disease risks. Given these points, welfare-orientated advocacy groups within bird conservation may wish to guard against the perception they are appropriating the avian flu concern to further ideological, rather than substantive, interventions into policy formulation.

On the importance of considering broader philosophical, ethical and political dimensions of NGO interventions in policy, we can only agree. Useful starting points for those interested are two books on environmental NGOs and politics: Lowe & Goyder (1983) analyse the first period of modern environmentalism, and Princen & Finger (1994) the early globalization period. Burton argues that the UK and Europe have banned the collection of their own wild birds, that this has positively changed public attitudes toward birds, and that it would therefore be 'paradoxical' to allow continued trade from other countries. With respect, this is a non-sequitur. A measure judged environmentally and socially appropriate and effective in one region cannot be extrapolated arbitrarily across the globe; its conservation and human impacts must be examined on a case-by-case basis. Burton criticizes our 'naïve' lack of understanding that policy positions for many Northern/Western NGOs are driven by the need to maintain the support of the Northern 'protectionist' public. While in practice this is to true to some extent, this is in tension with strong countervailing political, policy and ethical forces. The political context of conservation, particularly for Northern NGOs, is today in flux for reasons related to governance and legitimacy (see for instance Suchman, 1995; Attack, 1999; Clark, 2003; Lister, 2003; Collingwood & Logister, 2005). While the support of the Northern public is important, the support of the much broader range of stakeholders who affect the success of conservation interventions around the world is also vital. Reliance on indiscriminate trade bans is also in tension with a second major political force, the emphasis on trade liberalization that has dominated international economic policy discourse since the 1970s. While its environmental impact is hotly debated, conservationists working in international conservation policy need to keep in touch with World Bank economists; we are not yet in a position to challenge their dominant paradigm (even if it is showing its age!). The continued power of free market philosophies means it is likely that conservation landscapes will have to become more businesslike to survive. The assets of these landscapes largely revolve around brand, and brand values will be highest in developed regions such as Europe. Under this model, conservation landscapes need products to sell. These may include image, well-being, tourism and charitable products, but some will also have to sell plant and animal products.

One of us (PJ) leads a joint Oxford/BirdLife Indonesia/AcNielsen project (funded by the Darwin Initiative) that is assessing the possibility of modifying existing trade chains in Indonesian birds to reduce impacts on wild bird populations and generate employment in cities and forested landscapes. Generating employment may be crucial to building the legitimacy of conservation management bodies locally. While currently focusing on trade chains internal to Indonesia, it is important to retain access to European conservation markets. The other (RC) is working with Australia's Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and the University of New South Wales' Future of Australia's Threatened Ecosystems

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Programme in initiatives to counter the ongoing degradation of Australia's rangelands through development of sustainable enterprises based on commercial use of wild plants and animals. For the success of these and many other initiatives, at this point we are advocating flexibility in international wildlife trade policy.

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To ban or not to ban, seeking the middle path: a response to Gilardi

In the January Forum, Gilardi (*Oryx*, 40, 24–26) and Roe (*Oryx*, 40, 27–28) added valuable observations to the article by Cooney & Jepson (*Oryx*, 40, 18–23) on the relationship between blanket bans and biodiversity conservation. However, in my opinion, neither focuses adequately on the issue from the perspective of those developing countries that struggle to simultaneously conserve biodiversity and overcome their burden of poverty and underdevelopment. Neither author fully recognizes the difficulties such countries face in trying to avoid the classic confrontation between reckless business and fundamentalist conservation approaches, or the efforts they make to maintain the delicate balance between development and sustainability. While Roe does not, perhaps, fully acknowledge the existence of the tension, Gilardi's response clearly illustrates the conflations, confusions, and misconceptions that face and frustrate such countries, much to the detriment of effective conservation.

Firstly, the conflation: Gilardi lumps together all wildlife trade. He does not appear to discriminate between poorly controlled, irresponsible overexploitation of wild birds, and serious conservation efforts based on well-managed trade such as the management of the blue-fronted amazon *Amazona aestiva* in Argentina. In his discussion of the latter he implies that the Argentine government is anti-conservationist, seeking to reopen trade with the USA against protests from conservationists. He fails to mention, however, that the US Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA) of 1992 provides for the import of wild birds from sustainable use programmes that support conservation. Along these lines the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposed a rule (Federal Register, 68 FR 46559, 2003) to approve the sustainable use management plan developed by the CITES Management Authority of Argentina for the blue-fronted amazon under the WBCA, and to incorporate the blue-fronted amazon from Argentina's programme to the approved list of wild caught species contained in the WBCA (50 CFR 15.33(b)). The USFWS does not make these proposals lightly, and it was decided after much analysis and consultation, including a visit to Argentina to verify the harvest in the Chaco and Salta regions.

Secondly, the confusions: Gilardi endorses blanket trade bans as an effective and desirable tool for wild bird conservation, using the blue-fronted amazon as an example. However, this case in fact provides an example of the opposite impact of bans: when a trade ban by Argentina on *A. aestiva* came into effect in January 1993, poaching of this species continued and increased, albeit targeting the local rather than the export market (Barbarán & Saravia Toledo, 1997). Furthermore, this case contradicts Gilardi's dismissal of the local economic importance of trade in *A. aestiva*: the Argentinean Secretariat of Sustainable Development has shown that this carefully managed trade provides an important source of income for peasant families in this semi-arid region, and represents 25% of the total proceeds of trade.

Thirdly, the misconceptions: Gilardi claims the population dynamics model developed for the blue-fronted

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amazon harvest (Rabinovich, 2004) predicts a threshold for sustainability 'several fold lower than the current legal quota'. However, the model recommends a sustainable offtake 'between 1 and 2 fledglings km^{-2}', and the average fledgling offtake in the Chaco by the blue-fronted amazon management programme in the 2004–2005 season, the season with the highest offtake to date, was 1.55 fledgings km^{-2}. Such misleading allegations are hard to understand, unless Gilardi misunderstood the relation between area of collection and number of parrots collected.

A January 2006 survey of blue-fronted amazons in the harvesting region found that their density is similar to or higher than that predicted in the sustainable harvesting model (unpubl. data, Secretary of the Environment, Argentina). While those involved in the programme are first in recognizing the need for more and better information, this strongly supports the sustainability of this programme. It is disheartening that a 10-year conservation programme dedicated to ending poaching, struggling against corruption, legal gaps, institutional inefficiency, and lack of resources, and despite this succeeding in financing more than 40,000 ha of strictly protected areas, sustaining the wild population and supporting local livelihoods, is under attack rather than receiving international support, advice, and help in building on its successes in on-the-ground conservation.

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To ban or not to ban: a reply to Jorge Rabinovich

Rabinovich's comments on bird trade are most welcome as they prompt deeper discussion of Argentina's blue-fronted amazon *Amazona aestiva* harvest and export. This Elé project is important both because it is the sole bird harvesting scheme that makes a claim of sustainability, and because it has failed to achieve this basic goal despite a decade of effort and considerable study.

Central to the US Government's ongoing review of Elé is the question of the biological sustainability of the management plan. Whether the model (Rabinovich, 2004) supports this designation hinges on a comparison of the 'current legal quota' with the sustainability threshold predicted by the model. As it turns out, the model's threshold was 1.5 chicks km^{-2} versus the management plan's quota of 6.7 chicks km^{-2} (1 chick per 15 hectares as specified to the USFWS). My comment was therefore neither a 'misconception' nor a 'misleading allegation', it was a statement of numerical fact and, by Rabinovich's definition, the plan is clearly not sustainable.

I too hope that the Argentine Government is not 'anti-conservationist', but their policies on parrot management remain puzzling. By Argentine law no native avifauna may be exported for commercial purposes except for species deemed agricultural pests. Many Argentine parrots are on the pest list with little scientific or economic justification, including blue-fronted amazons, thereby enabling an annual export quota of nearly 50,000 parrots. Inexplicably, in 2003 the Argentine Government wrote to the US Government that 'Proyecto Elé never considered *A. aestiva* to be a pest for citrus plantations' (Lichtschein, 2003). So if they're not pests, upon what legal basis are they being trapped and exported?

Moreover, as a central Elé goal is to protect forests, it makes sense that they only award parrot collecting quotas to landowners. However, the management plan allows landowners to fill their quotas with birds from land which is not their own. Clearly such a policy encourages laundering of illegally harvested birds, inevitably undermining the incentive to protect privately held forests.

Although the earlier Forum focused on the effect of wildlife trade bans on traffic across international borders, Rabinovich may well be right that after Argentina temporarily halted exports in 1992 the abundance of birds on the internal market may have increased. Such local market shifts are to be expected, at least in the short term, particularly when *c.* 30,000 blue-fronted amazons were being harvested annually and suddenly the external market vanished.

Rabinovich is surely right about another thing: the seriousness of the questions at hand. The Elé harvests have not been taken lightly by international NGOs, parrot researchers or the US Government. In the mid 1990s TRAFFIC hired a parrot expert to determine whether this harvest could be deemed sustainable; he drew strong negative conclusions. His research on the

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Elé programme was a key component of the comments of nearly 100 parrot researchers to the US Government (Scientists' Letter to FWS, 2003) that also strongly urged rejection of the Elé proposal. Still undecided, the US later sent the sustainability models of the Elé harvests to two independent scientists for review; both returned negative replies. One concluded that 'The current plan to harvest nestlings based on the levels developed from the Rabinovich model seems likely to result in overexploitation and a declining population' (Beissinger, 2005).

It is reassuring to learn that blue-fronted amazon abundance in 2006 may be higher than the parameter used in the model, and one can only hope this partially compensates for a legal harvest quota that is four times greater than the predicted sustainability threshold. However, the vast majority of these harvested birds were destined for the EU, which halted all wild bird imports in late 2005. Perhaps this ban (due to avian flu) had more to do with these rosy surveys than does the 'sustainability' of a harvest that has been effectively suspended. Notable changes in parrot abundance since the EU ban have been observed in other formerly exporting countries as well, why not Argentina?

Poverty and deforestation are indeed serious challenges and they demand meaningful and effective solutions. In the end, a programme that is biologically unsustainable will fail to serve the local people, the forest, or the birds. One needn't be a 'fundamentalist conservationist' to believe that, but if it labels me so, I'll wear it proudly.

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