It’s time to stop winging it

WHY THE EU SHOULD MAKE THE TEMPORARY BAN ON WILD BIRD IMPORTS PERMANENT
Prelude

When a Suriname parrot died from a lethal strain of avian influenza (AI) in UK quarantine in October 2005, the world’s attention was immediately focused on the international trade in wild-caught birds. This one fatality highlighted the misery of the trade and the significant threat it places on human and bird health. Yet behind it lies a largely unseen trade of untold cruelty and exploitation which has brought some species close to extinction. In response to the detection of AI – since thought to have been introduced to the UK by a consignment of finches from Taiwan – the European Commission adopted a series of protection measures, including a temporary ban on the import of live, captive wild-caught birds.

The RSPCA believes it is unnecessarily dangerous to add to the threat by deliberately importing wild-caught birds – which we know can carry AI. The importance of the wild bird trade in relation to the other means by which AI could enter the European Union (EU) is not known, however the RSPCA believes it is unnecessarily dangerous to add to the threat by deliberately importing wild-caught birds – which we know can carry AI.

The RSPCA is urging the EU to acknowledge the welfare dangers and damage to wild bird populations inherent in this trade as well as the risk posed by AI, and to seize the opportunity to protect birds and humans alike by imposing a permanent ban on the commercial importation of wild-caught birds.
Introduction

Birds have been popular pets for thousands of years. Brightly-coloured feathers, song, and mimicry skills have an enduring appeal and birds are kept in an estimated 35 million households across Europe today, with about 1.37 million of those in the UK. Indeed, their appeal as pets is worldwide; in Indonesia, for example, birds are the most popular household pets. Finches, canaries, mynah birds, songbirds and birds from the parrot family – such as budgerigars, parakeets, cockatoos and macaws – are the most commonly kept across Europe.

Despite the fact that many species can now be bred in captivity, the 25 member states of the EU are the largest consumers of wild-caught birds taken from their natural habitat. Between 2000 and 2003 more than 2.7 million birds listed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) were imported into the EU – representing a massive 93 per cent of global imports.

Even these figures mask the true scale of imports as no records are held centrally by the government for non CITES-listed birds, while poor reporting, smuggling and under-declaration of numbers are widely accepted as commonplace. Indeed the illegal trade in CITES-listed species is estimated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to be worth an annual $5–8 billion – on a par with the illegal drugs and arms trades. Furthermore, given that huge numbers of captured birds die before they are exported (see pages 11–12), it is clear that the EU – which bans the export of its own bird life – is likely to be responsible for the extraction of hundreds of thousands of birds from the wild each year.

Partial or complete bans on the commercial import of wild birds are already in place in Australia, Canada and, significantly, in the world’s former largest importer, the United States of America. Based on figures provided by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in representations to US congressional hearings, it is estimated that the US’ import ban saved as many as 9.3 million CITES-listed birds between 1992 and 2005, and provides a clear model for Europe. In 1991, members of the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for a ban on the import of wild-caught birds.

In 2005, 226 non-governmental organisations issued the EU Wild Bird Declaration, urging a permanent end to the importation of wild-caught birds into the EU. Signatories included the RSPCA, Eurogroup for animal welfare, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), World Parrot Trust, Defenders of Wildlife, the Born Free Foundation, the Humane Society of the United States, World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), and the Jane Goodall Institute.

Seventy five per cent of the membership of the Parrot Society, UK, want to see an import ban.

This report examines the effect of the temporary ban and shows how the procedures that were in place prior to the ban – and that would be in place if the ban was lifted – are ignored. It also highlights some of the concerns the RSPCA and Eurogroup for animal welfare have about the trade. Research into the risks of AI spreading because of the wild bird trade is considered.

* This figure is based on the amount of bird food manufactured and sold in the UK rather than the number of birds, but is considered a good estimate.
Effects of the EU’s temporary ban

Little work has been undertaken reviewing the effects of the temporary ban on wild-caught imports of birds in the marketplace. While some studies show that the US’ Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA) ban (see page 17) resulted in a decrease in nest-poaching rates amongst some parrot species, other experts have surmised that a ban would drive the trade underground and increase smuggling. The Dimmock Report, commissioned by The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to examine the UK’s quarantine laws, also supports this view.

To establish the facts, the RSPCA set up a two-month project to assess the effects of the trade ban on imported birds into the EU. The project looked at the economic and trade situation in Africa by assessing bird prices in the period before and after the ban, based on information from traders and exporters in a number of West African countries. The investigation also looked at the effects of the ban on prices and demand in the UK for pet birds, using information from traders and pet shop outlets and examining economic data. The work was undertaken in February and March 2006, about four months after the ban first came into effect.

The African situation

Traders and exporters in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, both of which exported parrots and non-psittacines prior to the ban, reported that the trade in low-value birds such as finches has all but ceased because of the ban. As margins on small shipments of these birds are so small, the costs and risk of transporting these birds were not justified. The trade in mid-value birds, such as African grey parrots, was also struggling with some exporters holding onto breeding pairs rather than selling them, while the older and more disposable stock capacity is proving impossible to move.

As demand for the birds has dropped off, local prices are also dropping (see Table 1) as any unsold stock is beginning to cost dealers money. One report from a bird market in Mali also confirms that the trade has virtually stopped. Many traders are now moving out of the business into other areas, with at least two traders reported to have stopped trading in birds in preference for reptiles.

Table 1 – price changes in seven species of bird from one dealer in Ghana, pre- and post- the ban

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African grey parrot</td>
<td>$110</td>
<td>Price reduction of $15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Psittacus erithacus erithacus</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovebirds</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>Price reduction of $15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Agapornis spp</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape parrot</td>
<td>$120</td>
<td>Price reduction of $30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Poicephalus senegalus</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jardine parrot</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>Price reduction of $5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Poicephalus guliemni</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timneh grey</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>Price reduction of $10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Psittacus erithacus timneh</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touraco – green crested</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>Price reduction of $15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tauraco persa persa</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touraco – violet</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>Price reduction of $15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Musophaga violacea</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The UK situation

It appears that wholesalers are finding it difficult to source birds. The birds that were in the EU before the ban came into effect are quickly being used up and the ban came into operation so quickly there was little opportunity for traders to stockpile birds from the wild. In addition, breeders are not able to keep up with demand. Spring, the main season for captive-bred birds, was only just beginning when the survey was undertaken, and birds are not expected to reach the market until July or August – once this occurs the economic trends may alter.

However, demand appears to be smaller and still decreasing, owing to fears of disease from prospective and current bird keepers – something that may have increased with the first positive case of H5N1 in the UK in March 2006. Information on trends in prices of birds in the UK is difficult to assess due to two contradictory drivers – it appears that availability of stock is low but prices have not changed substantially. According to importers some species, such as Senegal parrots, are impossible to obtain. As most of these species were primarily wild-caught before the ban came into effect, this dearth would support the theory that the ban is having an effect and wild-caught birds are not entering the EU. Information from other dealers in May, reported in *Cage and Aviary Birds*, supports this view.

Data on seizures or trends in illegally imported birds are not yet available. Information from three EU countries, Slovenia, Belgium and Hungary, reported no illegal imports of live birds since the ban in 2005, and seizures of illegally imported birds into Germany have declined from 70 in 2002 to 18 in 2005. No shipments have been seized since the ban.

### Table 2 – data on the illegal seizures of birds in Germany, 2000–2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of birds seized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The wild bird trade is currently in a state of extreme flux. The trade from West African countries has collapsed. With very few birds being traded prices have declined by 10 to 40 per cent, depending on the species. Some traders have already moved into other areas such as the reptile trade. There is no evidence that birds traded before the ban are now being smuggled, and this is underlined by the economic trends.

In the EU the situation is complicated by the fact that demand may be lower owing to AI fears. But sourcing of birds is becoming a problem as the stocks of wild-caught birds have now all but dried up and captive-bred birds have yet to come on to the market in any great quantities – although this will change in the coming months once the breeding season is underway. For low-value, high-volume birds the risks of moving birds and evading the controls have simply not proved worthwhile. In this respect the ban has worked and has not led to any increase in smuggling.

It is too early to state what the position is in regard to the trade in high-value, low-volume birds such as wild-caught macaws and cockatoos. These are sourced from regions that were not researched as part of this study, though no evidence was found in the EU of such birds being imported despite the ban.
Case study: Ghana

Research carried out by the RSPCA reveals that some exporting countries ignore the EU’s quarantine rules for imported birds, and that the actions of some countries – such as Ghana – are not helping to minimise the risk of the spread of diseases like AI.

The research carried out in Ghana aimed to:
- assess the quarantine controls on exports of wild-caught birds, looking in particular at parrot exports
- assess the export packing of birds to see if they comply with the EU’s laws
- assess the paperwork completed by the exporting vet to see if controls are implemented.

The research produced some key findings.
- Bird exporters have a scant regard for concepts such as biosecurity in pursuit of commercial gain, admitting that they mix calm birds that are veterinary-checked and awaiting export with agitated incoming and unchecked wild birds.
- Exporters are given up to 10 days to export their veterinary-cleared consignments, but are not prevented from bringing new wild-caught stock into the same holding centre during that period.
- The health certification process is currently flawed, largely because capacity issues are placing a huge workload on the shoulders of very few people.
- The control and monitoring of in-transit and re-export shipments of parrots coming from neighbouring countries requires closer examination.
- Various animal handling conditions that are stipulated in Decision 2000/666/EC are not being met.

The current regime

At the moment exporters can move livestock into what have now been deemed substandard or failed stations in order to obtain health certificates for birds, animals or reptiles prior to export. Under current practices, the exporter then has 10 days to move the stock to an airport for onward export. This means that once a veterinarian has signed-off a consignment it is still possible for the cleared birds to be mixed with unchecked stock being added to the holding station at any time before they leave. As there is no tagging, ringing or chipping of the birds it means that a crate of ‘cleared’ birds could also include birds never seen by a veterinarian. If an exporter decides to use an unauthorised export route, e.g. by road to Côte d’Ivoire, they can reach export markets with few additional veterinary checks taking place.

There are some problems with the current system.
- There are no genuine sealed quarantine stations in Ghana – most quarantine stations are checkpoints or holding stations, none of which can be regarded as quarantines as envisaged under EU rules. The main quarantine station is at Kotoka International Airport and has two areas, one for imports and one for exports. All export stock is spot-checked by the duty veterinarian and paperwork is checked too – no animals are individually tagged. All animals arriving at the airport are boxed and ready for flight. If there are problems, the freight forwarder is instructed to take the animals away from the airport. Imports are checked by the duty veterinarian on arrival. If any problems arise the animals are taken to the veterinary services directorate for checks, but no animals are placed in quarantine. This is the case with exports from Côte d’Ivoire.
Veterinarian training is in crisis – there are currently no veterinarians being trained in Ghana, and within the next six to 10 years some 30 per cent of the current vets will retire. The Ghanaian government is planning to set up a new veterinary school in Accra, but this is likely to take three years to come to fruition at best – and it takes a minimum of six years to qualify as a vet. In addition, the wildlife department only has one wildlife veterinarian covering the entire country, with responsibility for policy, zoos, reserves and the monitoring of all exporters’ holding facilities.

Wild-caught birds from neighbouring countries – while Ghana exports a lot of wild-caught birds itself, it also exports birds from neighbouring Togo and Côte d’Ivoire. So although Ghana has a closed season for parrot exports it still manages to export the same number of parrots as usual during this period. The research was unable to establish how these animals got into Ghana or whether they had received medical tests in their home country.

A new regime

The Ghanaian government has recognised the problems and has begun to take steps to improve the situation. It has made it clear that its current practices cannot go on any longer and that new standards will be rigidly enforced. This is welcomed by the RSPCA. However, while the new systems will bring some improvements, they still fall short of meeting current EU pre-export quarantine requirements.

In September 2005 Ghana’s wildlife department carried out inspections of all 13 wild animal holding centres in the Accra area – failing all but one. The government inspector said the centres had problems with disease control, untrained staff, poor record keeping and high mortality rates.

The wildlife department and veterinary services directorate issued guidelines to wild animal and pet exporters, which include a new points system and new quarantine standards.

The new points system envisages three formal inspections a year – in February, April and November – with points awarded for issues such as the use of cleaning materials and protective clothing, biosecurity, ventilation and lighting, good record keeping, the educational background of staff, and export performance. Any exporter achieving 70 points out of 100 will be deemed to have passed the inspection.
Ghana’s new procedures

While the RSPCA welcomes these changes by the Ghanaian government, there are problems with the new requirements.

- The new quarantine procedures provide for only a one- to two-week formal quarantine period, which falls well short of the EU’s requirement of 21 days. As most birds are ‘pre-sold’, meaning they already have buyers so they can be shipped quickly, it could be possible for birds to be exported after only one week in the quarantine centre.
- The procedures for dealing with waste give no guidance as to whether waste should be removed or burned, or what type of holding cages could be used while existing cages are disinfected.
- Record keeping is to be more detailed than before, but does not go down to an individual-bird level.
- Although the new regulations are beginning to be implemented, the 12 out of 13 stations in Accra that failed their inspections are still operating as usual.
- A long bedding-in period for the new quarantine regulations is expected.
- When asked if there would be any legal remedies against exporters who did not comply with the new rules, the wildlife department was unable to answer.
- There will still be no proper isolation quarantine station.

Ghana illustrates very well the problems inherent in exporting countries that do not meet existing EU quarantine requirements, even when such countries have taken significant steps to improve.
AI and quarantine controls

The RSPCA commissioned Dennis Alexander, an independent consultant virologist who worked for Defra, to assess the risks of the wild bird trade in spreading AI.

Legal imports
Dr Alexander concluded that, providing the quarantine rules are followed properly and there are no errors or omissions in the housing and testing of imported birds, quarantine measures imposed by EU legislation have the capacity to detect AI and prevent its spread in importing countries.

Illegal imports
Given the high value of some captive caged birds and the expense of legal importation and quarantine, there is a financial incentive to import some high-value birds illegally. The danger of importing the HPAI virus via smuggling or illegal imports of high-value birds was highlighted by the detection of the HPAI H5N1 virus in smuggled eagles at Brussels Airport. Had the smuggling proved successful, the eagles – specifically ordered by a Belgian falconer for 7,500 euros each – would have been likely to come into contact with the falconer’s other birds.

The illegal trade in low-value, high-volume birds such as finches, which make up the majority of EU imports, could pose an even greater risk. As these birds are of low value and numerous – and some will die in transit – shippers can under-declare the quantity and species of birds being transported.

In addition, there is a risk that illegally imported birds infected with HPAI that die in transit or after arrival would not be disposed of in a way that would minimise possible contact with other wild or domestic birds.

Conclusion
When captive caged birds originate in countries where AI is present and are successfully illegally imported or smuggled, so avoiding the rigorous quarantine and testing required in Decision 2000/666/EC, there is a high risk that they may be infected or contaminated with the AI virus – and thus introduce it into the EU. How often this happens, and thus the magnitude of the risk, will depend on the number of birds imported illegally, and this is not known.

When legally-imported captive caged birds have passed through quarantine (and been housed, inspected and tested correctly and competently), the risk of introducing the AI virus to the EU is probably negligible.

However, in some cases the quarantine rules are not followed correctly and so the legal trade, in effect, masks an illegal one.
**The journey from the wild to the pet market**

The transition from wild bird to pet can prove lethal. In 2000 a review of mortality associated with the wildlife trade concluded that: “The magnitude of associated losses should be of profound concern to anyone concerned with the sustainability of wildlife trade” 21.

Studies estimate that about 40–60 per cent of wild birds caught for the pet trade die before they have even left their country of origin22. Others die in transit or in quarantine in the importing country. The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), which has carried out substantial research into the trade, estimates that for every one bird that survives the journey three others have died along the way23. Even then many pets end up in the hands of inexperienced owners and are poorly treated or passed to rescue centres – the RSPCA rescued 16,249 pet birds between 2000 and 2003.

**The scale of the trade**

Data on the scale of the international wild bird trade is difficult to obtain and those figures that do exist refer only to legally imported CITES-listed species.

In 1993 the UK government could no longer keep complete data on UK imports due to the cessation of internal EU order controls.

In addition, in 2002 the UK replaced a single-licence system for imports with six general licences and abolished the central point for licence application, making monitoring even more difficult in the UK.

Import figures are now only available when the UK is the first port of entry – many of the UK’s wild-caught birds come in via other countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands.

**Table 3 – wild birds imported into the UK, 1997–2002** 24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Wild-caught</th>
<th>Captive-bred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4,800</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4,845</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>4,826</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3,995</td>
<td>1,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>5,565</td>
<td>1,114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002*</td>
<td>8,315</td>
<td>1,046</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Up to 31 October. It was later reported that for 2002 a total of 10,158 parrots and 625 other birds were imported with most coming from Cameroon and Guyana25.

**Table 4 – top 10 exporters of CITES-listed wild birds into the EU, 2000–2003** 26

| 1. Senegal          | 944,319 |
| 2. Mali             | 776,103 |
| 3. Guinea           | 608,145 |
| 4. Tanzania         | 123,406 |
| 5. Pakistan         | 73,622  |
| 6. Argentina        | 56,110  |
| 7. Guyana           | 53,601  |
| 8. Cameroon         | 49,787  |
| 9. Democratic Republic of Congo | 35,471 |
| 10. Surinam         | 31,071  |
Capture methods

Capture methods vary from region to region and species to species. Many cause death, physical injury or severe shock to the birds and others damage or destroy precious habitat. Estimates of capture-related mortality vary greatly – from an average of two per cent for finches in Tanzania through to 48 per cent of blue and yellow macaw nestlings killed by the felling of nesting trees in Peru.

Techniques include the following.

- **Stick and glue (also known as ‘liming’) –** A tree is chosen along a significant flyway to or from a night roost. A trapper hides in the foliage and applies glue made from vine sap to the end of sticks, which are left to protrude from the leaves. Captive parrots are used to attract wild parrots to the sticks with their calls. Once a wild parrot has landed it is removed and disabled. Studies give details of birds having their flight feathers tied before being dropped or thrown to an assistant on the ground. Some birds suffer shock and internal bleeding, dying days or weeks later.

- **Taking young from nests –** Common worldwide, this method is favoured by some trappers as nest-bound birds are deemed more likely to adjust to life in captivity, either as a pet or trapping bird. In Guinea-Bissau nestlings were grabbed with bare hands or pulled out of nests using sticks daubed with glue. On the island of Principe a hunter can expect to take 20 chicks in one visit to a nest. Despite international concern over deforestation, whole trees with nesting cavities are still being felled to access young birds – destroying precious habitat and often killing or injuring the chicks.

- **Night capture –** Birds are taken directly from their roosts. In one study in Guinea, parrots perching close to the water were knocked in by hand. This was reported – ‘under the best conditions’ – to have a mortality rate of between 10 and 30 per cent.

Other capture methods can include:

- nets (often used for smaller species such as finches but can be used for African grey parrots)
- lassoing
- traps
- decoy bird.

Local holding and transport

Following capture the welfare of birds is likely to be jeopardised by a range of factors including:

- proximity with humans and other birds
- disease
- poor handling
- poor transport
- confinement in overcrowded, barren conditions
- a diet based on what is easiest to obtain rather than what the bird naturally eats.

Once caught, birds are taken – in bags, baskets, small boxes or crates – to the trapper’s home where they are kept before being passed to an exporter, either directly or more often via a local collector or middleman. Birds may remain with local collectors for several weeks until sufficient stock has been gathered for transfer to the exporter. In most instances wild-caught birds are trapped hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest international airport with reported journeys of up to 1,200 kilometres in Tanzania and more than 1,000 kilometres in Argentina. Other birds are driven to neighbouring countries and exported from there to avoid customs controls in their native country – highlighting the problem with introducing bans only in selective countries. Journeys between trappers, middlemen and exporters are made by bicycle, car and even public transport with boxes travelling on seats or strapped to the roofs of buses.
Some documented cases are as follows.

- At a collector’s premises in Argentina, EIA investigators recorded blue-fronted Amazon parrots being taken from overcrowded cages and boxes and force-fed with a squeezy ketchup bottle. During a single session six young birds choked to death on a maize and water mixture.

- Birds were denied the cover of branches and foliage at 18 out of 19 holding premises in Tanzania – mortality rates were lower at the one place that did have cover.

- In one instance trappers in Tanzania transported 150 finches by bus in a cardboard box measuring 30x30x30cm, with twigs for perches. When they were finally moved to a larger cage, 27 per cent had died. In another shipment of melba finches, nine per cent were found to be very weak or injured on arrival.

Export conditions

Birds can continue to die while awaiting shipment from exporters’ holdings. Strict quarantine conditions are demanded for birds imported into the EU in order to protect bird and human health. Researchers in exporting countries have, however, discovered haphazard, filthy and overcrowded facilities that amounted to little more than an exporter’s holding station, and where a mixed variety of species exposed birds to a high risk of disease. The RSPCA’s independent investigation in Ghana also revealed routine flouting of the rules and poor enforcement (see page 6).

Deaths of birds between capture and export are high. Examples of post-capture mortality figures for the heavily traded African grey parrot include 60–66 per cent for Nigeria, and 50 per cent for Guinea-Bissau.

While air travel is generally considered to be less problematic for animals than road travel, death and ill-health still feature in this relatively short stage of the trade. Lengthy waits and journeys, careless loading and handling, overcrowding, disease, poor supply of food and water and changes in temperature are just some of the potential dangers faced by wild animals in transit from one country to another.

The International Air Transport Association’s Live Animal Regulations (IATA-LAR) offer voluntary standards that are recognised by CITES and the EU, as well as many countries around the world. These provide standards on areas such as crate design, stocking density and the provision of food and water.

One study, which analysed data on the export of animals around the world, showed that between 1994 and 2000 an average 1.36 per cent of birds were dead on arrival. It also showed how in one sample year (1994–1995) death rates for consignments that did not comply with IATA-LAR standards were more than twice as high as for those which met them.

The RSPCA says:

The scale and degree of cruelty involved in this wasteful trade is wholly unacceptable. Legislation outlaws the capture of native wild birds within EU member states, and yet the EU continues to fuel the international trade even though captive-bred birds are readily available. Millions of birds have died or suffered as a direct result of these double standards.
Health risks of the wild bird trade

The significant stresses of capture, transport, handling, unhygienic conditions, an alien environment and unnatural diet all lower a bird’s immune defences. Because of the longer time spent in quarantine on arrival, death rates in the importing country are consistently significantly higher than the death rates for birds during transit, presenting a damning picture of the underlying state of health in which the birds arrive. Data from the UK’s Ministry of Agriculture for the period 1988–1993 shows that while 2.06 per cent of birds were dead on arrival a further 9.53 per cent of birds died while in quarantine.

In addition, although wild-caught birds can carry pathogens that may not result in disease in the wild, once taken into captivity and exposed to a battery of stress-causing factors resistance is lowered and disease can break out.

Parrots in particular are subject to a variety of infectious diseases, which may be passed to other parrots, other species and humans.

The pet market

A 2000 review assessed the impact of the journey from the wild to the pet market on individual animals and concluded that not only were immediate death and ill health a consequence for many animals, but that the impact was also felt at later stages for those that survived.

The change in environment and lifestyle for a wild-caught parrot entering the pet trade could scarcely be greater. Flight is an essential part of life for wild parrots with African greys easily able to fly 20 kilometres to the neighbouring roost when choosing where to sleep at night. They are extremely social and pair and flock, forming large communal roosts of hundreds or even thousands of birds.

A 2005 study has shown that wild-caught parrots have poorer health, develop phobic behaviours and pick their feathers more often than parent-reared or hand-raised birds. The analysis of 103 African grey parrots kept as pets stated that the trauma endured in being captured from the wild may have long-lasting consequences on the behaviour of the birds. Although feather picking has never been observed in the wild many wild-caught birds pecked their feathers (65.4 per cent compared with 53.8 per cent of parent-reared birds), and 57.7 per cent of imported parrots had respiratory problems compared with 30.8 per cent of parent-reared birds.

Ill-informed and ill-equipped owners often fail to appreciate the needs of their pet with regards to social behaviour, environment and nutrition. Indeed, 90 per cent of birds presented to the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh were reported to suffer clinical signs of vitamin deficiency as a result of an unsuitable all-seed diet.

The RSPCA says:

Suffering is not limited to capture and export, it can occur throughout the remainder of a bird’s life in captivity. This inhumane trade is allowed to persist even though captive-bred birds have better disease status, are easier to keep, and do not have welfare and conservation issues from the outset. As the key consumer, the EU bears some responsibility for the damage caused by the international trade in wild-caught birds; it has an alternative so should withdraw from international trade now.

It’s time to stop winging it
Conservation

The removal of wild birds from their natural habitat to supply the international pet market has had a hugely detrimental impact on the population of many species. Throughout the 1990s between 1.6 million and 3.2 million birds were estimated to have been taken from the wild each year.

Today about one-third of the world’s threatened bird species is at risk of being killed because of human persecution. The destruction of forest habitat for logging, agriculture, mining, development and charcoal production together with the ‘harvesting’ of birds has meant that some species are struggling to survive and others are believed to have been wiped out altogether.

CITES controls

CITES is administered by UNEP. It was established in 1973 and came into force in 1975 to monitor and control international trade in wild flora and fauna and to prevent trade detrimentally affecting a species. There are currently 169 signatory nations.

CITES places species into three categories.

- **Appendix I** – lists species that are the most endangered among CITES-listed animals and plants, and are threatened with extinction. CITES generally prohibits commercial international trade in specimens of these species, however trade may be allowed under exceptional circumstances, e.g. for scientific research. In these cases, trade may be authorised by the granting of both an export permit (or re-export certificate) and an import permit.

  There are currently 165 bird species listed (146 species and 19 subspecies), including the sulphur-crested cockatoo and several Amazon parrots.

- **Appendix II** – lists species that are not necessarily threatened with extinction at the moment but may become so unless trade is closely controlled. It also includes so-called ‘look-alike’ species, i.e. species of which the specimens in trade look like those of species listed for conservation reasons. International trade in specimens of Appendix II species may be authorised by the granting of an export permit (or re-export certificate). No import permit is necessary for these species under CITES (although a permit is needed in some countries that have taken stricter measures than CITES requires). Permits or certificates should only be granted if the relevant authorities are satisfied that certain conditions are met, and above all that trade will not be detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild.

  There are 1,401 bird species and eight subspecies listed, including the vast majority of parrots and the popular mynah bird.

- **Appendix III** – is a list of species included at the request of a ‘party’ (a country that is party to the Convention) that already regulates trade in the species and needs the cooperation of other countries to prevent unsustainable or illegal exploitation. International trade in specimens of species listed in this Appendix is allowed only on presentation of the appropriate permits or certificates.

  There are 149 bird species listed, and these accounted for 84 per cent of the CITES-listed trade into the EU in the last four years.

Species may be added to or removed from Appendix I and II or moved between them only by the Conference of the Parties, either at its regular meetings or by postal procedures. But species may be added to or removed from Appendix III at any time and by any party unilaterally.

To put the issue into context, there are around 9,000 species of birds, but as only 1,574 species and subspecies are protected by CITES Appendices I and II, it means that 82.5 per cent of birds are not protected by CITES.
Parrots – populations at risk

Parrots are widely distributed across the forests of the tropics and sub tropics. They can live to great ages, ranging from around 15 years for a budgerigar to more than 50 years for African grays, macaws and Amazons. As parrots do not build their own nests for breeding, but rather rely on tree cavities that may take decades to form, they are heavily reliant on their forest habitat for breeding as well as fruit seeds and nectar.

The parrot family has more globally threatened species than any other family of birds. Thirty years ago when CITES began, 24 parrot species were listed as CITES Appendix I. Today that figure stands at 56 with nine species being added in recent years.

A 20-year study investigating the poaching of 21 species of parrots in 14 countries across the Americas found that on average 30 per cent of nests were cleaned out, and for four species the level was more than 70 per cent. Among those was the yellow-naped Amazon in Guatemala where, in the first two years of a four-year study, 100 per cent of nests were ransacked for illegal trade. The report warned that parrots’ long lives meant the impact of taking the young might not be felt until it is too late.

More than 80 per cent of threatened parrot species depend on forests for their survival, so if forest destruction and degradation continues these species face extinction. The level of fierce competition for a nesting cavity is illustrated by reports of a pair of red and green macaws fighting beak to beak and feet to feet in order to defend their nesting site in Peru. A subsequent examination of 52 hectares of forest in the area revealed just three potentially acceptable cavities.

In addition, parrots have the biological profile of an extinction-prone species. A combination of a large proportion of non-breeding adults, delayed sexual maturity, just one set of eggs typically laid each year, low survival of chicks and fledglings and restrictive nesting requirements means that few young birds join the wild population each year. As a result populations may find it difficult to recover from human intervention.

Case study: The blue-fronted Amazon

Exports of Argentina’s blue-fronted Amazon parrot rose dramatically from around 5,000 in 1981 to more than 30,000 after 1984. Over-exploitation and habitat destruction led to the disappearance of some local populations and in 1992 national exports were cut. In 1997 a project aimed at harvesting the blue-fronted Amazon in a sustainable manner was established in the province of Chaco. This has often been cited as an example of how the trade can protect a population as well as functioning profitably.

Controls were introduced for birds originating from this area of Argentina and a percentage of profits from sales used to create or maintain reserves. Crucially, however, while a scientific model on how to manage a sustainable trade was created, it did not take into account enough information about population data.

Export quotas have grown since 2000 (from 3,300 to 6,700), and it is claimed that this figure is based on a rise in the number of landowners taking part in the project rather than a population recovery. While landowners do have an incentive not to clear-cut their land, critics believe that income from the project would be negated if costly control measures were actually implemented and that, in truth, few control measures exist.

In 2003 a group of 97 scientists and conservationists from around the world concluded that the harvest could in no way be deemed sustainable.

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It’s time to stop winging it
Is CITES enough?

While CITES controls provide protection for bird species on paper, some species have been traded at unsustainable levels and resulted in them requiring greater protection, such as being upgraded from Appendix II to I. Reasons for this include economic drivers in the trade and other threats such as uncertainty of population and habitat destruction.

Import permits and quotas are issued until there is proof that a species is in danger. For example, the Senegal parrot is currently the most heavily traded bird on CITES Appendix II, with 85–90 per cent destined for the EU. To date there have been no systematic field surveys or scientific population assessments and yet the combined quotas for 2005 stand at more than 45,000.

Instead of exporting countries showing that the trade is sustainable by, for example, providing data on species distribution, population, and population trends, there is a presumption of sustainability unless argued otherwise. Indeed, as parrots are long-lived and slow to reproduce the sustainability of taking them from the wild has never been proven.

Some conservationists fear that sanctions do not work and CITES provides the mechanism to manage the trade, whilst others fear that they are rarely used, and that species-specific bans against specific countries could simply give rise to increased smuggling either to the importing country directly or through a neighbouring country. In 1997 CITES imposed a ban on the export of African grey parrots from Cameroon after 1996 export levels were almost double the 11,000-strong bird quota. Yet one report stated that despite the ban: “Trappers continued to trap” and the situation did not change. A quota of 12,000 birds per year was subsequently imposed which the author claimed was repeatedly breached with more than 15,000 African grey parrots exported each year.

The RSPCA says:

CITES controls and EU regulations are proving an inadequate means of preventing declines in many bird species, and partial bans have failed to stem the trade. The EU refuses to export its own birds and yet turns a blind eye to the exploitation of non-native wild birds. The EU should address this imbalance and impose an outright ban, giving threatened populations an opportunity to recover.
It's time to stop winging it

The US Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA) of 1992 brought about a fundamental change in the structure of its domestic pet-bird industry. The law effectively banned the import of wild-caught CITES-listed birds, protecting millions of wild birds in the process while also creating a stronger market for captive-bred birds.

The WBCA allows the import of some birds under stringent conditions, which must be met and supported by evidence. The conditions are similar to those which, in theory, must be met under EU rules; in the US, however, the case for import must be proven by the trade and is not simply presumed.

The introduction of the WBCA saw Europe become the world’s largest consumer. Prior to the ban the US was the destination for almost 50 per cent of the international parrot trade. Between 1980 and 1991, for example, it imported more than 74 million birds primarily for the pet market. By contrast, in the three years following the law’s introduction, the EU accounted for more than 75 per cent of all legally imported parrots.

Proponents of the trade have long insisted that an import ban would simply drive the trade underground, but research has now shown that far from fuelling smuggling a ban also leads to a dramatic fall in demand. A review across South and Central America and the Caribbean showed that after the WBCA was introduced nest-poaching rates fell from 48 to 20 per cent. When the legal trade was banned, the illegal trade virtually disappeared.

A clear-cut ban on imports is simpler for customs personnel to enforce than a complex range of regulations, and puts an effective end to the well-documented practice of mislabelling a species in order to evade detection.

While the passage of the law was opposed by the US bird industry, the position of organisations such as the American Federation of Aviculturists has softened over time and many now regard the end of imports as a major step forward. The RSPCA believes that captive-bred birds are no longer undercut by plentiful, cheaper, wild-caught birds and the trade is brought into less disrepute. Indeed, shortly after the ban was imposed, retail sales of birds and accessories almost doubled in the US. An economic analysis of the effects of a future import ban on trade in Germany concludes that there would be no long-term drop in sales as breeders would no longer be disadvantaged and the more expensive captive-bred animals would compensate for the changes.

The RSPCA says:

The WBCA provides Europe with a functioning model that not only protects birds but also allows the pet industry to operate on a basis which is more sustainable and acceptable to the public. Crucially, the US example provides no convincing evidence that an outright ban encourages black market trading. On the contrary, evidence shows that it might lead to a fall in illegal poaching.
The way forward

It has been argued that the international bird trade encourages conservation as trappers are given an incentive to protect valuable natural assets\(^7\). This is not the case, however, as decades of intensive trading have failed to prevent populations and habitat from dwindling, or even disappearing\(^7\).

Birds can be traded without regard for the impact on the species. Indeed once Spix’s macaw was identified as rare, competition to obtain the species intensified and the last known population was effectively wiped out by trappers. The only known nest was plundered and the chicks offered for sale on the international market for $40,000\(^8\).

Those living closest to the birds have little incentive to protect them. Although some trappers can gain high financial rewards relative to the economy, they earn a small share of the final price paid for a wild bird\(^3\). The overwhelming share of the profits go to a select few in the shape of the retailer and importer. For example, a trapper in the Chaco region of Argentina may earn $7 for every bird they catch, but the bird can then be sold for about $400 in a pet shop\(^6\).

![Figure 1 – the percentage profit earned by people involved in the trade of Senegal parrots](image)


The RSPCA’s investigation in Ghana (see page 6) indicated that the bird trade can be based around two or three key people who operate numerous companies. For example, five separate inquiries to five separate organisations all led back to the same person.

A study of macaws in the Peruvian rainforest\(^8\) revealed how free-ranging parrots could generate more foreign income and local employment through ecotourism than via the pet trade. It showed that not only were birds protected under ecotourism but that each macaw could generate up to $165,000 in tourist receipts in its lifetime.

A study of African grey parrots in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau\(^3\) stressed that the birds’ high intelligence, natural language and appealing characteristics such as monogamous relationships, preening of one another and courtship feeding, could make them a key tourist attraction. Miniature video cameras installed in nesting cavities appeared to be of no concern to the parrots and the images were enthusiastically received by tourists.

A biologist working in Cameroon\(^8\) commented that properly-managed ecotourism could generate enormous revenue, and that in contrast to the trade in parrots, which was carried out undercover and did not benefit local communities, ecotourism involving local people should guarantee long-term support for conservation initiatives.
Many key exporters are developing countries – some of which are troubled by war and corruption – and effective enforcement of wildlife regulations is often simply too costly. It is unacceptably risky for the EU to continue to turn a blind eye to the reality that conditions required by EU legislation are not being met in exporting countries (see page 6).

**The RSPCA says:**

Carefully managed ecotourism protects birds and their habitat as well as providing vital revenue for the local community and surrounding areas. Ending international trade would provide communities with an incentive to develop less harmful and more sustainable ways of using their wildlife resources. Meagre short-term gains could be replaced with substantial profits and protection for threatened species.

The RSPCA and Eurogroup for animal welfare believe the temporary ban of the import of wild-caught birds should be made permanent. This would prevent suffering by the birds and allow them to live freely in their natural state.

We believe that the captive-bred market in the EU would be able to meet demand – and save the lives of thousands of birds each year. As the importation requirements of the EU cannot be guaranteed to have been met in the exporting countries, the ending of the ban will put many birds at risk and could play a part in spreading AI.
The Commission Decision 2000/666/EC sets out the quarantine requirements and conditions for commercial imports from non-EU countries of non-poultry birds. It excludes pets and birds going to approved institutes and other centres such as experimental laboratories and zoos.

The Importation of Birds, Poultry and Hatching Eggs Order 1979 gives effect to the requirements of the Decision in England. Article 4 prohibits imports of birds without a licence issued by the Secretary of State. A General Licence was issued to permit the movement of captive birds and to impose the necessary requirements prescribed by Decision 2000/666/EC.

However, the General Licence was revoked on 29 October 2005, reflecting the temporary emergency ban on captive wild bird imports imposed on all EU member states as a result of Commission Decision 2005/760/EC (as amended).

The following sets out the legal position relating to the commercial consignment of captive birds (not pets or those birds going to approved centres) from a country other than an EU member state prior to the temporary ban coming into effect.

Captive wild birds covered by the General Licence must meet the requirements of Commission Decision 2000/666/EC. The Decision requires that such birds must meet the following requirements (among others):

- Such birds must originate from a country which is a member of the World Animal Health Organisation (Organisation International des Epizooties).
- Such birds must come from holdings registered by the competent authority of the exporting country.
- Such birds must be accompanied by an animal health certificate, on which an official veterinarian in the country of origin certifies certain identification, health and transport information as prescribed at Annex A of Commission Decision 2000/666/EC, including that:
  - in relation to health information:
    - the birds have been kept at a holding station for at least 21 days prior to export
    - the birds were examined on the day of loading for export, showed no clinical signs or suspicion of infectious disease and were fit to travel
    - the holding centre from which the birds are consigned is free of AI and Newcastle Disease (ND) for at least 30 days prior to export and are not under any animal health restrictions in relation to AI, ND and, as appropriate, psittacosis
    - AI and ND outbreaks have not been notified either in the holding centre or in the surrounding area within a radius of 10 kilometres for at least 30 days prior to the export of the birds
    - in relation to psittacines, outbreaks of psittacosis have not been reported in the holding centre during the previous 60 days.
  - in relation to transport information, the crates or cages:
    - contain only birds coming from the same establishment
    - contain only birds of the same species, or if consisting of different compartments, each compartment containing only birds of the same species
    - bear the name, address and a specific registration number of the holding centre of origin, and a specific identification number of the individual crate or cage
    - are constructed in such a way as to:
      - preclude the loss of excrement and minimise the loss of feathers during transport
      - allow visual inspection of the birds
      - allow cleansing and disinfection
      - are being used for the first time or have been, as well as the vehicle in which they are loaded, cleansed and disinfected before loading in accordance with the instructions of the competent authority
      - in case of air transport, are at least in accordance with the most recent IATA-LAR rules governing the transport of live animals
      - in the case of CITES-listed species the birds are transported according to the CITES guidelines for transport.

* Defra includes circuses, amusement parks and conservation programmes in this group (Dimmock 2005:56).

** The effect of a General Licence is that as long as importers meet the quarantine requirements of Decision 2000/666/EC and the import conditions, they do not require individual permission to bring captive birds into the country (Dimmock 2005:56).
Such birds must be transported in cages or crates which must be individually identified with the identification number that must correspond with the identification number on the animal health certificate.

Such birds must be subject to post-import quarantine for at least 30 days in an approved quarantine facility. In Great Britain, approval of premises is given by the local State Veterinary Service (SVS) Division Veterinary Manager (DVM).

Importation through Border Inspection Post (BIP)
The Commission Decisions 2000/666/EC and 2002/279/EC (and the General Licence) require all imports of captive birds to be imported through an approved BIP, which may be in any member state. In the UK, the BIPs for live birds are at Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester and Glasgow airports.

The exporter of consignments of captive birds is required to give the BIP at least 24 hours’ notice before the arrival of the birds.

At the BIP a veterinary officer of the SVS examines and counts the birds, and checks that they are accompanied by the appropriate health certificate. The cage or crate will be sealed and transported directly to approved quarantine premises.

Quarantine premises
The conditions with which quarantine facilities must comply are set out in Annex B of Commission Decision 2000/666/EU. These conditions cover construction and equipment of the quarantine facility, and management (biosecurity). In the UK, approval of quarantine facilities is done on the basis of an inspection carried out by the SVS. Approval has a duration of one year, and a further inspection is required before re-approval.

Inspection during quarantine
The Local Veterinary Inspector (LVI) – who comes under the supervision of the SVS – is obliged to visit the quarantine facility three times. More frequent visits by the LVI or, if necessary by an SVS veterinary officer, may be required if the disease situation requires it.

Inspection on arrival:
On arrival, the LVI is responsible for breaking the seal on the crates or cages so that the birds can be unloaded into the quarantine unit*, checking the health certificate, identifying the birds, making sure they are in good health and recording the number of birds that may have died in transit. Psittacines must be individually identified by a tamper-proof leg ring or microchip. Any birds that are dead on arrival must be sent to the Veterinarian Laboratory Agency (VLA) for virus isolation.

Second visit – taking of samples:
All birds are tested for either AI or ND, either by use of sentinels in the quarantine facility or by virus isolation from faeces and/or cloacal swabs.

Carcasses of birds that have died during quarantine must be sent to the VLA for virus isolation**. The LVI must be informed of diseases which present themselves, and of the death of birds***.

“Sign off” – release from quarantine:
The birds will only be released from quarantine on the written authority of the local DVM. This will only occur once the LVI has carried out the final inspection at the end of the quarantine period and sent a report, together with the laboratory results of the tests, to the DVM.

* In practice, as many crates are not truly sealed and birds frequently arrive at quarantine facilities at unsocial hours, the quarantine staff, not the LVI, unpack the birds. LVIs often visit during the following day when the birds have already been unloaded.

** In practice, representative samples are sent for large numbers (Dimmock (2005:61).

*** Defra – via the SVS – carries out an annual inspection of the quarantine facility and supervision of the official veterinarian.
It’s time to stop winging it

References

11. See above, 8.
25. See above, 23.
27. See above, 22.
28. See above, 21.
30. See above, 29.
34. See above, 29.
39. See above, 6.
41. See above, 6.
42. See above, 6.
43. See above, 22.
46. See above, 44. Schütz C., 2003.
47. See above, 21.
49. See above, 21.
It's time to stop winging it.