

Conservation Beyond the Cage

By Karen A. McGovern, Curator, Rare Species Conservatory Foundation

If you are like me, the words *statistics* and *statistical analysis* have about the same effect as a quality sleeping pill. No one throwing a party has ever been heard to say, "Oh—don't forget to invite Bob—remember how much fun his statistical analysis was at the Smith's barbeque last weekend?" Nonetheless, statistics are vital tools for arguing for or against just about anything imaginable. Every once and awhile, a statistic comes along that you just can't help noticing—and I'm not talking about bogus and useless ones like: "99.9% of persons surveyed prefer life over death". I'm talking about figures that hit home, make you go "hmmm," and stick in your head like annoying Top-40 tunes. Charlie Munn has supplied anyone who cares about parrots and conservation with just such a stat. We already know that about one third of the parrot species on the planet are threatened or endangered, right? Well, according to Charlie, if conservation efforts were targeted to protect 50 high priority parrot species, *over 500 million acres of rainforest would also be protected*. 500 million acres—that's a lot of real estate filled with countless species of plants and animals besides the parrots. If someone can make a more compelling argument in favor of focused parrot conservation, by all means, step right up.

I would assert that the single-species conservation approach that focuses on *a particular parrot, plant, or animal* has proven woefully inefficient. One simply cannot save an individual species without protecting and preserving the habitat that supports it in the wild. That's what makes Charlie's statistic so timely and compelling. Sure, draw attention to the 50 parrots, but realize that entire, intact ecosystems are also at stake. For this reason, parrots are ideal "flagship species" for tropical conservation. I don't have to mention the spell these charismatic, beautiful creatures have cast over humans throughout our history. Parrots have captivated us for as long as there has been history to record.

So... we have the information, we have the statistics to back up these claims, we know that parrots are disappearing in the wild—the question is this—what are we going to do about it? Aviculture is a multi-million dollar industry—globally a multi-billion dollar industry. I'm not just talking about the money aviculturists make buying and selling birds; I'm also talking about the feed and supply industries as well. Why isn't parrot conservation one of the best-funded conservation initiatives? Why are conservation organizations constantly struggling to raise funds for programs that are obviously vital to preserving the resource upon which those multi-million-dollar industries depend?

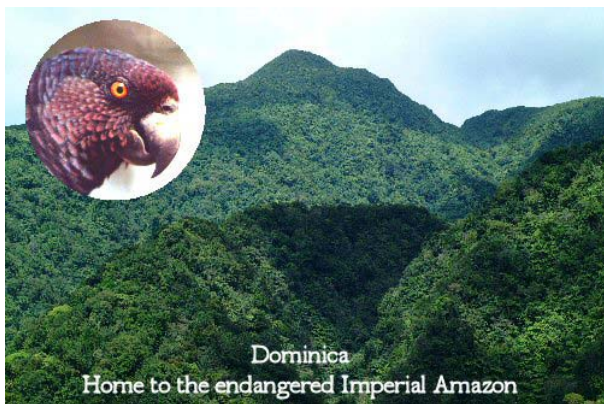
Call me stupid, but I just don't get it. The solution seems so appallingly simple to me—feed companies should donate a percentage of annual profits to promote parrot conservation. Every pet store that sells a bird, cage, bag of seed or silly parrot toy should include proceeds that directly benefit parrot conservation *in the country of origin*. Every aviculturist that sells a bird should attach a conservation surcharge to that sale, which is directed toward *in situ* conservation programs. Before the yelling starts about how much it "costs" to raise parrots; let's keep in mind the cost to the environment that once supported birds now in captivity and their ancestors. Thousands of acres of rainforests are being destroyed as I sit here typing and you sit there reading. If one or two major feed companies would place a one-dollar increase on every bag of seed, a 5-to-10% add-on to every toy or cage sold, for just *one year*, *MILLIONS OF DOLLARS* in revenue could be directed to conservation efforts, with a public relations kickback of incredible proportions that I think would be the envy of manufacturers everywhere. I submit that the average consumer would gladly accept having an extra few dollars tacked onto their bill in direct support of conservation initiatives for the very animal they are taking home. This could spark a huge public awareness campaign that is, in my opinion, long overdue. I know first-hand how surprisingly inexpensive it can be to run effective conservation programs focusing on endangered parrots, yet how impossible it can be to raise those funds.



The price of captive-bred parrots like this juvenile vinaceous Amazon should include a conservation surcharge.

The bottom line is that I'm frustrated. I see U.S. zoological institutions with collective budgets that total in the *billions* allocating fractional percentages to conservation of any sort, I hear from feed and supply manufacturers that "It just doesn't fit our profile" to allocate funds to conservation, I have had aviculturists with collections of *thousands* of parrots give me the cold shoulder, and (excuse me for repeating myself) I

just don't get it. It pains me to conclude that many people in the “bird business” have lost the connection between the rare birds they have in cages and their counterparts struggling to survive in the wild. Keeping rare and endangered birds in cages is not conservation. Repeat that for me, would you?



Funds from conservation surcharges could help programs for critically endangered species like the imperial Amazon.

completely falling apart. Endangered parrots are hoarded, hidden and illegally purchased and sold every day. These birds didn't ask for this—they have no control over their lives or fates. They are at the mercy of a consumer-driven market with an insatiable appetite. The kicker is that there *are* programs out there that work. Mechanisms are in place to give something back, to make up for all the politics and bad behavior. So, here we are, right back where we started—what are *YOU* going to do about it? Get mad, get loud—but first and foremost, please *do something*.

I agree that critically endangered species must be maintained in captivity as a simple hedge against extinction, but this is a salvage approach at best. Captive conservation programs must be part of a much larger picture that includes *in situ* habitat conservation programs. Face it, with only rare exception, birds in cages *die* in cages. The wonderful concept of parrot “reintroduction” is a crapshoot in the very best of circumstances, and is more often than not a dismal failure.

Successful parrot reintroduction programs rely upon governmental and local cooperation, successful land allocation and management, *continual, long-term* support from conservation organizations, and *lots and lots of money*. The Spix is gone from the wild, yet captive birds are bought and sold for many thousands of dollars. Bickering, ego and petty politics have paralyzed many parrot conservation programs, with some