

NEW WORLD PARROTS IN CRISIS: Solutions from Conservation Biology

Steven R. Beissinger and Noel F.R. Snyder, eds. 1992. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 20560. Hardback, 288 pp with index.

This volume is the result of symposium held at the meeting of the American Ornithologists Union in June 1990 precipitated by a proposed resolution to ban the importation of all wild-caught exotic birds. As the vast majority of these imports are neotropical parrots (at least 1.8 million imported into the United States legally between 1982 and 1988), the focus is understandable. It becomes quickly apparent as you read this book that the problem is not a strictly biological one, but that it is compounded by a real lack of basic biological information.

Fifty-two of the approximately 140 species of New World parrots are considered threatened or near-threatened. The presumed causes of these precarious situations are seldom clearly understood, but include capture and export for the pet and avicultural trade, extermination as agricultural pests, consumption as food, and massive destruction of tropical forests. Although capture and exportations have been regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) for more than a decade, it appears that the numbers of individuals in the wild have continued to decline while the numbers of birds traded remains high. While many biologists doubt that the levels of birds being traded can be sustained by the demographics of the wild populations, there is little or no hard demographic data available on any of the species involved. Given the lack of good information about habitat needs of many parrot species, it is even possible to excuse market-collecting as a way of saving birds that "will only die anyway as their forests are removed".

What makes this book truly fascinating is the wealth of expertise that is presented in exploring the options available to address the problem(s). Butler's chapter on education and changing popular attitudes in the Lesser Antilles as a way of conserving species of large *Amazona* was encouraging. Munn's chapter on eco-tourism should hit sensitive chords among many of the members of the CBC. The roles of aviculture and captive breeding programs are explored in two chapters that offer little hope for optimism. Reintroduction, on the other hand appears to offer real possibilities given the proven track record that some parrot species have demonstrated in their ability to adapt to human-modified environments (note the breeding of Monk Parakeets in Swannanoa, NC). On the other hand, all species of parrots are not the same, and there is little known about which species are more or less adaptable in this regard. Bucher's chapter on parrots as agricultural pests (mostly based on experiences in Argentina) demonstrates that conservation issues are always sociological and political issues as well. A chapter on the pet trade and its implications for conservation is well-written and should be read carefully. Finally there is a transcript of the open discussion held during the AOU meeting in Los Angeles and a pulling together of the disparate ideas presented in the preceding chapters.

While the future for New World parrots does not look rosy, there are possibilities for fending off devastation. As is so often the case, the solutions are in the hands of humans who must be willing to make decisions based on long-term goals that appear to be at odds with short-term gains.—H. T. Hendrickson