

The Role of the Avian Veterinarian in Conservation; Practice Beyond the Exam Room

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May you live in interesting times.

Introduction

To many the role of the avian veterinarian is exclusively that of diagnosing disease and applying medical or surgical remedies. Generally the career path of a veterinarian, especially one geared to companion animal medicine, is centered on understanding organ system function in health and disease. These days, however, choosing to practice avian or exotic animal medicine involves opening up a Pandora's box of ethical issues. The challenges of addressing these ethical considerations can either inspire or dishearten.

There can be no doubt that the current ecological situation of our planet is alarming. We are witnessing the swiftest extinction of species in geologic history. Those of us that have chosen to focus on psittacines have found ourselves facing ethical and global considerations far beyond typical companion animal health concerns. As veterinarians we are charged with the responsibility of promoting stewardship for the species we treat. To do this effectively requires an understanding of the animal's ecology and its role in the natural world. Equally important is an understanding of the unique circumstances that have shaped the current companion bird industry. Our role as authorities and educators on avian health and well being give us the opportunity to positively influence global conservation efforts.

How Did We Get Here?

As future avian veterinarians, you are inheriting a situation so full of ironies that were it not true, it would be unbelievable. Understanding the current crisis requires knowing how it developed. Parrots have throughout history fascinated humans. Whether for their beautiful feathers, their entertaining antics, or their unique ability to talk, they have been held in high regard. Until recently, human's interest in parrots did not threaten their numbers in the wild. Unfortunately, the convergence of several different trends has resulted in the crisis of populations, habitat and ethics that we are currently faced with.

Looking back at the chain of events that has brought so many psittacine species to the verge of extinction, makes one wonder why we didn't see it coming. Biologists have documented many complicated trends that have resulted in habitat destruction and species extinction in the tropical forests of our planet. Human population growth, agricultural pesticide usage, timber harvesting and the drive for economic development have seriously impacted many species of plants and animals. These factors have resulted in irreparable harm for many species including large carnivores, and many plants and insects.

We would certainly have enough to worry about if these were the primary forces leveraged against psittacine populations. Unfortunately, these powerful forces pale in comparison to the insatiable pet trade that has developed since the 1960's. It must have been thoughtless sense of abundance and greed that drove the harvesting of parrots from the wild into the pet trade. Reviewing the numbers makes for sobering reflection. In a five-year period from 1981-1985 more than 1.8 million parrots legally entered the pet trade. Over 703,000 were neo-tropical psittacines imported into the United States. By some estimates as many bird died in the process of capture and transport as reached retail outlets. The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 dramatically changed the pet trade in the United States by virtually stopping the importation of wild caught parrots for the pet trade. But it has not diminished the importation of wild caught parrots into Europe, UK, Canada and Asia, to which two million birds were imported from 1990-1994 alone.

Currently at least 30% of the 140 parrot species found in the Western Hemisphere are threatened with extinction. Of the 330 parrot species worldwide, 28% are considered threatened. The recently published Parrot Action Plan, the work of the Species Survival Commission working under the auspices of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), addresses the immediate threat to 95 species. The cumulative effect of habitat destruction and the pet trade has resulted in psittacine species being one of the most endangered groups of birds. These end results demands more than sober reflection; it should inspire panic.

Aviculture, as defined in the United States, has evolved into a huge industry. Breeding parrots for profit was a lucrative endeavor while the population of breeding birds was young and replacements were inexpensive. As improved avicultural techniques developed, many breeders found that providing humane and successful management strategies narrowed their profit margins. Many breeders have resorted to commercial practices that may include overbreeding, the sale of unweaned chicks and the marketing of birds to uneducated owners. These practices tend to produce birds that will never thrive.

Some aviculturists have argued that domestic production is a conservation strategy and that their birds may contribute in a real way to replenish wild populations. Unfortunately, experiences with the Puerto Rican Amazons and the Thick-billed Parrots have shown that domestic birds may lack the ability to survive in the wild. One result of careless breeding is that many devastating diseases have become endemic in captive flocks. Not only are domestic birds unlikely to readapt to life in the wild, they could pose a real and serious risk to threatened wild populations. While the concept of breed-and-release programs is very attractive both to aviculturists and the public, in reality these programs have not proven to be viable options for the preservation of most wild parrots.

Fast forward to 2001, where insult has been added to injury. The insult that many individuals are recognizing and wrestling with is the growing number of unwanted parrots. After years of record sales of both live birds and related products, statistics reflect alarming trends in pet parrot ownership. PIJAC, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, estimates the number of pet parrots in the United States to be between 3 and 5 million. They also estimate that the average parrot will have seven homes in its lifetime. With an estimated 85% of bird purchases made on impulse, most parrots are sold to owners completely unaware of the challenges of parrot ownership. Whereas some people have dismissed parrot rescue as an "issue du jour", the waiting lists at established rescue organizations and sanctuaries speaks to a real and growing problem.

Beyond Doom and Gloom

There certainly are those who have walked away from the current situation in despair and frustration. Were the stakes not so high, it might be the reasonable thing to do. Yet most veterinarians take seriously the commitment to stewardship that comes with our career. Veterinarians that have made a professional commitment to avian species exercise a significant influence over many of their clients. Many of us have personally observed the zeal with which

many people embrace their parrots. Their beauty, intelligence, adaptability and athleticism have a unique allure. When personally motivated by the insights that come with living with a parrot, the pet bird owner is often open to expanding their commitment from their individual pet to the plight of parrots in the wild. Collectively these parrot owners represent a powerful lobby.

Conservationists have recognized that it is easier to rally support behind a specific keynote species than for a complex problem. Enthusiastic support for a specific animal within an endangered habitat often insures support for efforts that result in protection for the entire ecosystem. Parrots are true naturals for this role. Paul Butler of RARE pioneered these techniques in his very successful campaigns of national pride that are working to replace old attitudes of hunting and habitat destruction with programs of education and economic development. Rallying locals around a unique native species, often a parrot, has proven to be a very effective conservation strategy. Charlie Munn, of the Wildlife Conservation Society, has developed eco-tourism in the forests of Peru and Brazil by using dramatic images of large numbers of macaws gathering at clay licks to garner the support of locals, government officials and tourists. The result has been several profitable ecotourism lodges that furnish economic potential for locals and can lead to protection of large tracts of land. Mike Reynolds of the World Parrot Trust has successfully reached out to pet bird owners and has grown the Trust into an internationally recognized fund that supports habitat preservation, research and conservation programs targeted at specific species.

Strategies for Change

Up to this point avian veterinarians have done an admirable job defining states of health and disease in captive bird populations. Most of these advances have occurred over the last 20 years. Avian medicine is now recognized as a specialty in both Europe and the US. In the US avicultural techniques have been developed that have enabled the continuation of the pet bird trade following the 1992 importation ban. Yet many of us have found a huge disconnect between commonly held attitudes about pet birds and the reality. Most people who purchase parrots think their new pet is going to be easy to live with. Many parrots are sold as babies, when like juveniles of many species, they are cute, cuddly and very benign. The first few months are typically easy. As the bird matures into its adult parrot ways however, owners are often in shock as they observe their parrot screaming, chewing up their treasures, chasing their kids and exhibiting unpredictable behavior. There is often a complete lack of understanding that the parrot in their living room is a captive wild animal. Few people stop to think what a flock of Moluccan (Seram) cockatoos would sound like or how loud a flock of macaws would be gathered at a clay lick. We find unthinkable the notion of having captive bears, tigers or even raccoons, but have built an industry around putting parrots in peoples' living rooms.

I'm sure that if we had the option to rewrite the scenario, most of us would. Decimating populations of parrots to feed a rapacious live bird trade has been a global disaster. Yet here we are. Avian veterinary medicine is not for the faint of heart. Most veterinarians drawn to "weird animal medicine" like to be challenged. We like to think on our feet. We like to go where no one else has gone. This challenge is both a blessing and a curse.

Our natural world is in crisis, yet we are typically too busy and too comfortable to do anything about it. Although we participate in and benefit from an industry that developed by harvesting parrots to the point of crisis, we rarely involve ourselves professionally in contributing to the solution. Our education in veterinary medicine prepares us to deliver a great standard of care but fails to connect us to our critical role as stewards. To many of us, it seems that it is time for all of us to take a step back, look at the big picture and start working to become part of the solution rather than an unwitting participant in the existing problem.

Strategies that work

Believe it or not, people in positions of power and wealth, people unaware of what they don't know, are going to pay to see you everyday. The main disease that you will fight everyday is that of ignorance. Most diseases of companion birds are not infectious but rather the result of ignorance and benign neglect. Most pet bird owners have no idea that most species of parrots are threatened or endangered. They have no idea that there are more Hyacinth macaws in captivity than in the wild. Few know that the number of wild Hyacinths is likely under 1200. Few are aware of the current status of *Amazona versicolor*, or *Ara glaucogularis* (the Caninde or Blue-throated macaw). For that matter many veterinarians who see psittacines are unaware of the perilous state of parrot populations worldwide.

Those of us involved in parrot conservation view the next five years as a now-or-never situation. Avian veterinarians that choose to rise to the occasion and put their influence to good use stand to contribute in very critical ways. There are many resources available to help you educate yourself and your clients. Organization like RARE and World Parrot Trust can provide not only printed information for distribution, but can also furnish interested parties with information on conservation strategies and programs. In the past, three conservation organizations (WPT, RARE and IAS) have prepared and given away complete sets of beautiful slides to ensure impressive presentations. RARE also has a pet memorial program that sends a thoughtful letter to grieving clients when veterinarians make memorial donations. Many clients are so moved by the memorial donation that they become supporting members of the organization. Informal slide shows that feature current conservation information typically turn into successful fundraisers. When possible, RARE and WPT will arrange to schedule one of their speakers for special events. Often veterinary technicians and receptionists can man tables at bird conferences and expos to distribute literature on parrot conservation and encourage membership in worthy organizations. Veterinary meetings also offer a great opportunity to inform colleagues about avian issues outside of medicine, surgery and practice management.

On behalf of both RARE and World Parrot Trust I invite you to become involved. If the issues of parrots in our world strike a chord for you personally, please contact us at any of the addresses below.

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